

## Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

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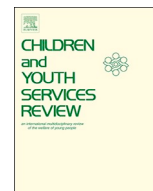
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# The contribution of professional youth work to the development of socially vulnerable youngsters: A multiple case study

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## ABSTRACT

The central question in this study is how, for whom, and under which conditions professional youth work contributes to the personal development of socially vulnerable youngsters, the reinforcement of their social network, the enhancement of their social participation, and the timely finding of appropriate specialized care services in relation to contextual factors such as life events and the influence of significant others. This research used a multiple case study with a comparative design. During a 12-month period, youth workers (N = 20) participated in group intervention meetings and kept diaries reporting on their actions and the development of the youngsters (N = 23). An analysis of this data revealed four patterns of development of socially vulnerable youngsters in youth work settings. Each pattern consisted of a specific form of multi-methodic action that resulted in a specific outcome. The study also revealed how these processes of development are influenced by important life events and significant others. The findings suggest that youth work contributes to personal development and social participation and thereby may lessen the need for formal social care services.

## 1. Introduction

Scientific evidence on the impact of Dutch professional youth work as a universal welfare provision is urgently needed. This is not only due to the increasing dominance of evidence-based policy on the national and international levels, which places an emphasis on measurement and outcomes (De St Croix, 2018; McGregor, 2015), but also because youth policy makers and social work practice within Western welfare states are paying increasing attention to how professional youth work contributes to the personal development and social participation of youngsters, preventing social and (mental) health problems (Dunne, Ulicna, Murphy, & Golubeva, 2014; Fish, 2014) and reducing the growing number of young people in social care institutions (CBS, 2020). From a theoretical focus on positive youth development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004), there is a growing belief that strengthening support for personal development, reinforcement of social networks and enhancement of social participation may be reducing risks and problems and preventing the need for social care in young people's lives. In the context of current youth policy, with a focus on prevention and positive youth development, this study focuses on how participation in Dutch professional youth work settings actually

contributes to the personal development and social participation of youngsters.

Professional youth work in the Netherlands is a relatively small profession (1,500 workers), usually funded by local governments. Youth workers play a preventive role in a wide range of informal contexts, such as youth clubs, sport facilities, online, or on the streets (Baillergeau & Hoijtink, 2010; De St Croix, 2018). The participation of youth is voluntary, which emphasizes that the youngsters choose whether, how much, and for how long they want to be involved (Jeffs & Smith, 1999). Youth workers identify the problems and needs of youngsters, provide early intervention support for personal or social problems, create experimental learning opportunities, support young people to reinforce their social network, encourage youngsters to participate in society, and play an essential role in the preemptive signposting of youngsters, directing them toward appropriate specialized care services if needed (Clarijs & Migchielsen, 2016; Coulston, 2010; Fyfe, Biggs, Hunter, McAteer, & Milne, 2018).

Professional youth work in European countries is primarily focused on socially vulnerable youngsters during their transition from dependence in childhood to adult independence (Metz, 2017; Dunne et al., 2014). The term "social vulnerability" refers to the structurally

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vulnerable position of specific individuals or groups in society (e.g., those in deprived neighborhoods), and negative experiences with social institutions which often leads to distorted relationships and social disconnectedness (Vettenburg, 1998). Youngsters growing up in socially vulnerable situations face challenges and developmental tasks in addition to the complexity of the developmental challenges that youngsters generally face in the 21st century (Larson, 2011). They have insufficient access to resources and opportunities for personal development. They often experience a lack of encouragement and support from people in their social environment (Abdallah, 2017), as well as encountering discriminatory experiences, conflicting relationships, low parental education levels, or parents who have to deal with problems such as addiction, illness or migration-related problems. The majority of these youth grow up in low-income families and must deal with living in poverty. Many of these youngsters have social, emotional and/or mental health problems, such as insufficient prosocial skills, depression or stress-related illnesses that hamper their opportunities to fully participate in society. The risk of developing problems in their transition to adulthood is significantly higher for youngsters who accumulate negative experiences in their social environment (Vettenburg, 1998), and they are more likely to be in need of relatively expensive, possibly specialized social care services (Henderson, Scourfield, Cheung, Sharland, & Sloan, 2016). Professional youth workers engage with socially vulnerable youngsters between the ages of 10 and 24 and support them in becoming independent adults. Within the target group, a division is made between youngsters who are doing well, youngsters with minor or initial problems, and youngsters with severe and multiple disadvantages (Sonneveld & Metz, 2019).

A growing body of literature (Dickson, Vigurs, & Newman, 2013; Dunne et al., 2014; Fyfe et al., 2018; McGregor, 2015; Ord et al., 2018) has attempted to demonstrate how and to what extent youth workers can contribute to the personal development of socially vulnerable youngsters, reinforce their social network, enhance their social participation, and find them appropriate support if needed. Basically, the clearest and most common characteristic of professional youth work is that youngsters choose to participate in the process and that it focuses on the experiences, needs and interests of the youngster (Batsleer, 2008; McGregor, 2015). Compared to the project-based after-school youth development programs in the United States (Larson, McGovern, & Orson, 2019), professional youth work in Western welfare states also offers “unstructured” activities in settings where young people can chill out. For many youngsters, the youth work environment is a “home away from home,” a space of safety and escape from the conflicts or pressures of everyday life (school or home), where they achieve a sense of belonging (Fyfe et al., 2018; Nolas, 2014). With young people’s lifeworld as a starting point (Bradford, 2000), youth workers use an open approach (Metz, 2016), which does not follow a pre-planned and time-limited specific intervention but methodical actions that are fluid and responsive to the specific needs and interests of the youngsters and the changing social and political context in which they occur (Doherty & De St Croix, 2019; Ord, 2014). This context involves significant life events and significant others.

The occurrence of significant negative life events (losing a job or experiencing a form of threat) can radically influence the living conditions of youngsters, as can positive life events. Youth workers must actively adapt the youth work process to such events in order to keep providing the appropriate support that is needed. Furthermore, the presence or absence of social support from significant others in the social environment of young people, such as support from parents, teachers, and other family members, can influence the health, well-being, and positive development of young people (Pringle, Whitehead, Milne, Scott, & McAteer, 2019). There is a growing belief that the presence or absence of social support from significant others influences the youth work process and its outcomes (Boomkens, Metz, Schalk, & Van Regenmortel, 2019).

