

Summary

Introduction

Den Engh is an institution that since its foundation in 1833 has always been used in the treatment of boys with learning difficulties. The method for bringing-up boys has naturally changed in the course of its history. Since 1996, the existing Social Groups Strategy (*Socio Groeps Strategie*, SGS) has been adopted at this State institution. This method was developed together with the State University of Groningen (*Rijksuniversiteit van Groningen*).

Den Engh has a total capacity of 196 places. Of these 196 places, 160 are allocated to boys with learning difficulties. Aside the national plan for boys with learning difficulties, in 2003 the Ministry of Justice made an extra 36 places available at Den Engh for the reception and supervision of young multiple offenders. The boys at Den Engh are between 12 and 23 years old. These include boys with a criminal punishment (PIJ) as well as a civil punishment (supervision order - *ondertoezichtstelling*, OTS - or guardianship in a closed detention centre).

Den Engh

There are three sections at Den Engh: Transport & Logistics (T&L), Maritime en Multiple Offenders. The SGS-method is carried out with all of these sections, and as a result, a large variation exists in the extent to which the SGS-method is adopted. The method is applied in the purist form in the T&L section. The Maritime and Multiple Offenders sections differ from the T&L section, and the Multiple Offenders section, in particular, diverges from the SGS-method on a variety of points.

The group process forms the basis of the SGS-method for bringing-up boys. The central idea of the method is to use the group process to bring positive experiences to the young people involved, from which new positive control patterns are derived. The objective of this upbringing is thus to help these young people grow into people with good physical, affectionate, cognitive, sociable and aesthetic/ ethical control patterns. Youths are instructed and educated within the framework of this upbringing.

Research

The Ministry of Justice has commissioned this programme evaluation in order to gain a better insight into the programme and the approach used at Den Engh. The research is concentrated on an evaluation of the SGS-method. The research comprises five categories:

- 1 Analysis of intake and placement.
- 2 Interviews with youths.
- 3 Image and co-operation.
- 4 Effectiveness of the approach.
- 5 Programme evaluation.

This programme evaluation specifically focuses on the regular processes at Den Engh that are concerned with the learning difficulties target group. Besides this there is an experimental multiple offenders' process, a derivation of the SGS-method that is still in development. This process is only dealt with in descriptive form in this study (it is not tested).

An assessment framework has been established in order to evaluate Den Engh's programme. This framework is based, in particular, on the '*What Works*¹': guidelines that - if adhered to - improve the chance of a successful intervention. As a marginal note to this assessment framework, it should be mentioned that if proven effective methods are not used at Den Engh it can not necessarily be concluded that the approach is unsound. The adopted method must, however, be supported by theory. Additionally, it is not only a question of whether something works, but also *how*, for *whom* and in *which* context (quantitative data) it works. In spite of the possible limitations of the *What Works* principles, these principles have been adopted in this study as a measuring tool. The Ministry of Justice also uses these principles as a basis for the soon to begin broad accreditation (for the limitations of *What Works* and a description of the assessment framework see Section 1.3). Not all questions in the assessment framework have the same importance. The relevant factors have been given weightings based on the literature. Of the 19 most important factors concerning criminal intervention, a distinction is made between factors that conform to a high, reasonable or small/negligible extent with the programme.

Analysis of intake and placement

Den Engh concentrates on youths with learning difficulties and multiple offenders. According to Den Engh, multiple offenders and boys with learning difficulties often have similar problems and needs, with the exception of IQ. Den Engh does not have specific entry criteria.

Selection is carried out via the Ministry of Justice. IQ (between 55 and 80) is the most important entry criterion used by the Ministry. After assessing the extent of learning difficulty, when considering placement to Den Engh the Ministry also looks at the suitability of the boy in question for the group approach. The Ministry adopts the national definition of multiple offenders as a criterion for the multiple offenders' process. Boys that belong to the multiple offenders group are entered with the status "under-supervision" (*Onder-toezichtstelling*) with authorization for transferral to a closed detention centre.

According to Den Engh 105 boys were admitted entry in 2003. Of these boys 59 belong to the learning difficulties group and 46 to the multiple offenders group. In 2003 the civil and criminal punishment placements for the learning difficulties target group were approximately the same (54% and 46%, respectively). Most boys (70,5%) are 15 or 16 years old at the moment of intake. The majority (72%) of the boys admitted in 2003 were of foreign origin, of which Moroccan boys (35%) were by far the largest group. Dutch boys

Footnote 1 English What Works principles: Programme Accreditation Criteria, from the Correctional Services Accreditation Panel, London, august 2003.

formed the second largest group with 28%.

The small intake limits the opportunities for Den Engh to reach an optimal group composition. Den Engh strives for homogeneity in the groups.

