Fix, G.M. (2018). *The football stadium as classroom: Exploring a program for at-risk students in secondary vocational education*. Doctoral dissertation. Twente University. Enschede.

Summary

Building on earlier research the present study was conducted in order to expand the research-based knowledge about effective drop-out prevention by researching in depth one intervention, implemented in four programs for at-risk youth that were developed with and within four SVE schools in The Netherlands. The programs were based on a program for primary school children in the United Kingdom that was aimed at enhancing motivation for learning and inspired by the ideal that sports can be used as a vehicle for social and emotional learning and re-engaging youth. According to literature such an approach might indeed have potential. We aim to know how the programs are implemented and enacted by teachers and students, how they think and feel about the programs and what problems they face during enactment of the programs. We chose to focus in this study on program quality operationalized by the relevance, consistency, practicality, effectiveness and sustainability of the programs and why students benefit from the programs (or not).

The question that directed this study was:

According to the perceptions of managers, teachers and students, what are the effective characteristics of four programs implemented for students at risk in secondary vocational education in order to decrease the drop-out rate?

In order to answer the main research question; four sub-studies were conducted in which we chose to include different program representations. In study one, we focused upon the perceived program characteristics as they arose from teachers' practice. In study two, we investigated the students' perspective on the programs. For study three, we researched

teachers' emotions and feelings and in the fourth study, we examined the long-term sustainability of the programs.

Study 1: Perceived program characteristics

For sub-study one concerning the perceived program characteristics, a qualitative research approach was chosen and data were collected using multi methods. The first research question was aimed at teachers' perceptions of effective program characteristics. The second research question addressed teachers' perceptions regarding positive learning experiences to students. Data were collected from two sources. First, interviews were conducted with teachers who worked in the programs. The aim of the interviews was to identify program characteristics based on teachers' program enactment and perceptions. In addition, documents were gathered to obtain information about the written programs including goals, pedagogical principles and planned learning activities. Teachers perceived that for improved student engagement, which was the aim of the program, the curriculum must be tailored to students' individual needs. In addition, they asserted that social learning had to be prioritized above academic learning. In practice, teachers facilitated the development of students' competencies in different ways, by using a combination of peer group dynamics, sports activities and job orientation. Teachers believed that students' engagement and motivation depend on their relations with peers and teachers. The teacher's role was defined as being a coach of social skills, as an expert in the use of sports activities to develop students' competencies, and as a group manager, being able to create a positive peer group climate.

Teachers emphasized the indispensable contribution of positive learning experiences on students' engagement and motivation. Three important cornerstones for positive learning were mentioned: (1) equality in the relationship between student and teacher, operationalized in practice by non-directive coaching, sharing personal stories and humor; (2) positive relations

between peers, operationalized by peer group coaching and peer feedback; and (3) a match between the curriculum and the students by the adaptation of learning activities, learning content and learning goals to students' individual needs, engaging students in goal-setting, attractive sports activities and on a location outside the school building.

Study 2: Students' perspective

Sub-study two addressed the students' perspective on the programs based on their experiences and was conducted with a mixed methods approach. For this study, interviews were conducted with students who participated in the programs at the four different schools.

Students were interviewed immediately after they had finished the programs and were asked about their experiences. In addition, students completed a questionnaire aimed at providing information about their engagement. Findings suggest that students' engagement was supported in this program especially emotional engagement. Support was reflected in relationships with peers and teachers, as students felt respected, recognized and appreciated and reported feelings of joy and fun. They also experienced enhancement of self-esteem and self-worth. Students and teachers together shared and discussed personal stories and emotions, which helped students to determine and understand effective behavior and goals. In addition, students were interested in the program because of the relevant learning goals for their personal lives, the extraordinary location and challenging sports activities. Relationships with teachers and peers were perceived as caring and respectful and, together with sports activities, evoked feelings of fun, joy and pleasure for students in this program. This helped students to lower their resistance be more open for learning and reflection which was, according to students, conditional for autonomy and competence support. The conclusion that students' engagement in this program is supported through connection with peers and teachers is

strengthened by the quantitative data that pointed at a positive change in students' engagement, especially the emotional component.

Study 3: Teachers' emotions

Sub-study three, which investigated teachers' emotions, consisted of a qualitative study based on interviews with teachers. The aim of this study was to investigate teachers' perceived emotions in their classroom practice and how emotions were related to their perceived well-being. Based on our literature study, we posed that teachers' perceived well-being was affected by their emotional experiences in their classroom practice through their perceptions of autonomy, competence and relatedness. In our results, we reported that teachers perceived mixed emotions caused by interactions with students, the students' learning process, colleagues and their program. We conclude that the following characteristics of classroom practices contribute positively to teachers' perceived well-being:

- Practices in which teacher feel free to adapt and evolve their program to meet students' needs.
- Practices in which teachers have the opportunity to support students' individual learning processes and moreover are able to determine their personal contribution to students' success and achievement.
- Practices that allow teachers to have interactions with students that are characterized by normal classroom contact, such as talks and chats, and that allow teachers to have more emotional contact through sharing personal stories and feelings with students.
- Practices in which teachers have the opportunity to work closely together with colleagues, expressed by shared program vision, goals and responsibilities.