Based on an open approach, Dutch youth workers frequently apply a

combination of four commonly used methods: detached youth work, social group work, individual guidance, and information and advice services (Metz, 2020). *Detached youth work* establishes contact with youngsters and provides services in young people’s living environment (Koops, Metz, & Sonneveld, 2013; Milburn, Forsyth, Stephen, & Woodhouse, 2000). *Social group work* recognizes the significant influence of social peer interactions and group processes for the development of important life skills required to become an independent adult, fostering peer sociability and support, and the enhancement of social participation (Rumping et al., 2017; Douglas, 1976). Some authors (e.g. Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004) argue that the influence of peers in group-based activities in youth work can also have a negative side, such as modeling antisocial and/or criminal behavior.

Through the provision of *information and advice services* and sometimes more prolonged *individual guidance*, youth workers offer accessible support in resolving problems concerning school, work or relationships; for example, enhancing the youngsters’ ability to make informed decisions about their lives (Bradford, 2000; Koops, Metz, & Sonneveld, 2014; Manders & Metz, 2017). Having access to the right information and having the appropriate skills to find information enables youngsters to make independent and positive choices in life (Manders & Metz, 2017). Previous research (Koops et al., 2014) shown that *individual guidance* assists youngsters develop their future prospects, to increase their self-mastery and referring them to social agencies (such as education programs or care institutions) that strengthen their connection with society.

The application of these methods in combination is known as a multi-methodic approach (Metz, 2020). A recent longitudinal cohort study (Sonneveld, Metz, Manders, Schalk, & Van Regenmortel, under review) revealed the positive impact of a multi-methodic approach on socially vulnerable youngsters. Those who were recipients of youth work support for over six months or more had significantly more extensive support from their social network, participated more in society (such as volunteering), developed better social skills, and had more self-esteem. Moreover, those who had youth work support for over three years or more experienced more ownership and better future prospects. Finally, more than one third of the target group found an additional form of care with the assistance of youth workers.

Little is known about how a multi-methodic approach supports youngsters in their development and how these processes are influenced by the presence or absence of social support from significant others or the occurrence of important life events. The aim of this study was to explore patterns that provide insight into how, for whom, and under which conditions a multi-methodic approach contributes to personal development, reinforcement of the social network, enhancement of social participation, and finding appropriate specialized care when needed. In addition, we wished to determine whether and in what manner the patterns are influenced by life events and the presence of significant others in young peoples’ lives. We based this decision on the fact that it is known that the youth target group grows up in socially vulnerable environments that can obstruct their opportunities for development or cause stress. This research will contribute to an understanding of how professional youth work plays a preventive role, decreasing the number of youngsters who require specialized social care.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Design

To investigate this exploratory question, a multiple case study with a qualitative comparative design was conducted, aimed at gaining a better understanding of the multi-method approach to youth work and how it contributes to the development of socially vulnerable young people.

During a period of 12 months, we collected in-depth stories from professional youth workers (N = 20) in which they described: i) how

they supported a select group of socially vulnerable youngsters (N = 23), ii) the results of their methodic actions on the development of these youngsters, and iii) how the process was related to contextual factors.

Yin (2014) has emphasized that multiple cases strengthen the results of findings. Moreover, qualitative comparative analysis (Ragin, 2014 [1987]) enables us to investigate shared patterns (without neglecting the person level) that, in our study, reflect how youth workers, through means of a multi-methodic approach, contribute to personal development, reinforcement of the social network, and the enhancement of social participation of youngsters. According to Yin (2014), 6–10 cases per category are needed to make patterns visible. We chose to investigate the perspective of youth workers because they are in direct contact with socially vulnerable youngsters and are most knowledgeable about what to do to support them. This study thereby complements previous quantitative research (Sonneveld et al., under review), in which we examined the impact of a multi-methodic approach from the perspective of youngsters (N = 1579).

The study was conducted in close collaboration with 11 Dutch professional youth work providers from urban areas in the middle, south and east parts of the Netherlands. The research group collaborates with these organizations on a structural basis, contributing to the professionalization of youth work through practice-based research. In addition to granting access to their practices for data collection, the collaboration ensured that the research instruments and protocol were appropriately adapted to the youth work practice.

### 2.2. Sample

To gain insight into the processes of interaction between youth workers and youngsters, the sample for this study consisted of 20 pairs of professional youth workers (N = 20) and youngsters (N = 23). Sampling of the professional youth workers took place through managers of the organizations that were involved in this study. Youth workers were free to choose to participate or not and could indicate at any time if they wished to stop participating in the study. The anonymity of the data was ensured and participation in the study could not adversely affect their position in the organization. Consistent with the population of youth workers in the Netherlands, the managers selected 20 professional youth workers, with an equal distribution of women (45%) and men (55%) and an average age of 38 years (range 23 to 55). Of the youth workers, 65% had a social work degree at the Bachelor's or professional vocational level and 55% had six or more years' experience in youth work. Table 1 illustrates the main characteristics of the professional youth workers.

The youth workers were asked to select one or two youngsters from their own practice. To obtain a representative sample of the youth

**Table 1**  
Professional youth workers sample demographics and characteristics (N = 20).

<b>Age range</b>	23–55 M = 38
23–35	9
36–50	7
51–55	4
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	11
Female	9
<b>Migration background</b>	
Yes	7
No	13
<b>Professional qualifications</b>	
In social work (Bachelor's or professional vocational education)	13
Other fields	5
No higher education	2
<b>Reported years of experience in youth work</b>	
1–5	9
6–10	5
> 11 (up to 28 years)	6

**Table 2**  
Youth sample demographics and characteristics (N = 23).

<b>Age range</b>	
10–14	5
16–19	9
20–23	9
<b>Gender</b>	
Boys	12 (52%)
Girls	11 (48%)
<b>Migration background</b>	
Yes	13
No	10
<b>Extent of personal or social problems (such as health, housing, financial, loneliness, education, employment, crime)</b>	
Doing well	6
Small or initial problems	8
Severe and multiple disadvantage	9
<b>Duration of contact (start dairy)</b>	
0–6 months	4
7 months to 2 years	12
3 years or longer	7
<b>Intensity of contact (start dairy)</b>	
Several times a week	11
Weekly	8
Once every two weeks	3
Incidental	1

population, we determined the number of cases that needed to be followed in order to be able to detect patterns. This selection procedure was guided by three conditions: 1) gender, 2) age (10–24), and 3) the extent of personal or social problems. The youth workers verbally informed one or two youngsters about the study and asked them whether they were interested in participating. If they were interested, the youth workers verbally explained the study to the youngsters (and their primary caregiver, if they were younger than 16) and gave them a letter provided by the researchers. Participants were made aware of their rights (such as voluntary participation, right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity). Data collection started only after the youngster (or primary caregiver) had signed the informed consent. This resulted in a total sample of 23 youngsters (N = 23 study occasions).