Interviews with youths

There is a marked difference between the praise and criticism given by boys in the T&L and Maritime sections and boys in the Multiple Offenders section.

Boys from the T&L and Maritime sections are mainly positive about Den Engh. They see the activities as the best and most specific part of Den Engh. The physical aspect, as well as the excitement and adventure provided by the activities, appeals to them greatly. As a result, these boys came across as being enthusiastic about the tuition given. All boys appeared to be very proud of the diplomas and certificates they had attained. The most important criticism of Den Engh's programme is, in the opinion of the boys, related to its duration and toughness. The interviewed boys give countless examples of this (see Section 8). In addition, they all indicated having difficulty with the ethos of disciplining the whole group according to the behaviour of one individual group member. The boys experience this as a great injustice and find it difficult to accept.

The two boys interviewed from the multiple offenders' process stated that they left Den Engh bitter and frustrated. They have little praise for the SGS. This had to do, in particular, with the group being punished for individual misdemeanours, but also with them having to correct group members themselves. From their accounts it would appear that although at a certain moment the boys did begin to correct one another, this was in fact a façade. The boys agreed amongst themselves beforehand where and when they would correct one another. These boys also look at the tuition given in a very different way. They consider the level of tuition to be much too low and do not find the certificates relevant.

Image and co-operation

Den Engh's image is generally positive among the people responsible for placing boys in the learning difficulties target group. This is particularly due to the generally held opinion that the programme and working method relate well to this target group.

Co-operation has clearly improved and parents are better involved. Rigid plans and the refusal to engage in intercourse about issues that do not run smoothly are mentioned as negative points. Den Engh is characterised as an inward looking organisation. It is noticeable that while some juvenile magistrates are strongly in favour of placement to Den Engh, others are strongly against.

The picture is very different for multiple offenders. One point of criticism is the very high level of expectation that was created before the start of the programme.

The disappointing number of reoffenders, the number of incidents and questions regarding the programme's suitability for this group mean that, although there are supporters, there are also placement personnel who have major doubts over placing boys to Den Engh. Furthermore, it is suggested

that the way in which parents are involved does not relate to the predominantly Islamic target group. With respect to this group, limited opportunities for communication and rigid dictation of agreements are also mentioned as criticisms. Further questions are asked about the selection of youths (in Amsterdam) for Den Engh.

Effectiveness of the approach

The theory behind the Den Engh method has been described in detail. Nevertheless, what is clear is that the theories and regulating frameworks used are not based on the extensive literature on developmental psychopathology published in recent years (for example, group-based versus individual approach; affect-free approach). Having a modern cut does not necessarily mean the theory is of a good quality, but ignoring tens of years of empirical research into the ways in which children develop and how problems in development can arise also doesn't help. The theoretical frameworks of Den Engh give the appearance of a closed system developed by a limited group of people. The theoretical foundation and theoretical architecture of that system was laid down several decades ago. This was then built upon without the fundamental aspects of the design being discussed. (There has been a visible lack of reflection of modern theory forming.)

A positive point is the existence of a reasonably complete and detailed structure. There are few institutions that can claim to have as detailed descriptions of their theories as Den Engh. On the other hand, a minus point is that the scientific community has developed further outside this theoretical structure without influencing either the builders or residents of the institution.

The dilemma that now exists is as follows. The theory behind Den Engh is perhaps somewhat dated and in part untenable, but not entirely indefensible. This dilemma can only be solved by empirical research. In conclusion, we do not yet know whether the theory behind Den Engh forms a sound basis for a treatment method.

Programme-evaluation

Programme design

The Den Engh approach is focussed on stimulating the group in such a way that group members are able to conduct themselves as healthy people after two years of treatment. The approach is sub-divided into four phases, whereby the tempo is determined by the development of the group. The activities are very important for the social-forming of groups. They are adventurous, challenging and varied, but task and function orientated. In this way the boys gain positive learning experiences, whereby their self-esteem and motivation grow. Furthermore, the activities of the education are integrated into the approach. This means that the youths, especially in the beginning, gain learning experiences in a playful way. The importance of support from parents is recognised, but at the moment they play a modest role in the approach.

The programme in practice

Due to the (uniform) group approach, little is done to address the individual

needs of young people. The group is used as a means of education, but if the group is very homogenous (a lot of foreigners, leader types) the chance of learning is reduced. Regulated behaviour by adults should, according to Den Engh's vision, be limited as much as possible. But in the first phases the group supervisors have a definite steering role. In practice, not all youths progress through the same learning process at the same speed, but the entire group is nevertheless expected to begin each new phase together. The weaker boys hold the group up. Attractive task and function-related activities are carried out within the programme for the learning difficulties group. The activities do not relate as well to multiple offenders.