In addition, we argue that the following classroom characteristics diminish teachers' perceived well-being:

- Practices in which teachers are hindered from optimally adapt their program to students' needs, due to organizational or financial aspects.
- Practices in which teachers do not feel capable of supporting students optimally, for example, due to their perceived lack of pedagogical skills or competences.
- Practice in which teachers experience too much emotional load due to personal involvement with students, for example, when they feel pushed beyond their own limits or worry too much about individual students.
- Practice in which teachers work alone or lack support from colleagues.

Study 4: Program sustainability

Sub-study four was a follow-up study regarding program sustainability and was conducted three years after the programs were implemented. The aim of this study was to investigate program characteristics from the perspective of sustainability for which a multi- method approach was chosen. Interviews were conducted with teachers and managers of the programs that focused upon sustainability of the programs. In addition, documents were gathered about the formal, written curriculum. For this study, we used two theoretical frameworks namely the integrated model for sustainable innovation and the self-determination theory, which were chosen because they focus, from different perspectives, upon the learning that is the heart of sustainable innovation.

For School A, teachers together with their manager shared and discussed program goals and pedagogical approaches and worked together as a team based on equality. Stakeholder expectations were managed by providing information and explaining program goals. and teachers were actively engaged in development of new practices and future development of the program. The manager was considered as a facilitator for development at the organizational level. At school A, the teachers as well as their manager experienced a lot of

autonomy in their work. Yet too much autonomy was perceived by the teachers as undesirable. Teachers were convinced that they were competent to meet the program goals, which was perceived as important for the future of the program.

At School B, sense making was an important theme for the teachers and their manager.

However, they did not have structural meetings to discuss the program goals and vision with all stakeholders. Expectations from stakeholders that were experienced were managed by providing information. The teachers perceived development of new practices as an important part of their job; however, this was not stimulated or directed by their manager, who took on the role of facilitator at the organizational level. The teachers and their manager perceived little connection between different levels of the innovation, which was seen as a threat for the future position of the program within the school context. Teachers perceived a lot of autonomy in their work, based on trust and expertise. The manager furthermore perceived that teachers had to develop their competences due to the innovative character of the program. The manager also perceived himself as having too much autonomy in his job, which was interpreted as little engagement by the other stakeholders.

For School C, collective sense making was not always easy, as teachers differed in their vision regarding pedagogical approach. Relationships between the manager and the teachers were perceived as warm and open on organizational issues as well as personal issues. The role of the manager was perceived as being responsible for the connections between all stakeholders. Expectations by stakeholders were handled through explanation of program goals and communication. Transparency was seen as important for the sustainability of the program. The teachers and the manager experienced high levels of autonomy and teamwork, and respected each other's expertise. They had to account for the program at all levels of the organization, but did not experience controlling behavior by the stakeholders. According to

them, autonomy was based on trust in their competence. Teachers at this school were constantly challenged to develop their competences, with support from the manager.

Conclusion

The main research question was aimed at perceived effective characteristics of programs for students at risk in secondary vocational education, which we investigated using five criteria namely, relevance, consistency, practicality, effectiveness and sustainability.

We conclude that the programs were highly relevant which was not only based on research on students' and teachers' perspective which was not only based on research on the students' and teachers' perspective. Findings provided evidence that the foundation of the programs were inspired by an ideal that was based on empirical research. Furthermore the programs were implemented keeping in mind the specific contextual conditions that are conditional for learning through sports, such as strong teachers and a social learning climate.

Based on the findings we conclude that the learner-centered approach, the high level of teachers' engagement, peer support and sports reflected program consistency, although the exact contribution of sports could not be determined because teachers and students differed in their perceptions about the role of sports for students' learning.

The practicality of the programs was strongly affected by the strategy that was chosen for program development and implementation by each of the participating schools. First, the manager and the teachers of each school described program goals. After that, the programs were implemented using a strategy that consisted of three phases, namely, try-out, evaluation and improvement. After ten weeks, the program was evaluated by teachers and students, which brought up suggestions for improvement of the program. Next the program was adapted in view of the improvement suggestions. We conclude that, for practicality it was important to engage all stakeholders in the process of implementation, including in this case the school organization and the top sports organization.

Based on the findings for effectiveness we conclude that students who participated in the programs perceived a change in their personal emotions and feelings, and that changes in the behaviors of students were observed and reported by teachers.

Based on our research, one of the most important factors affecting program sustainability was the relationships between stakeholders within the programs. These relationships focused on shared program goals and shared expectations about program effects. Relationships were important for carrying out the developmental strategy, including the phases of try-out, evaluation and improvement. Poor connection between stakeholders and too much autonomous program enactment was perceived as a threat for the future success of the programs at all investigated schools. Yet, our research also points out the importance of teachers' autonomy and competence for a high quality program implementation. To find a proper balance between stakeholder interference and autonomy for teachers to do their jobs is an important task for managers. It is their responsibility to enable teachers, as experts, to create well-adapted programs for students and also engage the other stakeholders.