



Talent van de straat. Jongerenwerk als preventiestrategie
M.J.B. Kooijmans

Summary

Talent off the streets Youth work as a prevention strategy

Author: Maike Kooijmans

Youths who are unable to develop themselves and their talents at school or in their spare time and who spend a lot of time in the streets receive a relatively large amount of policy attention. It is assumed that these 'youths at risk' are more likely to display criminal or other deviant behaviour due to the influence of street culture (Junger-Tas 2001). Since the late nineties there has therefore been an increasing focus on preventive youth policy in order to prevent these vulnerable youths from dropping out of school or being marginalised (Schuyt 1995; Vettenburg & Walgrave 2009; Baillergeau & Hoijtink 2010).

The number of local preventative programmes is also on the rise, for example in the form of talent-oriented youth work. These programmes aim to stimulate the positive development of youths at risk and to keep them on the straight and narrow.

These programmes are meant for youths who already cause nuisance and show delinquent behaviour (secondary and tertiary prevention) as well as those who pose a high risk of doing so but who have hitherto managed to stay away from crime (primary prevention) (De Roos & Van Dinther 2011).

To date, no systematic research has been done on how these programmes exactly work. For this reason we do not know how these programmes work (the action theory) or why they would work (the change theory) (Chen 2005). As of yet, there is no written programme theory that deals with talent-oriented youth work. We also hardly know if the goals - talent development and the desistance from crime - are achieved by the individual participants.

Research design

The present study is an investigatory evaluation study on the effectiveness of two youth work practices in Brabant (in the south of the Netherlands). The first is the football project Doelbewust, which is an initiative of an 's-Hertogenbosch welfare organisation called Divers, and the second is the artistic talent projects carried out by R-Newt, a youth work initiative of ContourdeTwern in Tilburg. In revealing the interventional mechanisms and developmental patterns in these practices, this study aims to show how and for what type of youths the projects fail or succeed in providing prevention. This study lays the foundation for a theoretical substantiation of talent-oriented youth work by making explicit the action theory of these practices. The central question is:

How can artistic talent projects and sportive talent projects in youth work contribute to resistance to crime (and desistance from crime) among boys with a high risk for delinquent behaviour?

In order to study the effectiveness of these practices from more than one perspective, a multiple research design has been opted for:

1. The professional perspective. What methodological ideas and approaches are used by the youth workers of the talent projects Doelbewust and R-Newt, on what type of youths do they focus and how do they think the projects can contribute to resistance and desistance (from crime)?
2. The participatory perspective. What significance do the participating boys accord the talent projects Doelbewust and R-Newt, and how do they think participation affects their relationship with 'the streets'?

3. The goal achievement perspective. How do the participating boys develop at Doelbewust and R-Newt, and to what extent are the goals of the talent projects achieved?

Subsequently, the results will be compared to an existing *what works* study (Andrews 2000).

4. What similarities and what differences can be seen when comparing the findings of this study to those of existing studies on the possibilities to affect (incipient) delinquent behaviour, and what are the implications of these results for the significance and value of talent-oriented youth work as a prevention strategy?

To carry out the survey a *community of research* was established, consisting of four youth workers, two supervising researchers and eight junior researchers who have systematically studied the two practices over three years. For this study, fifty boys¹ who participated in Doelbewust or R-Newt were selected. During the period of participation, half of the group was known to the police and court due to anti-social behaviour. The data was collected by (participant) observations, interviews, the monitoring of talent and behavioural development and a 'Q survey' carried out in the same research group (see chapter 2).

A framework of dramaturgical analysis

What happens to these boys during the projects, what is the effect on their 'inner world' and how does their participation in Doelbewust and R-Newt affect their performances (i.e. their behaviour in public) and their relationships? How do the projects affect their emotions, motivations and aspirations? And, in what manner are their attitudes towards 'the streets' also affected?

