

"Cults in the field of health - how we do work in schools".ⁱ

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Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to start my presentation by telling you about a true case:

In 2017 22-year-old Finn Bogumil travelled to Dominica for a few months to relax and get to know the country. This is a dream that many young people have and want to fulfil, especially after graduating from school or before going to university.

But a short time later, a friend found Finn lying on the ground outside, exhausted and weak. A short time later, Finn died.

What happened to the healthy 22-year-old? In 2020, due to intensive investigative procedures and with the help of the bereaved families, authorities were able to clarify this question.

Finn believed in so-called light nutrition, an esoteric concept with followers all over the world. Supposedly, it is possible to live completely without eating and drinking - and to feed only on light. Finn apparently tried this - and died of it. In a letter to his mother nine months before his death, he wrote: " I believe in light nutrition. The ability to live healthier, better and more energetic without physical food. According to the principle of 'mind over matter'. Ever since I learned about it, it won't let me go. (...)".

Thank God, the cases that fall under the title of my lecture today – “cults in the field of health and how we do work in schools” - do not all end so tragically. Nevertheless, this incident shows that there is a need for action.

Under the terms indigo children, crystal and rainbow children, extreme esoteric currents bring the topic also in our schools' agenda. As a burning glass of social processes, these issues are increasingly being brought into everyday school life. In addition, we observe very similar phenomena as during the Corona pandemic in particular considering conspiracy theories:

More precisely, to see a meaning in random events, to see everything connected to everything and a great potential for radicalisation as the example of Finn has shown.

It is the belief in the effect of hidden forces and powers beyond sensual perception. these are still in vogue among many people and have even been even strengthened by the pandemic. The number of enquiries to our office in the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport Baden-Württemberg reflects this trend. Every day, new spiritual offerings come onto the market that promise people, among other things, simple solutions to their problems, healing of illnesses, a sense of purpose in their lives, a

glimpse into the future, more quality of life or the disappearance of fears and even illnesses.

The described phenomena first started as a trend in the nineties in the USA. Since the year 2000, the trend has also been conquering the German market. Elements of anthroposophy and aura teachings, belief in light beings and mediumistic abilities such as telepathy, reincarnation and transmigration theories, energy teachings, astrology and belief in karma are combined with angel therapy and all kinds of energetic transformation beliefs. A field broad enough to appeal to and win over many esotericists of different persuasions.

Through public manifestations of distrust not only towards the state in general but especially towards science as well as established conventional medicine, dangerous views about alternative healing methods are spreading at the same time. Not every esoteric practice is dangerous, by any means.

Beliefs become dangerous when self-proclaimed faith healers try to treat diseases like ADHD or autism in children with remedies like the toxic MMS, i.e., chlorine bleach. Parents often fall into the clutches of healers. According to a survey in 2020, parents of autistic children report spending an average of \$1,000 a month on supplementary drugs. For \$20,000, they can also buy a hyperbaric oxygen tent, in which autistic children are then confined for an hour each day to allegedly heal their child's autism. In these cases, authorities immediately take action because of the risk to the child's well-being.

The phenomenon must therefore be seen as a challenge for society as a whole.

But what contribution can schools make here? One can confront such theories with facts, which is also called "debunking". However, those who try to do this often achieve the opposite: the ideological world views are not weakened, but even strengthened. This is also called the "boomerang effect". Contradictory information leads to inconsistencies in the represented worldview, which in turn leads to an emotional malaise. Instead of absorbing the new knowledge and modifying the worldview, the facts are rejected and one's own worldview is transferred. Therefore, direct confrontations are not always the best solution in all cases.

Often it makes more sense to teach people skills that enable them to assess such claims or influences for themselves. This applies especially to media literacy, given the overlap with the phenomenon of conspiracy theories and fake news.

Prevention in schools in Baden-Württemberg therefore focuses on several areas in addition to active educational work through internet sites on the topic and checklists on flyers. These main areas among others are:

1. training in critical thinking
2. competences in the area of media criticism, especially in social media channels

3. thematising the structure and function of conspiracy theories.

In the educational curricula in Baden-Württemberg, these areas are also referred to as core-life-skills. Here, the curricula of all grades and types of schools are based on the WHO definition of the central core competences in the area of health promotion and prevention in schools. These include:

1. self-awareness, which refers to the recognition of one's own person, one's own character as well as one's own strengths and weaknesses, wishes and dislikes
→ This is important for self-analysis and assessment of one's own wishes and aspirations.
2. creative thinking, which makes it possible to make adequate decisions and to solve constructively
→ Not every problem has a supposedly simple solution, which is often propagated by esoteric providers.
3. critical thinking as the skill of objectively analysing information and experience
→ essential competence to critically check and question claims.

These competences are successively trained through the mandatory contents of the education curricula. Through case studies, analyses of literature and other media, and above all through a problem-oriented lesson structure, the pupils are trained early on to look behind the facades, to question and to form a fact-based opinion.

However, media literacy itself is also a focus of Baden-Württemberg's educational goals.

The 2016 educational plans introduced media education in Baden-Württemberg as one of six overarching guiding perspectives. In addition, a basic course in grade 5 teaches the basics of media competence on which students and teachers can build in further school years. Furthermore, while learning with, through and via media, the protection of minors from harmful contents, is also given central importance.

The guiding perspective of media education and the basic course on media education are based on eight areas of competences which are taken into account in school teaching in an integrative way:

- Media society - this also includes the well-known fake news, conspiracy theories
- Media analysis - to critically question the sources but also to recognise manipulative techniques.
- Information and Knowledge
- communication
- Production and presentation
- Youth media protection, especially in the area of social media.

Teaching tools include checklists and concrete procedures for the critical examination of media texts and sources. Teachers are trained about the dangers that can occur in this context and informed about the aspect of endangerment of children's well-being in three-day in-service training courses that take place once per school year.

The goal is clear: to give children and young people the tools they need at an early age so that they do not fall for dubious sellers on the worldview market in the first place. Or even get into a situation like the one I reported at the beginning of my lecture.

It is essential to train students in how to deal with the media and crude theories so that they can critically question and examine news or religious and ideological offerings and their explanatory patterns. These contents do not only promote imparting general knowledge, but rather protecting children and young people from the dangers of it.

Thank you for your kind attention!

Information and education about dangerous religious-ideological offers

Information et éducation sur les offres religieuses et philosophiques dangereuses

¹ Because of air traffic perturbation Dr Hermann was not able to make his presentation. However, he took part in the General Assembly of FECRIS in video conference where he represented the association Zebra BW of Baden Württemberg