The observed group of youngsters were aged 11 to 23 (M = 17 years) and consisted of both girls (48%) and boys (52%) from urban backgrounds. A significant number of the youngsters involved in this study had been engaged with youth work for more than six months (82%), with 35% having minor problems and 39% more severe and multiple disadvantages (see Table 2). This sample formed a representation of the population of youngsters involved in youth work services in the Netherlands (Sonneveld & Metz, 2019) and allowed us to identify any emerging patterns.

### 2.3. Data collection

Over 12 months (Oct 2017–Nov 2018), information about both the multi-methodic actions of professional youth workers and the process of development of the young people was gathered using a variety of data sources: diary notes, small group intervision meetings, and pre- and post-descriptions. All instruments were developed on the basis of the literature and practice-based studies of the four methods, which were conducted between 2011 and 2017 (Koops et al., 2013, 2014; Rumping et al., 2017; Schaap et al., 2017).

The use of a diary as a research instrument permitted the youth workers to describe, in their own words (with the help of guiding questions), their interactions, observations, and reflections associated with supporting the youngster one-on-one and/or during group-based activities. 'A fundamental benefit of diary methods is that they permit the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context, providing information that complementary to that obtainable by more traditional designs' (Reis, 1994 in: Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003, p. 580).

This research tool holds great promise for capturing rich data on participants' actions, interactions, and reflections that may otherwise be difficult to obtain or are not easy to observe objectively (Hyldegård, 2006).

The diary format was supplied by the researchers and consisted of a structured six-page diary form to allow reflection on changes over time. This format was designed to monitor the following elements: general information about the contact (duration, intensity, location, reason for contact, aim, impression of the conversation); concrete methodical actions; important life events in the young person's life; and cooperation with people in their social environment (parents, family, peers, or social institutions). The youth workers were instructed to describe the activities/events/actions chronologically and, at best, immediately after contact with the youngster.

Instructions on how to use the diary were given verbally during a 3-hour meeting that included an introduction to the study. During this meeting, youth workers received instructions on adhering to the diary format, and the researchers checked the format for feasibility, usability, and correct interpretation of the concepts. Minor changes were identified, and the instruments were amended accordingly. During the meetings, it was openly communicated that youth workers could learn while participating in the research, and they were allowed to make mistakes during the data collection. Data was collected from the youth workers, who uploaded a completed diary once a month via the e-learning tool Pluform. During the 12 months of data collection, the researchers repeatedly reminded the youth workers to upload the completed diaries. A decrease in records occurred toward the end of the study period, primarily due to youth workers who quit or had lost their jobs ( $N = 3$ ), or youngsters who stopped receiving support because they were busy with school, moved to another area, or were completing an individual guidance trajectory ( $N = 8$ ). In three cases, the youth worker was temporarily replaced by a colleague. These youth workers received instructions from the researchers in advance.

In addition to the diaries, the youth workers participated in five (2–2.5 h) intervision meetings (spread over 12 months), in which three groups of youth workers jointly explored their 'cases' in more depth. The meetings were prepared and facilitated by the researchers and resulted in additional in-depth data about the specific cases. Audio-recordings were made of these meetings and were transcribed verbatim. One of the youth workers only kept a diary and did not participate in the intervision meetings.

Finally, youth workers completed a pre- and post-logging period profile description of each youngster. By filling out these profile descriptions, a general overview of the youngster's demographic characteristics, health situation, social behavior, social support network, social participation (daily activities, sporting and other clubs, friends, etc.), and form of participation in youth work (including the four methods) was provided at the beginning and at the end of the study. These descriptions made it possible to observe changes over time concerning the personal development of the youngsters in relation to their social networks and their participation in society.

The study protocol was approved by the managements of the eleven participating organizations. Data collection and analysis was carried out in accordance with the [Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity \(2018\)](#).

#### 2.4. Analysis strategy

The analyses were carried out by the first and second authors of this paper in consultation with the third author. We used the MaxQDA 18 program to store, organize, and analyze the data. We adopted an abductive approach, which offered the possibility of arriving at theoretical innovations through the combination of deductive and inductive elements (Locke, 2010; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The deductive elements are reflected in the diary format and pre- and post-logging period descriptions which were designed on the basis of the literature and several practice-based studies of the four methods conducted

between 2011 and 2017 (Koops et al., 2013, 2014; Rumping et al., 2017; Schaap et al., 2017). The analysis of the empirical materials offered the possibility to search for inductive elements. With respect to this approach, we were inspired by two analysis techniques: 1) Thematic Analyses, according to the procedure used by Braun and Clarke (2006), and 2) Qualitative Comparative Analysis (Ragin, 2014 [1987]).