To this end, a framework of dramaturgical analysis will be developed in this study, inspired by Erving Goffman's microsociology and the dramaturgical perspective (1959), Arlie Hochschild's sociology of emotions (1979, 2003) and Arjun Appadurai's anthropological perspective on 'the capability to aspire' (2004). The working mechanisms of Doelbewust and R-Newt will be studied on the level of four different focus areas, which in this study will be called '*frontstage* and *backstage management*'.

Frontstage relates to impression and relationship management: youths learn to recognise how their performances come across to others and how they can build supportive and stimulating relationships. *Backstage* relates to emotion management (how can youths at risk experience success and pride?) and aspiration management (what are their ambitions for the future, and how can they achieve these dreams and goals?).

The manner in which boys 'of the street' deal with the tension between their frontstage and backstage management systems says a lot about the risks of delinquent behaviour or conformism. A specific *taxonomy of risks and opportunities* has therefore been developed in this thesis.

- *High-risk*: boys who conform to the main values of the streets and do not reject criminal behaviour. Backstage and frontstage coincide for these youths; there is insufficient tension to trigger (behavioural) change. There is a significant risk of delinquent behaviour.
- *Auspicious*: boys who like to act tough to heed the macho codes of 'the street' but who familiarise themselves with the mainstream values in our society backstage. There is a healthy tension between their frontstage and backstage management systems. Chances of them turning to crime are slim.
- *In-between*: boys who want to be loyal both to the values of the streets and the mainstream values are in between these profiles. They continually experience 'collisions' between their frontstage and backstage management systems because the different sets of values from the streets, school and their homes clash within them (EI

¹ After a year, the scope of this research was narrowed to focus exclusively on boys because the girls who participated in the talent projects proved to show a relatively smaller risk of delinquent behaviour.

Hadioui 2011). Boys with an *in-between* profile are vulnerable because they like to imitate the macho behaviour of criminal role models, which potentially leads to delinquency. At the same time, this profile is auspicious because it is rooted in a substantive tension between the frontstage and backstage management systems. Furthermore these boys are relatively easily tempted to positively develop their talents.

Youth workers on the effectiveness of the projects

The Doelbewust football project and the R-Newt artistic projects do not formally focus on criminal youths. However, this survey demonstrates that some of the participating youths do indeed commit offences (*first offenders* and *recidivists*). Youth workers prove to consciously work with delinquent youths to keep them from committing more serious offences or do so more frequently. The different kinds of adolescents participate in Doelbewust and R-Newt as a mixed group.

The projects are presented as a safe environment to learn and experiment in, located between the streets, school and home; moreover, each has its own specific rules and etiquette that youth workers and youths agree on within the world of professional football and music that is simulated in the projects.

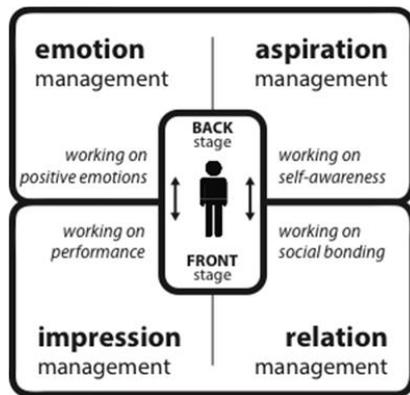
On the level of *impression management*, the workers assume that if the youths at risk further expand their competences they will be more capable of alternative performances in which they are able to show their strengths (talents) without losing face. According to the youth workers, talent projects contribute to the development of general practical and social skills, better enabling youths to resist the negative influences of the streets and giving them more opportunities to participate in society and achieve social growth.

Furthermore, the workers claim that participation in talent projects affects the *relationship management system*. They believe it to produce supportive and inspiring relationships. The bonding among youth workers and peers 'who do well' provides the youths at risk with a better chance to identify themselves with these positive role models and thus to distance themselves from the delinquent street culture. Youth workers think that youths at risk who socially connect to the project are more capable of staying away from crime.

