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## Levers for Compensatory Education

### Pilot Study'

**T**he main objective of this pilot study is to identify and develop promising action strategies which promote educational advancement and long-term labour market integration of people with a migration background. A key aspect is to study resilience factors, which are factors influencing an individual's ability to overcome crises by using personal and socially imparted resources and to take them as a trigger for developments, despite poverty or low qualification on the part of parents. The study focuses on the age group of 14- to 21-year-olds as that is the time when, on the one hand, people have fulfilled their period of compulsory schooling and, on the other hand, major educational and career choice decisions are made at the interfaces between the education system and the world of work.

#### Research on successful immigrants in the education system

International studies confirm that the Austrian education system only has a limited capacity to exploit the existing educational potential of the population. This affects, in particular, pupils who come from immigrant families and those who have immigrated themselves. At the same time, as is shown in the analysis of WEISS (2006) for example, their parents mostly show very high motivation to take part in learning, but they frequently do not succeed in transforming this motivation into a successful educational career of their children.

Discussions on this topic in society most often focus on the education system. However, educational processes are not only influenced by the education system, they are also shaped by the interaction between pupil, family, peer group and the education system. The education system does not constitute a structure that strictly pre-determines which specific education pathways pupils need to follow - despite the well-known hereditary and selection effects, even pupils from families with little educational capital succeed in progressing along the educational ladder.

Whereas a large number of studies have been conducted about the structural impacts of the education system, hardly any studies exist about the factors promoting or inhibiting educational success which originate in the family and social environment. Based on qualitative interviews with experts and on group discussions with young people, this explorative pilot study aims to describe strengthening and inhibiting factors from the

personal, family and social environment and derives recommendations for action for policy-makers.

In recent years researchers have demonstrated increasing interest in explaining successful educational biographies of young people from immigrant families. Meanwhile three studies have been concluded for Germany on the topic of "Successful immigrants in the education system" (RAISER 2007, NIEHAUS 2008, FAVERO 2010) which, based on empirical analyses, attempt to identify the major preconditions for educational success. As shown by the studies, young people from immigrant families frequently face the challenge of successfully completing the immigration biography as representatives for their parents. This has the result that they face strong pressure within their families towards educational advancement, their parents however usually lack the necessary cultural resources to support it. Successful educational biographies can originate from this conflictive situation in particular where young people succeed in obtaining the necessary resources from outside their families. Attachment figures who continually support them mentally, who approach them with respect and attention and also challenge them to put their potential achievements into practice.

The findings of studies on educational sociology reveal clear overlaps with the findings of **resilience research**, which is an established part of psychology. This branch of research demonstrates that children and young people can develop into stable and successful adults even under difficult conditions if they develop a stable and continuous emotional relationship with a parent or another attachment figure. Social support and an emotionally warm, open, structuring and norm-oriented educational

climate are just important here as the possibility to accept responsibility in small portions and appropriate to the respective age as well as to have to meet performance requirements or to be encouraged to adopt constructive coping behaviour. Of particular importance in resilience research is also the establishment of a continuous and long-term relationship to a supporting, demanding and promoting attachment figure who believes in the young people's potential and constantly motivates them.

### Pilot study

This empirical study is based on nine structured qualitative interviews with experts from schools and youth work as well as five group discussions with successful and less successful young people<sup>2</sup>. Overall 34 young people between the ages of 14 and 22 took part in the discussions. One discussion group each was held with successful young women, successful young men, and with less successful young women. Another discussion group with less successful young people and a discussion group with young people from a project of the charity organisation Caritas which aims to promote young people comprised young men and women. The discussion groups with successful and less successful young women were moderated by a female moderator.

All the **interviewed experts** highlighted the great **importance of the family** for educational success. In their opinion, a supportive family environment which is interested in education, particularly a continual interest of the family in their children's educational career, connected with related regular inquiries and support, have a positive effect. As one expert from the school sector remarked, school should also be represented in the family's everyday life "prominently and not just marginally". Both more authoritarian and also open and liberal family structures could provide emotional security. But authoritarian upbringing and education styles can turn into pressure, which has a negative effect on the motivation to take part in education.

The family's social situation, particularly poor housing conditions, and here mainly the lack of a separate room or place where the pupils can do their homework without being interrupted, is assessed as a major risk factor by the experts.