The data analysis procedure consisted of four steps. In the first step, all data was securely stored and checked for anonymity. During the second step, we used Thematic Analyses to combine and compress the collected data of each individual case into a case description. Each case description (23 in total, 4–5 A4 pages) was a concise summary that portrayed: 1) the characteristics of the youth worker, the young person, and his/her living environment and situation; 2) the relationship between the youth work process and the presence of significant others and life events in the young person's life; and 3) observed changes in health situation, social interactions, social network, or participation during the period of study. We carried out a member check by submitting a draft of each case description to the relevant youth worker, with the case description finalized after feedback requiring any modifications. In the third step, we constructed a qualitative data matrix (Hak, 2007) based on the 23 case descriptions. The data matrix created a structured overview for each individual case and for all of the cases as a whole. The variables included in this matrix were the characteristics of the youth worker and youngsters; the multi-methodic approach; outcome measures; negative or positive life events; and support from significant others. For example, we coded the variable "social participation" as yes or no, indicating whether or not a positive change (such as "started volunteering" or "started participating in education or work") had occurred on this outcome measure during the 12 months of observation (see appendix for a compressed version of the matrix). The variables of the data matrix were determined based on theoretical hunches about potential patterns derived from the literature and previous practice-based studies of the four methods. Finally, we used the 23 case descriptions and the data matrix to search for patterns shared between the cases. This allowed us to distinguish shared patterns related to how youth workers using a multi-methodic approach contribute to the personal development of the youngster, the reinforcement of their social network, the enhancement of their social participation, and finding appropriate specialized care when needed. For example, in the total of 23 cases, we investigated which youngsters had expanded their social network with the support of the youth worker. In this selection of cases, we carefully searched for corresponding variables (such as a combination of methods or age) that in all likelihood played a role in this outcome. In addition, we also investigated which deviating variables may have led to specific circumstances (such as the occurrence of a negative life event). Each potential pattern was explored and validated by moving back and forth between the data matrix and the case descriptions.

### 3. Findings

Although each process of interaction between a youth worker and a youngster was unique in itself, comparative analysis revealed shared patterns that provided insight into how, for whom, and under which conditions a multi-methodic approach contributed to the intended personal development of the youngster. Each pattern identified refers to a specific area of development which was facilitated by the youth worker using a specific form of multi-methodic action that resulted in a specific outcome. This relationship between process and outcome provides insight into how youngsters develop with the support of the youth workers. In addition, we describe whether and in what manner the occurrence of important life events and the presence of significant others influenced the specific outcome for youngsters and how youth workers responded to these contextual factors.

The analysis of the data led us to distinguish four patterns of development:

- 1) Meeting new young people and gaining access to peer support
- 2) Developing life skills
- 3) Strengthening school and work careers
- 4) Improving health and well-being

The areas in which the youngsters developed depended on their specific needs and the combination of methods which the youth workers deployed. Most of the youngsters were able to develop in more than one area. For example, some youngsters made friends (Pattern 1) and developed a sense of self-responsibility (Pattern 2) through participation in group-based activities. Through a combination of the methods of group work and individual guidance, other youngsters developed their pro-social skills (Pattern 2), received support from peers (Pattern 1), and found appropriate specialized care for mental health issues (Pattern 4). We substantiate the findings with quotations from the 23 case descriptions, which include a reference to the original sources (see appendix for further characteristics of the individual cases).

### 3.1. Meeting new young people and gaining access to peer support

*The youth workers facilitated positive peer interactions in youth work settings primarily by means of group work. These peer interactions resulted in the fostering of peer sociability, strengthening social support from peers, and sometimes developing new friendships. Significant others (for girls in particular, their mothers) and life events may, to a limited extent, impede opportunities to reinforce a youngster's social network through participation in group-based youth work. Collaboration with mothers appears to be important in order to give girls the opportunity to expand their social network.*

In seven cases, the youngsters created meaningful relationships with new peers or made friendships over the year in which they were observed. Remarkably, many of them only had a few supportive peers in their own social environment in addition to the peers in the youth club. Eight youngsters who had been participating in youth work for a longer period had built friendships through their involvement in the process prior to the study.

Contact with peers in the youth club offered youngsters peer sociability, expand their contacts within their social network, and gain social support from peers, such as reassurance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging. Girls, especially, engaged with other girls to deal with central issues in their transition to adulthood (such as external beauty care, relationships, and sexuality), which contributed to recognition among peers. Some youngsters maintained contact with peers they had met in youth work clubs in contexts outside the club, such as public spaces, sport events, and on social media.

*Case 5: By following the girl on Instagram, the youth worker noted that she had more contact with girls of her age. She met these girls through her side job and her participation in youth work activities (post-logging period description).*

The youth workers facilitated such outcomes primarily through group work (e.g. cooking, kickboxing, debating group, making music or chilling out). Group-based activities enable peers to meet and become acquainted. By facilitating positive peer interaction and applying interactive work methods, the youth workers encouraged the youngsters to share experiences, to help one another, or to find support from each other.

*Case 9: The youth worker used different methods to encourage these social interactions. One example is a card game in which the girls asked each other specific questions and had conversations about sensitive topics. By sharing these experiences, the girls found support from others. When a girl was sad, she was comforted by others (diary note).*

An important condition for a positive outcome is to ensure social safety during group-based activities. Most of the cases demonstrated pleasant mutual respect in the group. In four cases, there was negative peer interaction, such as bullying, violence, resistance to rules, and disrespectful behavior toward youth workers. These negative

interactions disturbed the order of and safety within the group and may obstruct youngsters in their development.

Significant others and life events can, to a limited extent, impede opportunities to reinforce the social network through group activities. In four cases, the parents of girls hampered their involvement with peers and peer support in the youth clubs. The data for these cases suggests that the parents (in particular, mothers) only want to protect their daughters from the possible negative influence of peers, despite girls needing support through youth work. This indicates that the guarantee of social safety in youth work is also important, encouraging mothers to allow their daughters to participate.

*Case 17: A recurring topic during the guidance of the girl was to engage her in the start of a girls' group. The mother told the youth worker that it was not a good idea, because she did not trust the girls in the neighborhood. There were stories that these girls carried knives in their pockets. According to the mother, this group of girls could have a negative impact on her daughter (diary note).*

The occurrence of important life events has consequences for the maintenance of peer relationships created in youth clubs. Five cases showed that either moving or a preoccupation with newly found work or school resulted in a discontinuation of the youngster's participation in youth work groups. This finding suggests that life events such as this affect the degree of social participation of youngsters in the context of youth work.

### 3.2. Developing life skills

*Through a combination of group work, information and advice services, and/or individual guidance, the youth workers provided informal learning opportunities for youngsters. One result of this learning environment was that the youngsters developed life skills, such as self-responsibility, pro-social skills, and social-emotional skills. These skills increased the youngsters' ability to participate and function adequately in different social contexts. However, we also found that significant others (for girls in particular, their mothers) may impede the youngsters' development of these skills. Active collaboration with mothers contributed to ensuring that these specific youngsters received more social support (encouragement, trust, experimental space) to develop skills in different social contexts.*

Almost all of the youngsters (N = 22) developed life skills within the youth work settings. One common result was an increase in a sense of self-responsibility and self-confidence, as a result of an experience which taught the youngsters that they could take responsibility and be meaningful to others.