Additionally, youth workers believe that working on the *emotion management system* can counterbalance the negative emotions that our prestigious society brings about in youths, such as feelings of rejection or exclusion, fear of failure, anger and jealousy. 'When youths at risk experience positive emotions they are encouraged to develop their talents, which makes it more likely they will distance themselves from the streets', youth workers state.

Lastly, youth workers claim that the projects contribute to the ability to *aspire*, which forms the fourth management system. The idea is that boys who discover their strengths and ambitions will realise that crime will not bring them any closer to their goals. The youth workers are convinced that increasing self-awareness and self-esteem and reinforcing more favourable future prospects will stimulate youths at risk to stay on the straight and narrow.

This leads to a basic model for preventive talent-oriented youth work that shows a strong coherence between the improvement of the frontstage and backstage management systems.



The participatory perspective on the effectiveness of the projects

The sub-study on the views that fifty participating boys have on the effectiveness of talent projects has, through Q methodological research, led to five 'discourses' that are referred to as 'scripts' in chapter 5. A script portrays the view of a group of boys on how the projects affect their behaviour, their relationships, their emotions and their aspirations. Moreover, the scripts show any changes in their attitudes towards the streets without discussing their actual talent or behavioural development.

The five scripts are defined as follows:

- I. In a *street-resistant script* it is the social dimension of the project that is appreciated most. Boys with this auspicious script believe they have gained more self-awareness. Their view is that they can stay away from crime more easily because they have turned further away from the street values in their backstage management system. They want to be a role model to others.
- II. Boys with a *street-ambiguous script* think that besides the social dimension, the emotional aspect is also important. They value the experience of success and perceive all project participants to have equal opportunities. Although they physically spend less time in the streets, they prove not to distance themselves from the streets in their backstage management system. Therefore, we call them *in-between*.
- III. According to boys with a *street-shunning script*, the project mainly influences their emotional and aspiration management systems. For these ambitious boys, who fear the negative pressure of street culture, the projects are a safe environment in which they can work on their sportive and artistic talents. The fear makes them consciously distance themselves from the street culture, and this makes their future prospects *auspicious*.
- IV. In a *street-loyal script* the boys consider the project to be a stepping stone towards a career in sports or an artistic career. They state that they experience a high level of autonomy and owe much of their successes to the projects. In this manner they can impress their street friends even more while spending as much time with them as before. In this script the projects particularly affect the impression and aspiration management systems. In their backstage management, the confident boys want to stay loyal to the main values of the streets, which gives them a *high-risk* profile.
- V. Boys with a *street-naive script* consider the emotional and social impact of the project to be the most important. They attach great importance to the fact that they can make mistakes in the projects without being rejected, which happens frequently outside the projects. They indicate that because of the project they can interact with their street friends in a fair manner. They do not hold street culture at bay: they are unaware of crime and are *in-between*.