Similarly problematic seems to be the frequently occurring delegation of the parents' advancement aspirations to their children and the parents' focus on traditional prestigious occupations (lawyer, doctor) connected with a lack of understanding of the educational processes required for HE studies and lacking knowledge about support measures.

According to the experts' information, an upbringing in line with traditional gender role models in traditional families has a negative impact on the educational advancement of young men and young women. This is because, on the one hand, young women repeatedly need to assert their educational aspirations against

resistance and are not supported sufficiently, on the other hand, the frequent lack of acceptance of love relationships with the opposite sex leads to dramatic emotional strain. Young men in traditional families often adopt a controlling function in this respect and consequently become alienated from their siblings. At the same time, if young men are brought up in line with an understanding of gender roles which is no longer socially accepted, this also leads to conflict at school and in apprenticeships; lacking acceptance of women as teachers and superiors impedes the educational advancement of young men. Therefore, the experts state, it is necessary that youth work expands **activities promoting young men** with a focus on patriarchal images of masculinity.

Almost all interview partners highlighted the great importance of a **sound command of the school language** for educational advancement. Here it is essential, above all, to learn language's tool character, which is clearly helped by sound knowledge of the first language. The experts add that, above all, uninterrupted contact with language-based materials in early childhood, such as by telling or reading stories, supports this. Similarly supporting is an appreciative recognition of multilingualism as well as the visibility and audibility of the languages of origin in the educational institutions.

To **strengthen the young people's resilience**, the interviewed experts recommended that young people be provided with the possibility of establishing a continuous relationship with educational coaches across education and training pathways who can connect with the young people's lives due to their origin and age.

The interviewed experts view the **role of peer groups** as ambivalent. It is mainly important to convince the informal leading figures to become interested in educational advancement in order to take advantage of the group dynamic of peer groups.

The **group discussions** revealed that both the families of successful and those of less successful interview partners consider it very important that their children have a good education's education. But the families of the two groups differ in terms of dealing with educational decisions in the family. In the families of more successful young people, the children's educational pathway was repeatedly discussed, but they were also given space for developing their own ideas. Due to their own education, parents were able to either provide support themselves or organise it if any difficulties arose. Parents of less successful young people also supported their children's educational pathway but were less able to organise support. Their educational aspirations were focused on socially highly attractive occupations and mainly aimed to serve socioeconomic advancement. The young people's educational aspirations were given clearly less space, any rejection of the parents' educational wishes led to serious conflict, often to domestic violence. Both successful and less successful young women described an upbringing according to traditional gender role models

and lacking acceptance of relationships with partners as especially stressful.

It was conspicuous that **skipping school** was viewed as the “**beginning of the dropping-out process**” mainly among young men. Their statements were consistent in that neither the parents nor the school called in external counsellors in most cases and that the cause of school absenteeism was not explored. Even after the pupils had been reprimanded by the school there was no institutional response. School absenteeism which leads to pupils dropping out is obviously not followed up by the education system at the institutional level and can only be termed “organised lack of responsibility”.

Different patterns of **language use in the family** were encountered both among successful and less successful young people. In the majority of families, the interview partners say that the first language is mainly spoken with parents and German mostly with the siblings. But in both groups there were also some families where deliberately only the first language was used in the family or which deliberately only spoke German. It was stated that the parents’ command of German varies from excellent to rather poor. The statements did not reveal any connection between educational success and the parents’ language skills as reported by the interviewees or the use of languages in the family. However there are clear indications of the importance of early uninterrupted linguistic inputs in the form of telling stories and reading them out loud to children for their later ability to articulate themselves.

Independent of educational success and gender, young people oriented their plans for the future towards educational and career advancement as well as obtaining qualifications. All interview partners reported a high positive identification with Vienna and Austria and rated their educational opportunities and possibilities in Austria as very good. Even among the less successful young people, an optimistic outlook prevailed. All young women saw their future both in the world of work and in the family, none of the female interviewees saw themselves in the role as housewife only.

### **Recommendations for action: prevention and intervention**

The following recommendations for action – particularly from the viewpoint of prevention and school-based intervention – can be derived based on the study findings:

Due to the great importance of the **family for educational careers, one focus of prevention measures should be on parent-related activities**. These should approach the parents actively and comprise the following special focuses:

- **Knowledge about the functions and requirements of the education system**

To ensure prevention is successful, the parents – starting with the first contact of the child with the pre-school edu-

cation system (nursery school) – should be informed about the functional mechanisms and structure of the Austrian education system. Here the requirements of this country’s education system for cooperation with parents and the concept of school partnership but also the parents’ rights vis-à-vis the school should be in the foreground.

