

8.Young Leaders as a role model for youth at risk and youth policy. A study on individual effects of a pedagogical training programme in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This study reports on a practical experiment with a pedagogical training programme for youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the results for participating youth. The programme was implemented at seven youth work locations and was aimed at stimulating youth's development towards self-conscious people who take responsibility in their neighbourhoods. After a short discussion of the programme's theoretical foundations in social learning theory, resilience of youth at risk and the position of role models, this study provides indications for the programme's encouraging function regarding competence development of participants and their social activation. These results offer interesting leads for a consolidation of youth policy directed at social integration of youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Keywords

youth at risk, youth agency, role models, disadvantaged neighbourhoods, social competence

The past years Dutch youth have gained international attention due to comparative research demonstrating that young people in the Netherlands score relatively highly on indicators for wellbeing (UNICEF, 2013). However, there are vulnerable groups who do not profit from this favourable position. Several studies indicate that in disadvantaged neighbourhoods the number of young people experiencing social problems have been stabilising or even increasing the past few years (CBS, 2012; Steketee, Tierolf & Mak, 2014). Evidently the current efforts of youth policy are not sufficient to create a noticeable improvement in the development of youth growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, leaving them exposed to all kinds of social risks.

Growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

In addition to the home and school environment, the neighbourhood where young people grow up plays a significant role in their development. Youth from socioeconomic disadvantaged neighbourhoods are exposed to more and higher risks (WRR, 2005). For example, an international study has demonstrated a direct correlation between juvenile delinquency and substance abuse among young people and the socioeconomic status of the neighbourhood they live in (Junger-Tas, Steketee & Moll, 2008). A vulnerable neighbourhood environment might give room to deviating norms which encourage types of behaviour generally designated as 'risky' or 'undesirable'. Particularly in urban neighbourhoods the anonymity of public space offers a playing field for developing a 'deviating' culture of the streets (El Hadioui, 2011). Such a 'street culture' is said to be at odds with norms and values of the home- and school environment: civic decency standards and studying hard in school are generally not appreciated (De Jong, 2007). Not surprisingly, youth from these neighbourhoods are relatively more prone to expulsion or school drop out due to truancy, misbehaviour in class or low academic performance (WRR, 2009). Hence, the social environment in which they are raised has a large impact on the current and future opportunities of young people from these neighbourhoods.

Role models and competence development

A protective factor for young people growing up in such risky environments is proved to be the presence of an involved adult in their environment who functions as a positive role model for them. Research in various international contexts demonstrates that youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods who can count on such support prove to have more success later in life in the area of education, work and social relations (Werner & Smith, 2001). The principles of social learning theory also stress the importance of these examples in the social environment of children and

adolescents. Social learning theory describes human developments as a chain of social learning processes in which a person's experiences to a great extent shape his or her behaviour (De Wit & Van der Veer, 1984). Norms, expectations and cultural codes of the social context in which a child is raised, like the family, the peer group and the school, have large impact on their behaviour. However, Crul (2003) argues that young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods often lack positive role models, like older peers who have experienced educational success and entered university.

In addition to social support and the presence of positive role models, several personal factors have been shown to play a substantial role in the extent to which young people are resilient to risk factors. High self-esteem, competency in age-related developmental tasks and an internal locus of control, or the belief to be in control over circumstances in life, all contribute to young people's ability to flourish despite adversity (Werner & Smith, 2001).

In view of the foregoing, we would like to propose that investing in competency development and talents of youth at risk could produce positive effects for their personal wellbeing as well as their future social position. Earlier research stresses the importance of offering opportunities to experience success (Seligman, 2011). The positive emotions such an experience provides boosts their motivation to exert themselves to achieve another success. For youth at risk such 'success experiences' are even more important because in many settings – such as in school – they are often confronted with their shortcomings and accompanying sentiments of discouragement (Kooijmans, 2009). Offering opportunities to improve their skills in the context of leisure time might offer a counterbalance. Simultaneously, they are able to acquire proficiency in skills they need to find a positive place in society. A review of the international literature on talent development of youth at risk indicates that such an approach, encouraging their competency, offers positive outcomes for their self-esteem and social skills (Van Hoorik, 2011).