Street scripts and the risk of delinquency

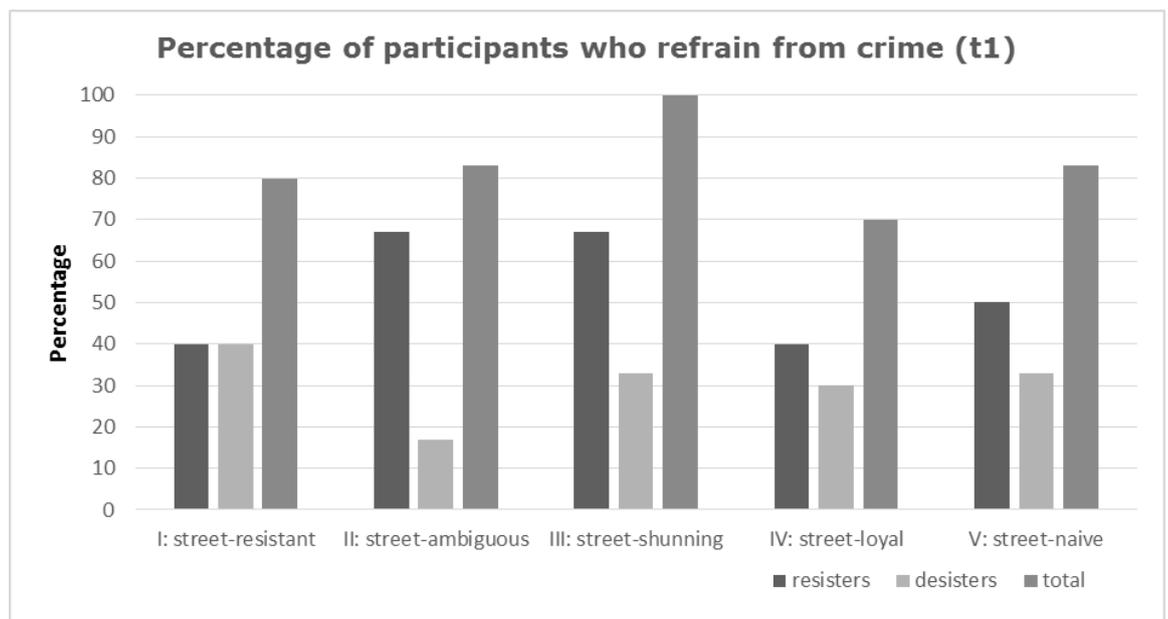
In the light of the *taxonomy of risks and opportunities*, boys with a street-loyal script comprise the most at risk group, followed by the groups of boys with either street-ambiguous or street-naive scripts, which both have an *in-between* profile. The latter are vulnerable because they take little distance from the delinquent street culture in their

backstage management systems. From this perspective, boys with a street-resistant script have the most promising future prospects. They follow the positive examples of peers and youth workers and, in turn, want to be role models to others. This is what makes these assertive boys able to stand up for themselves. The anxious street-avoiders consciously distance themselves from the streets, and this also gives them promising future prospects. However, this group is at special risk because they are not always able to withstand the pressure of criminal youths. They are at risk of getting involved with crime as co-offenders, offenders and/or victims as soon as they are no longer protected by the youth workers.

Goal achievement

The talent and behavioural development of the fifty boys has been monitored at two particular points in time. At the start of the project (t0), 50 percent of the group had previously committed an offense. During the second measurement (t1), 78 percent were free from delinquency.

Boys who represent an auspicious script (street-resistant or street-shunning) prove to develop positively and to a large extent stay away from crime (*resistance to crime*). This also applies to boys who have *in-between* scripts (street-ambiguous and street-naive). The group that represents the high-risk street-loyal script seems to refrain from crime less frequently (*desistance from crime*).



The results of monitoring the talent and behavioural development show that the participation in talent projects contributes to the choice to refrain from crime (*resistance*) by boys who run a higher risk of committing an offence but have not yet done so. To them, primary prevention goals apply. Participation in the projects is also effective for boys who show incipient delinquent behaviour and to whom secondary prevention goals apply. However, the projects do not seem to reduce the risk of delinquency for boys with a high-risk profile to whom tertiary prevention goals apply. This is because they already show delinquent behaviour.

Recidivists with a street-loyal script state that they experience great success through the projects. This stimulates the intrinsic motivation for talent development, but it also gains them status in the streets. This causes their street-loyal script to remain unchanged. Moreover, as representatives of the street values they can negatively influence other project participants, especially boys with an *in-between* script, and this constitutes an additional risk.

A comparison between the results of this research and existing knowledge based on *what works* research (Andrews 2000) suggests that the examined talent projects work as primary and secondary prevention strategies with stimulating (promotive) and protective factors. The talent programmes in their current setup do not provide an adequate tertiary prevention strategy.