*Case 10: By the summer (2018), the youth worker connected the girl to a trainee, with the assignment to organize activities together. The girl was given the task of doing errands with a younger girl. Taking this responsibility and the confidence the youth worker had in her enhanced her self-esteem (diary note).*

In more than half of the cases, the youngsters improved in social-emotional skills, such as expression of feelings in a peer group, helping each other, having the courage to ask for help, and having respect for others (including teachers, youth workers, and family members). The strengthening of these kinds of skills enables youngsters to successfully engage in a variety of social interactions and to better participate in society.

*Case 19: The youth worker noticed that she [the youngster] was talking more and was more open in contact with others. The interactions with her colleagues were also going better. She was more successful in keeping calm in a variety of situations (diary note).*

In addition, in eight cases, the youngsters increased their pro-social skills, such as punctuality, dealing with authorities, and complying with rules. Youngsters who are familiar with street culture, school failure, or unemployment, especially, have the need to develop these kinds of pro-social skills.

Through a combination of social group work, information and advice services, and/or individual guidance, the youth workers facilitated

an informal learning environment which enabled the youngsters to develop the above-mentioned life skills. Above all, social group work provides youngsters with learning opportunities in a peer-group environment in which they can practice social-emotional skills such as giving support, helping each other, asking for help, and taking responsibility. In some cases, the teenagers (under 15 years) were invited to take on light responsibilities, such as inventing a dish, doing groceries, and cleaning up. As they grew older, they were assigned more responsibilities within the group activities, either in the role of peer, volunteer, or as a trainee.

Finally, the presence of rules and structure during group-based activities provided the youngsters with a framework that helped them to understand which pro-social behavior is acceptable in youth clubs.

The youth workers offered individual guidance and information and advice services to support the youngsters in the development of the skills necessary to participate and function in different social contexts (at work, school, home situation). In response to concrete situations in the daily lives of youngsters (such as debt, job dismissal, doing homework, or aggressive behavior), the youth workers facilitated learning processes by asking reflective questions, offering practical assistance, assuming a role model function by sharing experiential knowledge, and giving youngsters feedback and positive affirmation.

*Case 19: During follow-up meetings, the youth worker returned to previously discussed topics to gauge progress. If it turned out that the youngster had managed to remain calm during conflict situations (at work), the youth worker rewarded her positive behavior. He encouraged her to repeat this positive behavior in the future and attempted to make her aware that this behavior could help her to avoid problems (diary note).*

One important condition for a positive outcome is that learning processes need to be carefully aligned with the current capacity of the youngster. Three cases showed that youngsters can become frustrated when they are confronted with major responsibilities or expectations within the youth work setting for which they are not quite ready.

*Case 21: In spring, the youth worker gave the boy the responsibility to keep the agenda for the music studio. After a conflict between the boy and a participant, the youth worker concluded that he was not sufficiently ready to take on this responsibility (diary note and interview).*

We found that significant others can impede the developmental process of some youngsters in this regard. Again, in three cases, the mothers impeded their daughters' development of independent life skills by depriving their daughters of the space to develop these kinds of skills. Active collaboration with the mothers resulted in more receptiveness to the development of their daughters. This increased trust and led to more experimental space for the girls, in which they could practice assuming self-responsibility.

*Case 1: During the summer period (2018), the girl called and asked if she could go bowling with a group in the city. The youth worker responded enthusiastically and immediately indicated that he would rather that her mother did not go. It turns out that he underestimated the situation. The girl was allowed to go without her mother on the condition that the youth worker was present (diary note and interview).*

In seven cases, the youth workers used the occurrence of important life events in the young person's life as a valuable learning experience from which they could develop skills such as asking for support from others, daring to share emotions, controlling aggressive behavior, or taking responsibility. By engaging in one-on-one dialogues with youngsters, the youth workers were able to demonstrate their understanding of the feelings the life event evoked and to talk with the youngster about the consequences and develop an appropriate action strategy.

*Case 6: In early April 2018, the girl was the victim of a violent incident. During a one-on-one conversation, the youth worker advised the girl to report the incident to the police instead of responding with violence, emphasizing the importance of de-escalation. Together they went through the steps required to make a statement. By doing this together, the girl learned enough to be able to do this herself if necessary in the future (diary note and interview).*

### 3.3. Strengthening school and work careers

*The youth workers contributed to the strengthening of school and work careers of the youngsters primarily through individual guidance. A division can be made between two concrete outcomes: 1) youngsters become more aware of their future prospects and take the first steps in realizing these future prospects; and 2) prevention of early school dropout or unemployment. Strengthening school and work careers enhances youngsters' socio-economic participation, social network, and independence (financial and otherwise). Significant others (mostly fathers) and the occurrence of negative life events can disrupt youngsters' outcomes in this development area.*

In nine cases, the youngsters became more aware of their future prospects and had taken the first steps in realizing them. Some youngsters were stimulated to consider their future prospects, while others engaged in an educational program or obtained an internship, a side job, or other work with the support of the youth worker. Participating in an education program or the labor market enhances the socio-economic participation of youngsters, as well as their social network and independence.

*Case 5: The side job had a positive effect on the girl. She met new people, had new experiences, and earned her own money. With this money she could finally buy the nice shoes she wanted (diary note).*

Furthermore, in eight cases, the youth workers supported youngsters who were experiencing difficulties at school or work, such as disappointing school or work results, or conflicts with teachers or colleagues at work. The aim of the youth workers was to prevent these youngsters from negative school results, prematurely dropping out of school or losing their job.

The youth workers supported the strengthening of the youngsters' school and work careers primarily by means of individual guidance. Youth workers invited young people to consider their future prospects and aspirations by asking them, for example, what their dreams were. The youth workers supported the youngsters to achieve better results at school or work, in close cooperation and step by step. For example, they supported the youngsters in making a career choice, helped them apply for a job, attended meetings with school mentors, or provided constructive feedback and advice. When the youngster's aspirations were not realistic, the youth worker attempted to increase the former's critical awareness by addressing these unrealistic aspirations.

