Landelijk Kennis Team Schoolweigering: Meeting on March 24th 2021

Workshop 1: Group discussion based on the plenary presentation: '*The importance of peer relations in preventing school refusal, and how to build relationships when school refusal is established*' by Dr. Trude Havik

Four questions were posed to the participants. Here below, the reactions are summarized.

1. <u>What are your experiences, and the challenges, in preventing social disconnection among youth?</u>
   - It is important to try to connect students with friends, a school mentor can play an important role in this.
   - A broad challenge to 'prevent' social disconnection for youth is when the family is isolated / withdrawn.
   - It was noticed that in times of corona with homeschooling or partly homeschooling it was difficult for vulnerable students to stay in touch with peers. Especially within school for special education, since these schools mostly have a regional function, so meeting outside school is hard and because a lot of students within special education have problems with creating and/or maintaining relationships.
   - Another participant also saw a lot of social anxiety and social isolation with many of the students at the special education school she is employed. Most of the students at her school have ASD.
   - Students experiencing social isolation are often ashamed of it. Asking for help might be difficult for them.
   - A participant stressed that the gap between education and (mental) health care is a huge problem. There have been cuts in education and social workers have disappeared. CJG (center for youth and family) should fill in these gaps, but this does not always work that smoothly in practice.

2. <u>In what ways could we better promote social connectedness among youth?</u>
   - It is really important that we keep family (parents and siblings) connected to school.
   - Preventing 'boredom' within schools and making education more appealing can stimulate social connectedness between students.
   - For young people it is really important to experience successes within school; that they are able to achieve their goal and participate.
   - One participant explained how they have implemented 'stop walk talk' as part of the SWPBS program. It is meant to prevent bullying. Bullying preventing is really important in stimulating social connectedness between youth.
   - The importance of having school psychologists within mainstream schools was stressed by multiple participants. The feeling is that we need more school psychologists within mainstream schools in the Netherlands. They would be able to identify difficulties in social connectedness early on (e.g., sign of social isolation or bullying) by students and provide support to these students.

3. <u>What are your experiences, and the challenges, in socially (re)engaging youth who already display school refusal?</u>
   - One participant mentioned that in her experience children sometimes drop out of school due to a lack of understanding for their behaviour by the parents of their peers (e.g., not getting invited for parties).
   - A major challenge is helping students learn what to say or how to respond when peers ask them where they have been, why they have been out of school for so long.
   - It is difficult when students need to reengage school in an already existing school system/situation, which might also have been part of the problem in the first place.
   - School refusing youth often have had negative experiences with peers, and therefore have little confidence and motivation to enter into new social contacts.
   - School refusing youth might get (temporarily) placements within schools for special education. If the special education school also includes youth with externalising behaviour, this might be very difficult and stressful for school refusing youth.
   - Multiple participants expressed their concerns regarding Covid and school refusal. They think that there might be an increase in youth suffering from severe school refusal, since youth that already had difficulty with attending school have had too little real practice (exposure) in the recent year. The lockdowns might have been quite comfortable (being able to isolate socially) for socially anxious youth, but it can also increase the avoidance behaviour, which makes it more difficult to reengage socially again.

4. <u>In which ways could we support youth who are displaying school refusal to (re)engage socially?</u>
   - Practice, practice, practice. Social situations should be practiced a lot, for example by role plays.
   - It is all about taking small steps, regaining trust, working with the parents, and other involved professionals (like mental health care).
   - A professional acknowledged that we need to accept that the student is taking three steps forward and then 'falls back' two steps in the learning process. It is with ups and downs. We need to stick with the young person and don't give up.
   - It might be really helpful to make a support group of peers.
   - It is important to rebuild a meaningful daily routine.
   - The school mentor (or classroom teacher in primary education) is definitely a key person. When there is no good bond with the mentor, the feeling of safety will be less and reintegration will be much harder if not impossible. We need to support teachers in how they can be a safe haven for school refusing youth.
   - We need to spend more time on preparing schools and peers when the young person reengages with school. It is not the young person alone that needs to change.
   - And more in general we need to look at our school system. Research shows that there are school-related factors associated with the development and maintenance of school refusal. It is not just an individual problem.

When finishing the discussion, professionals employed within educational programs supporting youth displaying school refusing were asked whether their students went to school or not during the lockdown. It was noticed that most educational programs kept most or some of their students displaying school refusal within the schools, to prevent them from building up more avoidance of school.

Interesting links

These links were shared during the discussion:

- https://continuityineducation.org/articles/10.5334/cie.17/ (about empowering children through school re-entry after Covid)
- https://www.trimbos.nl/kennis/ijslands-preventie-model (about a prevention model developed in Island that is now also used by six municipalities in the Netherlands)
- https://www.nji.nl/nl/Kennis/Dossier/Sterke-basis-voor-de-jeugd/GIRFEC-Getting-it-right-for-every-child (an approach from Scotland using a circle of opportunities)