- **Upbringing, education style and gender roles**

As upbringing and education in line with traditional gender role models has negative effects both for the young women’s and the young men’s educational advancement as well as professional and social integration, approach-oriented activities for parents should also deal with the topic of gender role models.

- **Supporting the ability to articulate oneself**

To ensure prevention is successful, it is recommended to specifically promote the development of the ability to articulate oneself and abstract linguistic competence. In the field of parent-related work this mainly means that they are informed about the possibility of language promotion within the family by regular telling stories and reading them out to children as early as possible and are clearly told about the negative effects of regular TV consumption on linguistic development. One basic principle of language learning should be that parents communicate with their children in the languages they know well enough to express themselves in a differentiated way.

For the field of education and training it is recommended to enhance **interface management** and to establish **individualised forms of educational coaching across all school types and occupations**.

- **Transition from primary level to the lower secondary level**

To exploit all children’s potential talents as best as possible, the interviewed experts recommended that school career recommendations for transfer to lower secondary level be outsourced to school-independent boards. In addition, all parents whose children receive a recommendation for entry to lower secondary school should be offered a counselling talk with a school-independent educational counsellor and informed clearly about the option of enrolling their children in an academic secondary school even contrary to the teachers’ recommendations. Reasons should be given especially for recommendations for a school type which is already attended by a sibling.

- **Continuous interface management**

To ensure the educational biography is as successful as possible, individualised interface management provided by educational coaches should be created across education and training pathways. These coaches should inform children and young people about educational pathways and training programmes from lower secondary level onwards and develop educational plans jointly with them. Here it is essential that the coaches also support transi-

tion to the upper secondary level and/or vocational education and training and that they are available as contacts until the young person has reached a firm position in the respective educational establishment. Here it is also vital to set up a continuous and longer-term relationship between the young people and an educational coach who assists them beyond changes of school and career choices. This aims to promote the young people's resilience in particular.

One major weakness of the school system is the "organised lack of responsibility" when **dealing with school absenteeism**.

#### • Measures to combat school absenteeism

To prevent repeated school absenteeism becoming the "beginning of the drop-out process" it is recommended that school-based social workers be called in on a mandatory basis following repeated, also excused absence from school. These social workers should cooperate with the above-mentioned educational coaches to explore the reasons for school absenteeism and develop countermeasures. The obligation should be imposed on school authorities to collect data about all pupils who do not attend schools or training establishments due to school absenteeism following the end of compulsory schooling and to pass on this information to the school-based social workers and labour bureaus. It should be considered if a legal framework should be created obliging pupils to attend education or training programmes up to legal age.

Not least due to the tension described above between upbringing in traditional gender role models and the frequency of school absenteeism among young men it is necessary to expand gender-specific and gender-sensitive youth work.

Whereas the offer for young women is already well developed, supply with dedicated activities promoting young men still needs to catch up. These activities should be expanded with consideration of new pedagogical approaches.

#### Compensatory measures

Whereas prevention and accompanying measures aim to support young people in the education process and prevent difficulties, compensatory measures aim to correct undesired developments after these have occurred. As it is only possible in very few cases to specify individual factors as the cause of undesired developments, compensatory measures must take account of different aspects and understand and treat the respective case in all its complexity. When analysing the mentioned phenomena and developing compensatory measures, it is therefore always necessary to view the factor of 'migration' or 'origin from an immigrant family' in its context with other relevant factors – the socioeconomic

situation, educational background, family situation, personality traits – rather than as a singular variable which explains everything.

The study also comprises suggestions on compensatory measures. In short, these are the following:

- peer mentoring
- making it easier for people who have dropped out from education or training pathways to restart them
- modularisation of education and training programmes
- recognition of qualifications
- gender-sensitive networking with immigrants' organisations
- support in the development of individual life plans
- development of the competence of multilingualism and cultural diversity in the family
- productive approach to deviant behaviour.

The entire study can be obtained from ibw in a printed form (ibw research report no. 173, ISBN 978-3-902742-57-5) or [online](#).

#### Literature sources

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<sup>2</sup> The pragmatic definition of "success" here was completion of an apprenticeship or an upper secondary school (or successful attendance of the 7th or 8th year of an upper secondary school) within the foreseen timeframe plus no more than two years.