*Case 16: She discussed with the girl what kind of work she would like to do in the future, and she contacted educational institutions to gain more insight into the possibilities for the girl (diary note and interview).*

*Case 21: The purpose of this advice was to contribute to the realistic future prospects for the boy. The young man was convinced that he had already made it in the music industry because he had sold a "beat" to a well-known rapper (diary note).*

By conducting one-on-one conversations with youngsters, the youth workers aimed to prevent premature school dropout and unemployment. During these informal conversations, youth workers expressed their interest in specific situations and addressed the importance of education and employment in order to establish an independent life, both financially and personally. If possible, youth workers shared their own experiences to stimulate youngsters to take school seriously.

*Case 8: The youth worker discussed with the boy why school should have priority over training (kickboxing). Having a school certificate offered a "way out", as the youth worker had experienced this himself (interview).*

Furthermore, through individual guidance, youth workers supported youngsters in learning skills such as concentration, scheduling, and conflict management.

We found that one important condition to ensure a positive outcome is constructive collaboration with school or work-related institutions. The practical ability (e.g., professional space) to collaborate with these institutions allowed the youth workers to advise these institutions on the need to take the youngster's vulnerabilities and personal challenges into account. From this position, the youth workers acted as a link between a youngster's needs and the requirements of the school or work environments.

*Case 12: If necessary, she [the youth worker] would attend a meeting between the boy and his mentor [from school]. The purpose of her presence was, on the one hand, to support the boy and, on the other, to convince the school that the boy deserved an opportunity to follow an education program and complete it (diary note and interview).*

Various case descriptions suggest that this pattern is vulnerable to disruption by significant others and negative life events. In two cases, the father had a strong influence on the youngster's career choice and perspective. Existing role expectations can lead to struggles when making a career choice.

*Case 15: The father did not support his son's decision to switch careers. Despite previous positive developments, his father believed that social work was a profession for gay people. He thought that his son should be a welder, since at least this was a male occupation (diary note).*

We found that the occurrence of negative life events can also obstruct the progress of youngsters in this development area, especially of young people who grow up with severe and multiple disadvantages. Successive negative life events (such as domestic violence or a seriously ill parent) may make it complicated, for example, to retain employment or to focus on school or work. During one-on-one conversations, the youth workers discussed these life events or the obstructive influence of significant others. In addition, some youth workers established contact with parents (e.g., via mediation) to reduce or eliminate the negative influences.

*Case 14: After a fierce argument at home (November 2017), the youth worker tried to initiate a mediation between the boy and his mother, with the aim of having the boy living at home again (diary note).*

### 3.4. Improvements in health and well-being

The youth workers contributed to improving the health and well-being of the socially vulnerable youngsters through a combination of individual guidance and information and advice services (individual and group-based). Two results can be distinguished: 1) health promotion, such as consuming healthy food or reducing stress; and 2) referring youngsters with mental health problems to specialized care services. In addition, we found that negative life events and significant others (parents) can impede the development of a healthy lifestyle.

Comparison of the cases found that the youth workers contributed to health and well-being in two ways. First, in eight cases, the youngsters experienced positive development regarding their own health or lifestyle. At the end of the observation period, these cases demonstrated diminished use of drugs or alcohol, less consumption of unhealthy food (N = 4), an increase in physical exercise (N = 2), an improvement in external (beauty) care (N = 1), a start to taking contraceptives (N = 1), or less experience of stress (N = 3). In four of these cases, health promotion measures increased the youngster's self-esteem by helping them lose weight or improving their social skills due to less aggressive behavior.

*Case 15: During the year, the boy made a number of positive choices in his life. First, he is consistently smoking less cannabis. His responsibilities in the internship and work were important motivators of this change. Second, he drinks less alcohol on weekends because he has to drive for his side job. His girlfriend also told the youth worker that the boy's aggressive behavior had decreased (interview).*

Youngsters with mental health problems (N = 6), such as depressive feelings, stress disorder, or self-harm, were signposted toward additional care services or placed on a waiting list for specialized care institutions. After referral, two appeared to avoid the help offered by care institutions, as they failed to comply to planned agreements.

The youth workers contributed to improvements in health and well-being through a combination of individual guidance and information and advice services (individual and group-based). By providing information and advice about healthy food, the risks of drugs or alcohol abuse, or unsafe sexual behavior, in combination with their position as a role model, they were able to promote health improvements.

*Case 21: From a role model perspective, the youth worker started brief conversations about healthy food. [...] Although the youth worker did not intend to convince him that he could live a healthier life, the conversations had the effect that the boy started to think more consciously about his own health (interview).*

Additionally, as the youngsters made progress, the youth workers fostered their health by inviting them to reflect on their actions, giving them feedback and positive affirmation.

*Case 15: The youth worker affirmed this positive development in the boy, making the comment: "I hear you had a good time? Tell [me about it] ...". The boy succeeded in reflecting and realized that less alcohol and different behavior led to more fun with his girlfriend (diary note and interview).*

Special individual attention was given to youngsters who were dealing with social-emotional or mental problems (depressive feelings, anxiety, excessive stress), or to youngster with mild intellectual disabilities. Individual guidance meant that the youth workers were accessible and available (also online) to provide additional support if needed. For example, they had conversations with the youngsters about stress situations (being bullied at school or school exams), depressive feelings, or domestic or other violence. Through these one-on-one dialogues, the youth workers demonstrated their responsiveness, providing the young people with comfort, reassurance, and active support.

*Case 20: During the last interview meeting the youth worker received a WhatsApp message: "Yo [name youth worker], I was in [location], do you have about five minutes?" This signal informed the youth worker that something was going on in the boy's life, and that the boy would like to discuss this with the youth worker (interview).*

Youngsters feel that they are recognized by the youth workers, especially when the latter have similar experiences or a common sociodemographic identity (cultural background or sexual identity). By sharing these similarities, the youth worker can support the youngster in dealing with setbacks, depressive feelings, or stress situations. *Case 3: During these conversations, the youth worker again shared her personal experience by telling the girl that she was also bullied in the past (diary note).*

When a youth worker determined that a youngster needed specialist care for mental health problems, they referred them to additional specialized care institutions. It is striking that in the cases studied this only applied to young people aged 14 years or older.