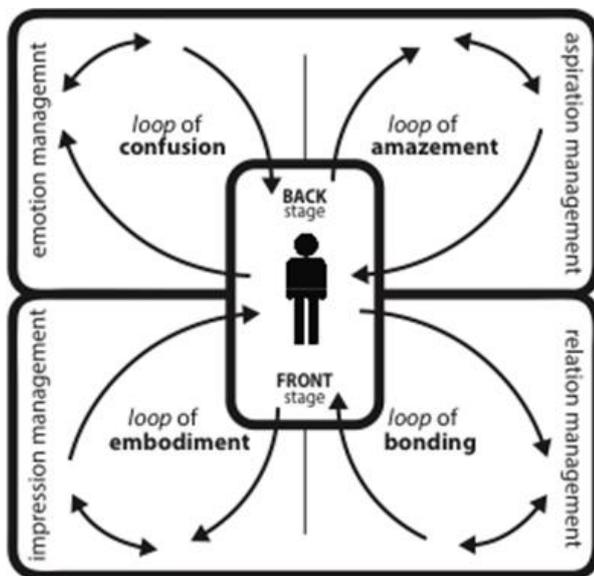
Conclusion

The way in which youth workers can use sportive and artistic talent projects to work on the auspicious street scripts and thus on the resilience of youths has been demonstrated in an action model that I call the *intervention model for talent-oriented youth work* (see diagram below).

In this model, the routes that the project participants follow are represented as *loops*, describing and clarifying their development processes. Through talent project experiences (referred to as 'triggers' by youth workers), the interaction between the frontstage and backstage management systems can be sparked, starting from the centre of the model. To disrupt certain negative patterns in their conduct, they require an experience that disturbs their emotion management: the *loop of confusion*. This is often a crucial moment at which a process of awareness can be set off: the *loop of amazement*.

A positive experience leads to 'movement' in the direction of a certain management system, indicated by the upward arrows in the diagram. If boys overcome their resistances and persevere, they will pass 'critical tipping points' in the *loops* (see the bidirectional arrows in the loops). If the projects merely offer fleeting thrills or experiences of failure, participation will not lead to any motivation to positively develop or change. In that case, the projects may even have a weakening effect.

After passing the critical *momentum*, the path leads back towards the centre where the boys can process and internalise the positive experiences. New experiences will be required time and again, further enabling them to work on their frontstage management systems. In the *loops of bonding and embodiment*, they can gain experience with supportive and inspiring relationships (social bonding) and learn to show their strengths and their talents.



Intervention model for talent-oriented youth work

In the thesis, the intervention model has been developed into three routes for ideal development that lead to primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Every risk profile requires its own emphasis within the talent projects, and the *loops* are more or less compelled to occur in a particular order.

In this study, it is concluded that talent-oriented youth work proves to be a promising prevention strategy, provided that youths at risk are able to gain experiences which affect both the backstage and the frontstage management systems that challenge them to step

out of their comfort zones. This increases the likelihood that sufficient tension is created between street and mainstream orientations so that auspicious scripts can be developed.

If talent-oriented youth work aspires to suffice as a tertiary prevention strategy for youths with a high-risk profile, it is essential that the backstage management system is worked on first. In case of a stronger dissonance between the frontstage and backstage management systems (caused by *confusion* and *amazement*), it is more likely that a process of awareness and the motivation to change are sparked, causing the youths to develop a positive street script and refrain from crime.

If youth workers want to utilise the dramaturgical taxonomy of risks and opportunities as well as the intervention model (the action theory), they need to have specific, diagnostic skills but also to constantly reflect on their actions. They will continuously have to check if the experiences of the youths in the talent projects appeal to the right frontstage and backstage management systems.

To those working with youths at risk, the frontstage-backstage perspective provides a framework for a more nuanced observation of the risks and opportunities of the participating youths and in this manner maps out an appropriate route. Within the action theory of youth work, this study makes a distinction between frontstage and backstage work. In doing so, it adds a new dimension to the existing body of knowledge on the effectiveness of preventive programmes within social (youth) work, in which there is a dominant focus on the influence on behaviour and relationships (frontstage work).

In order for a talent project to successfully help youths at risk, intervention in the backstage management system is essential.