Youth work in the Netherlands

Youth at risk in disadvantaged neighbourhoods are the main target group of over 3.000 youth workers in the Netherlands. While the majority of youth policy is directed at youth care in specialised institutions, only a smaller amount of the budget is reserved for professional youth work, which in public opinion is meant for recreational activities and tackling youth nuisance. After more than fifty years of professional youth work, there are serious doubts about its results.

Solid impact assessment has recently started (Noorda & Van Dijk, 2017). In our view doubts might be countered if youth work's main goal to connect youth at risk with society would receive more attention. Boosting young people's social and cultural capital by enriching their development with informal learning programmes, might provide youth work with (new) tools to encourage their personal and civic education.

Young Leaders: a practical experiment

Against the background of the foregoing, we posit the question whether the social integration of youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods could be encouraged more effectively using the elements of role models and competence development. The results of a practical experiment with Young Leaders, a pedagogical training programme for youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods, have provided new insights¹.

Goal of the Young Leaders programme is to encourage the personal and social development of young people in socioeconomic disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The programme has been developed to activate youth as positive role models for peers, by encouraging their development towards self-conscious persons who take responsibility in their neighbourhoods. Young people participate in a training course consisting of ten sessions. Each session has several topics to discuss and to learn about. Throughout the course the youth are challenged to gain more in-depth knowledge about their own characteristics: good qualities and potential 'pitfalls', and how to make use of them for the benefit of their own future as well as to improve their neighbourhood.

Individual and group assignments are used to treat subjects, such as 'who is your role model', 'what are your strengths', 'dealing with peer pressure' and 'formative experiences'. During the course young people make plans to organise social activities in their neighbourhood. Supported by a coach they carry out their plans. The young people are leading in thinking up and designing the activities, guided by the aim to improve the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, their visible contribution to the neighbourhood also aims to improve young people's reputation among residents and professionals in the area. In total 96 young people at seven youth work locations participated in the practical experiment. In this paper we present the results of an evaluative study, showing that the programme has fostered several positive effects regarding their development.

Method

A process and effect evaluation has been carried out in order to describe the methodology of the pedagogical training programme Young Leaders and investigate its effects. The study consisted of several elements, among

¹ The programme has been designed in a co-production by the Dutch National Youth Council (NJR) and research institute Noorda en Co.

which individual effects for participating youth, the neighbourhoods they live in and the organisations for youth work in which the programme has functioned. In this paper the individual effects for participating youth are discussed². The central research question for this paper was:

"How do participating youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods and professionals involved with them reflect on the progress in their development during the Young Leaders programme?"

The core of the data set consists of semi-structured interviews with four types of respondents: trainers, youth workers, coaches and participating youth. In these interviews respondents first of all were asked about their experiences with the programme and its course and subsequently were invited to reflect on their observations regarding the development of individual participants and the group process.

The study deliberately combined insights from different perspectives in order to get a more elaborate understanding of the reflections on the youth's development during the programme. Through such triangulation (Creswell, 2013) the validity of the reported progress could be increased, in this case by including four sources with different perspectives. In addition to semi-structured interviews, the analysis included observational reports of training and coaching sessions and evaluation forms completed by trainers after each training session.

Participants

The results are based on interviews with 58 respondents involved in the programme at seven pilot locations. It concerns trainers (n=12), youth workers (n=13), coaches (n=7) and participating youth (n=28).

Almost all participating youth were already involved in other youth work activities. Youth workers asked young people they were in contact with if they were interested in the training programme. Their motivation, learning goals and specific needs were considered in an individual interview before participation in the programme.