However, in advance of the referral, the youth workers considered the nature of the request for help and made the youngster receptive to the idea of further assistance from specialized care givers. Generally, these vulnerable youngsters have difficulties trusting care professionals due to bad experiences in the past. To allow a "cordial" transfer, it is important that youth workers constructively collaborate with social care institutions. This implies, for example, that youth workers sometimes attend meetings between the youngster and the care professional.

*Case 11: At the beginning of the summer (2018), the youth worker attended a conversation with the psychologist to discuss the treatment plan and to make arrangements about phasing out individual guidance (diary note).*

We found that this fourth pattern is vulnerable to disruption by significant others and life events. In several cases, the youngster's health situation was negatively influenced by their parents. For example, some parents had an unhealthy lifestyle (drug or alcohol abuse),



which legitimized poor behavior, as they functioned as a negative role model for the youngster. Other cases indicated that parents are reluctant to receive help or support from professionals or are insufficiently available to provide support themselves when the youngster is experiencing depressive feelings, anxiety, or stress.

*Case 7: The boy regularly had conflicts with his father, which could sometimes escalate into violence. The boy did not feel understood by his father in his depressive periods (interview).*

The youth workers established contact with parents to realize improvements in the health and well-being of the youngsters. They shared positive developments about the youngster's health situation, provided advice, or mediated between the youngster and their parent(s) to reduce stress. The study also found that in two cases a failed mediation led to an increase in stress. These cases required professionals specialized in family coaching.

Various cases demonstrated how negative life events negatively influence a youngster's health and well-being, especially the level of stress experienced. For example, parental divorce increased the level of stress experienced by one youngster. In four cases, stressful periods caused by negative life events temporarily intensified the number of contact moments between the youngster and youth worker.

#### 4. Discussion

This study identified four patterns of development of socially vulnerable youngsters, providing insight into how a multi-methodic youth work approach positively contributes to their personal development, the reinforcement of their social network, the enhancement of their social participation, and timely contact with appropriate specialized care services. The findings reflect those observed in earlier studies that identified the same outcomes of professional youth work (Dickson et al., 2013; Dunne et al., 2014; Fyfe et al., 2018; McGregor, 2015; Ord et al., 2018). The findings in this investigation offer greater detail because the study used a framework consisting of four patterns, allowing us to see how a combination of youth work methods (under the right conditions) contributes to specific outcomes in relation to specific needs and/or problems of youngsters as well as contextual factors. Scholars can use this hypothesizing framework, testing it in other samples and delving deeper into specific findings about the process and impact of professional youth work.

For the majority of the youngsters in this study, the methods of *social group work* and the provision of *information and advice services* met the general (latent) needs of the adolescents, assisting them to create meaningful relationships with peers, gain access to peer support, practice important life skills, and become aware of health risks. The youngsters in our study were prepared to listen to practical advice in order to strengthen their own opportunities and responsibilities.

Using these combination of two methods, the youth workers created learning opportunities, as well as providing positive encouragement and feedback, with the youngsters given opportunities to experiment, expand their social network, and develop their own identity and lifestyle during their transition to adulthood. Consistent with the literature (Fyfe et al., 2018; Ord et al., 2018), this study also found that the guarantee of social safety is an important condition for the development of skills and increasing support from the peer group. The youth workers played an essential role in making youngsters feel accepted, ensuring that the young people accept each other (Ord et al., 2018, p. 224), and offering them an appropriate informal learning environment.

In addition, this study confirmed that youth workers also provide *individual guidance* to youngsters when needed, addressing specific needs or problems, such as school difficulties, unemployment, and

social-emotional or mental health problems. In many cases, they assisted youngsters who had otherwise limited support from significant others or who were dealing with an accumulation of setbacks and negative life events that could radically influence their development. For these youngsters, the youth workers were recognized and accepted dialogue partners in learning to deal with stress, setbacks, or conflict situations provoked by other interactions in their living environment. Youth workers support youngsters as they learn how to navigate difficult challenges, which Larson and Tran (2014) consider an important skill for positive youth development.

The youth workers in our study were approachable and even willing to share their own similar personal experiences during one-on-one conversations. Utilizing this similarity and accessibility as working elements provided the youngsters with a positive role model, as well as support and confidence in dealing with stress, setbacks, and conflicts. Other research has emphasized the importance of approachability and similarity – such as similar cultural and migrant backgrounds, familiarity with street culture, and a certain 'life experience' – as important conditions for bridging contacts to be of help. This similarity means youngsters feel understood by others (Schenk et al., 2018, p. 267). As Sandu (2019) showed, when youth workers reveal aspects of their personal lives, they can establish a common ground between them and the youngster. Our study supports such findings, indicating that greater attention should be paid to these working conditions and practices.

The study revealed that youth work supports some youngsters with specific needs or problems to gain access to a new education program or employment, which has positive consequences for their participation in society and their financial and personal independence and reinforces their social networks in work or education settings. Other youngsters gain access to appropriate specialized care for mental health problems which could prevent the accumulation of problems and more expensive and long-term care. Other studies on the impact of youth work services have also established that youth work contributes to better formal educational outcomes and has a positive impact on employability (McGregor, 2015; Ord et al., 2018; Souto-Otero, 2016), as well as signposting youngsters in challenging circumstances and directing them toward appropriate additional services (Coulston, 2010; Fyfe et al., 2018). Further research should be undertaken to determine whether youth work prevents an increase in youth problems and thus reduces the need for relatively expensive social care interventions.