The majority of the groups of young people participating in the programme were mixed with respect to gender. Regarding age category some differences were observed between pilot locations. At three locations the groups consisted of young adults aged 18 to 20 years, while at four location the groups mainly consisted of teenagers aged 15 to 17 years old³. With respect to ethnic-cultural background the groups were a representative reflection of the neighbourhood's population. This has led to an ethnic-culturally diverse group of participants in the Young Leaders

programme at the seven locations.

Results

Analysis of the interviews with respondents shows that they have observed positive effects of the Young Leaders programme on several aspects of the participating youth's development. The most important results that emerged during analysis will be presented in the following. These results are considered indications of the average participants' development and not all participants have made the same progress with regard to all elements. Furthermore, despite their growth, both participants and their counsellors indicate that after completing the programme they still have the need for further development.

New skills

First of all, participating youth have developed several specific skills, among which presenting, organising and communicating. They have learned how to give a public presentation, and have developed application skills as well: how do I present myself? Participating youth were given the opportunity to practice a lot in the training course and eventually presented themselves and their plans to an audience, often including members of the city council.

Discovering qualities

Furthermore, participating youth have discovered their own qualities and further developed them. The training programme has challenged them to gain more knowledge about who they are as a person: what do they find important, what gives them a good feeling and what do they feel they are good at. In that process other participants have served as a mirror to them and trainers and youth workers provided them with feedback. How valuable this has been is described by a 20-year-old participant in the following excerpt:

Drawing your own 'life path' was very instructive. We really had to think about where we stand and what we would like to achieve. This is also a way to get to know yourself better. I think this was the most important thing I've learned from the programme. Also because of the feedback. You know, normally you mostly focus on the negative and your own weak points. In the programme other people reflect on your good qualities, your strong points. This helps you to see yourself in a more positive light.

² All results of the evaluative study are presented in a book about Young Leaders: Noorda, J. & Van Dijk, A. (2015). Young Leaders. Positieve rolmodellen in kwetsbare wijken. Amsterdam: VU University Press.

³ Age differences with respect to results for participants were not analysed because the number of interviewed participants was limited and the age differences were relatively small.

Self esteem and responsibility

The previous excerpt also reflects another important result: improved self esteem among participating youth. Youth workers and trainers reflected on the fact that many participating youth had low self-esteem when starting the programme. They described how in their perception during the Young Leaders programme the young people have gained more confidence in themselves and their own abilities. Youth workers also related this to the new experiences the youth have been confronted with. This was challenging for them but also provided them with a sense of pride when leaving their comfort zone and for example giving a presentation in front of a group of new people. One of the youth workers described how this resulted in new learning experiences for them:

They have learned to step outside their comfort zone. They have been brought into touch with new things. One activity included handing out flyers at the shopping mall, an area where they usually hang around in groups. This time they had to walk up to people on their own. At first they were a bit scared and stayed close together as a group. But eventually they started and overcame their inhibition. For them this was a huge step forward.

Another mentioned element in the increased self esteem was the appreciation and recognition they received for completing the programme and organising social activities in the neighbourhood. Several participating young people did not expect to complete the course with success. Receiving the certificate for participation in the programme was a gratifying experience of success.

Another element was the increasing sense of responsibility among participants. During the course several participants took on the responsibility to gather and prepare an activity and they informed each other about the content of a session when one of them was unable to attend.

The number of participants that completed the training but who were not involved in the activity stage of the project was relatively high (36 of 70 participants). The main reason for them to quit was that after the summer break the activities did not fit their schedule anymore. Their advice was to offer both elements in the same school year as an integrated programme. Other factors of importance were instable and problematic circumstances in the home and school environment which impeded some youth to continue their involvement. Noteworthy is that the vacancy this created was filled in

by new participants who wanted to join and to contribute to activities in their neighbourhood.

Socially involved role models

Young people that participated in the Young Leaders programme have gained awareness of the fact that they are an example for other youth, especially younger children in their surroundings. They started feeling responsible for the impact they have on other people and with the awareness came the desire to set a good example and spread a positive message. They put this into practice by fulfilling an active role in the neighbourhood. According to youth's reports and the professionals involved, this has functioned as a source of both self confidence and a sense of responsibility. The recognition they received as a role model plays a central part in that process. This is reflected in the words of a 19-year-old participant:

We notice that we have really become a contact person in the neighbourhood. People come up to us. That's also because we are in the news and several papers are writing about us. We have become 'hood celebrities'. The other day one of the neighbours walked up to me to tell me about a group of youth who were causing trouble. Young people also ask us for help. They ask us to organising an activity or help them out when choosing a new school.

During the programme participating youth have come to realise that they can make a contribution to their neighbourhood. The awareness of the impact they can have on others, both positively and negatively, is an important motive for positive behaviour and making well-considered choices. Both young people and involved professionals indicated that the youth's social engagement and their enthusiasm to organise something for other people and be of importance to the community has been prompted and grown stronger. This element was also addressed in the continued coaching youth workers provided after the training programme had ended. Several participants continued volunteering in youth work facilities or other neighbourhood activities.

Young Leaders for a positive pedagogical neighbourhood environment

Now that a small-scale practical experiment with Young Leaders shows that the programme provides positive results, we would like to consider how this knowledge can contribute to the current system of youth policy in order to improve its effects on youth from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. We argue for wide use of pedagogical training programmes like Young Leaders as a structural element in the activities of youth facilities. This would also have implications for youth work education and in-service training, in order to

prepare youth workers for a 'new' role as trainer and facilitator. Application of these programmes could improve their results not only through encouraging young people's talents but also through offering them a podium to inspire other youth around them and have an impact on their communities. This argument is supported by findings of Jönsson and Larneby (2018) describing a Swedish peer-to-peer programme developed in a youth work context in the municipality of Svedala in which young people organised activities for young refugees and other youth, evolving from a temporary project into an association run by a board of 'established' and refugee youth. They found similar effects for participating youth to those described in this paper, such as developed skills and increased awareness of strengths and capabilities, as well as the development of a sense of community. In Belgium and France, youth programmes that combine training for personal development and 'civic service' have shown similar results, although these studies focused on professional skills and employment (Kantar, 2013; PJS, 2014). Furthermore, a project addressing transitions of European youth demonstrated that young people combine both elements of personal aims, attributes and skills with collaborative techniques in their transition to adulthood and that they are deeply committed to contribute to their communities (Cuzzocrea & Collins, 2015).

These findings also call for continued involvement of youth workers and other coaches to support them in their involvement with the neighbourhood and the appeals that are made to them, particularly regarding complex issues beyond their influence. Further research into the effects of the programme should consider potential pit falls and opportunities for sustainable involvement of young leaders in the community and required coaching and support.

Although the initial participants of the Young Leaders programme have functioned as an inspiration for other youth to join their group, the size of this pilot has been too limited to address community effects such as improved social cohesion and experienced neighbourhood safety. It would be interesting to investigate these potential social effects when implementing the programme on a larger scale over a longer period of time. A connecting framework for initiatives like the Young Leaders programme that fits the current developments in the social field, is the concept of 'pedagogical neighbourhood programmes'. These programmes are based on the conviction that educating youth can only succeed as a communal pedagogical effort (De Winter, 2008). It takes a village to raise a child. It starts from the assumption that when a large part of the neighbourhood environment participates in their education, young people will run less social risks.

Such programmes might be an effective way to fill the pedagogical 'gap' in disadvantaged neighbourhoods from the bottom up. In practice most of these neighbourhood programmes focus on primary schools and establishing a relation with the environment outside the schools advances with difficulty (Horjus, Van Dijken & De Winter, 2012). A bottleneck with large implications is the fact that youth aged 12 years and older are usually not included in the programmes. The Young Leaders programme might serve as a trouble-shooter, since it has proved effective in involving this age group. This might create opportunities to construct a solid pedagogical community among residents, including young people, who act with joint forces as a role model for 'their' youth and map out routes to a positive future.

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