It is interesting to note that in all four of the patterns we identified, the youth workers collaborated with formal or informal partners in the environment of the youngsters. We also found that with whom and in what form youth workers collaborate depends on the specific needs of the youngster, the intended outcome, the influence of significant others, and the occurrence of important life events. Various cases indicated that parents (as significant others) can impede opportunities to improve the health and well-being of youngsters, as well as hampering attempts to support their own choices, life opportunities, and responsibilities. This study has shown that if youth workers collaborate constructively with parents, the developmental process can be accelerated, both inside and outside youth work settings. These insights might be of value for the further conceptualization of parental involvement in youth work and youth programs in general (Munoz & Raffaelli, 2019). Additionally, collaboration with professionals from social institutions improves youngsters' chances of finishing school or finding appropriate specialist care. Other research into youth work processes has emphasized the importance of collaboration with family members and other professionals involved in young people's lives (parents, social workers, teachers). These relationships and practice partnerships help to form a strong community network, help youngsters to make better use of

services, and enable all those involved to become more responsive in meeting the needs and aspirations of youngsters (Boomkens et al., 2019; Fyfe et al., 2018, p. 25; Merton, 2004). One point of concern is how much youth workers should involve significant others: whether collaboration with significant others will contribute to the positive development of a youngster and should be part of the professional guidelines in youth work. After all, youth work begins with the needs and interests of the young person, not the broader context.

Finally, detached youth work does not appear to directly contribute to any of the outcomes presented in this study. Nevertheless, the cases demonstrated that detached youth work has a role to play in two ways. First, young people come into contact with youth work through this method, including youth with problems who would otherwise remain invisible. Second, detached youth work presents opportunities to maintain contact with young people (e.g., outside a youth club) and to involve those in the social environment (peers/family) of young people in the process.

#### 4.1. Strengths and limitations of the study

One strength of this study is that the data was collected over a relatively long period of time, focusing on how young people develop with support from youth workers and taking into account contextual factors. To our knowledge, to date, no studies have examined this combination of youth work process, its impact, and the influence of contextual factors over such a period of time. The multi-case study design used here provided opportunities to gain insights into these developmental processes of youngsters in youth work. Another strength of our research is that we collaborated closely with eleven youth work organizations, which increases the extent to which our findings can be generalized.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations to this study that require consideration. First, the selection of the youth workers ( $N = 20$ ) and the youngsters ( $N = 23$ ) in the study might be biased, since not all youth workers and youngster had an equal chance of being selected. It is possible that youth workers who were highly motivated and had stronger reflective skills participated in the study. Moreover, the youth workers were instructed to select youngsters of different ages, gender, and extent of personal or social problems to ensure that the sample reflected the broader target population of Dutch youth work services. Second, the data was obtained from the perspective of youth workers, while the perspective of the youngsters was not explicitly addressed. However, in a previous study, we examined the issues from a youth perspective (Sonneveld et al., under review).

Third, the age range of youth in this study was very broad. Using comparative analysis, we searched for differences in age groups. The differences found in the patterns were minimal, as reported in this article. However, the sample in this study was small, and it is therefore recommended to investigate how age influences the youth work process and its outcomes using large-scale quantitative research.

Fourth, the duration of the data collection (12 months) may have influenced the quality and frequency of the diary notes. It was apparent that some youth workers registered data more frequently and in more detail at the beginning of the diary period than at the end. This emphasizes the importance of the intervision meetings to triangulate, support, and deepen the information gathering process. Finally, the youth workers indicated that their participation in the study contributed to their professional development and improvements in their working process. This positive side effect may have affected participant

reflections (Hyldegård, 2006). In future work, we will explore in greater depth how the participation of the youth workers in this study contributed to their own professional development.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the identification of four patterns, this study found that a multi-methodic youth work approach does contribute to the expansion of the social network of youngsters, developing life skills, strengthening school performance and work opportunities, and improving their health and well-being. Youth workers tailor a multi-method approach to the specific needs and developmental issues faced by youngsters and interact with the social environment during the process (parents and/or formal institutions). If youth workers collaborate constructively with the environment, the developmental process of youngsters can be accelerated.

The findings support a growing body of research indicating that youth work contributes to the personal development and social participation of socially vulnerable youngsters and will lead to positive social returns in the longer run, including a reduction in social care costs.

#### 5.1. Implications for practice and policy

These insights into the multi-methodic youth work process and its outcomes can support youth workers to improve their practice. The findings provide youth workers with insights into how they can adequately support socially vulnerable youngsters who have varied needs and development issues. Additionally, youth workers can use the knowledge gained about methodical ways of acting to further legitimize their profession. This exploratory research shows policy makers that a multi-methodical approach meets the varied needs and developmental issues of socially vulnerable youngsters and contributes to strengthening their own sense of responsibility, the reinforcement of their social network, enhancement of participation, and the timely finding of appropriate care to reduce more expensive longer term costs or the need for (specialized) social care. Based on these insights, municipalities can decide whether, and to what extent, they use youth work services as a form of preventive welfare provision in the implementation of a youth policy aimed at prevention and positive youth development.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Jolanda Sonneveld:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Jeremy Rijnders:** Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing. **Judith Metz:** Conceptualization, Writing - review & editing. **Tine Van Regenmortel:** Supervision. **René Schalk:** Supervision.

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Appendix A. Matrix with criteria used for the comparative analysis

Case	Age	Gender	Extent of problems		Life experiences and support			Multi-methodic approach				Youth worker collaborate with				Outcomes			
			Doing well	Initial problems	Severe problems	Support from the social network	Positive life events	Negative life events	Detached youth work	Information & Advice services	Social group work	Individual guidance	Adult (s)	Friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, boss	Social institutions (school, care, police)	Reinforcement of social network	Developing skills	Social participation	Finding specialized care
1	11	F	●			●													
2	12	M		●		●					●							●	
3	13	F		●		●		●			●						●		
4	13	F		●		●					●						●		
5	14	F		●		●		●			●						●		
6	15	F		●	●	●		●			●						●	●	
7	16	M		●		●		●			●						●	●	
8	16	M		●		●		●			●						●	●	
9	17	F		●		●		●			●						●	●	
10	17	F		●		●		●			●						●	●	
11	17	F		●		●		●			●						●	●	
12	17	M				●		●			●						●	●	
13	18	M				●		●			●						●	●	
14	18	M				●		●			●						●	●	
15	19	M		●		●		●			●						●	●	
16	19	F		●		●		●			●						●	●	
17	19	F		●		●		●			●						●	●	
18	21	M				●		●			●						●	●	
19	21	F				●		●			●						●	●	
20	21	M		●		●		●			●						●	●	
21	23	M				●		●			●						●	●	
22	23	M				●		●			●						●	●	
23	22	M				●		●			●						●	●	

## Appendix B. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105476>.

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