In practice, there is a clear strain between the group supervisors' responsibility, the groups' responsibility and uncooperative individuals. Demotivated youths stagnate the group. The group comes before the individual (there are no individual treatment plans, few questions are asked during the working process and there is no discussion of the criminal factors that relate to individuals. The individual phase is limited in time; boys experience the return to society as a considerable step. There is mention of a large gap existing between the institution and society. After-care is voluntary, and as far as we can see, not intense enough. In conclusion, the approach for multiple offenders is definitely unsatisfactory. We think more highly of the progress of the programme for the learning difficulties group

The Programme tested in the assessment framework

Based on the following overview it can be deduced that the Den Engh programme has been built-up and developed with its own vision. The study carried out by Den Engh into the effectiveness of the SGS-method offers unsatisfactory insight into the reoffending of the youths that have participated in the programme. The absence of a large number of essential components of the - in the assessment framework - factors considered lead to the impression that the programme in its current form will only lead to a reduction in the criminal behaviour of the youths which pass through Den Engh in very limited measure.

Table 1 Den Engh score on the 19 most important factors of assessment framework

Present to a high degree	Present to a reasonable degree	Present to a small degree/not present
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practical education • Personnel assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection criteria(exclusion criteria) • Learning skills • Practice skills in practice • Personnel prepared to adapt to different learning styles, motivation and capacity of youths • Implementation programme as intended • Registration of data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forms including objectives and final terms • Effective (scientifically based) work process • Decrease shortages dynamic risk factors • Relate to individual learning styles and capacity of youths • Use of behavioural therapeutic approach • Making use of family system • Connection of programme intensity to risk of relapse • Attention of client to qualities that lead to committing criminal offences • Breaking through these (mentioned above) characteristics • Supervision of reintegration into society • Effectiveness study

The absence of a large number of factors considered to be essential leads to the supposition that the programme in its current form will result in the reduction of criminal behaviour by youths who have passed through Den Engh in only limited measure.

The SGS-method is a unique approach that does not resemble anything else

being applied (and tested). The effective components as described by Den Engh are neither based on tried and tested theories nor evidence-based programmes.

Conclusions and recommendations

Using the *What Works* principles as a reference, the most important conclusion of this study is that there are no reasons to suppose that the SGS-method works (and therefore leads to a reduction in reoffending). Nor can it be concluded, however, that the method doesn't work. Only a study into the effectiveness of the programme can determine whether or not the SGS-method works. Based on the assessment framework used in this study (in turn based on the *What Works* principles), only a few elements were found in Den Engh that could contribute to a reduction in reoffending. Improvements in effectiveness are therefore in all likelihood achievable by modifying the programme. Based on the findings of this study a number of recommendations have been proposed for the improvement of the SGS-method (improvements that aim to increase the probability of a reduction in the level of reoffending). These recommendations are focussed on Den Engh itself and on the justice system.

Den Engh

The authors consider there to be substantial limitations in Den Engh's SGS approach. In order for the treatment to relate better to the "*What Works*" principles, the following conditions must be satisfied:

- *Adapt method to current developments*
In spite of this study failing to prove whether or not the method works, what it has revealed is that the method adopted by Den Engh has not taken recent empirical developments and theoretical insight into account. Additionally, Den Engh has not made it clear why the SGS-method has been kept devoid of any modifications based on new insight. It is recommended that a review of the SGS-method be carried out in order to determine whether or not it can be adapted according to recent scientific insight (from tried and tested theories and empirical studies: evidence based).
- *Allow parents greater involvement on an individual basis*
Den Engh is currently working on involving parents still more in the programme. This component is well in development. When approaching parents it is important to place the emphasis on the individual supervision of the boy and his parents and not the group. Only limited results are expected if a group-focussed approach is taken.
- *Teach skills more systematically*
At Den Engh boys receive what is effectively retraining. Den Engh teaches the skills that appear appropriate during the course of the (re)training process. The authors recommend that a more systematic manner of teaching be adopted along side this existing method. Most boys should be able to survive on their own in society after Den Engh. Focussing on the skills needed by boys in society is therefore of great importance. Good screening and diagnosis instruments should be used to ascertain which skills an individual lacks. With respect to the teaching of skills, clear terms of completion must be formulated. It then becomes easier to determine when a boy is ready to leave, and for the institution to which they are referred, it is clearer which skills the youths do and do not

have.

- *Estimate risk at the start*
At the beginning of the programme an estimate should be made of the probability of an individual reoffending (estimate of risk). The outcome of this estimation should be taken account of during programming (on an individual basis). This means that the group may not be held up as the standard. Instead, more guidance must be given to the individual development of the youths.
- *Consider criminal factors during intake and supervision*
A programme that is focussed on the reducing the chance of reoffending should be focussed on the (variable) problems and characteristics of a youth that are associated with his criminal behaviour (reducing the dynamic risk factors). This aspect should be developed within Den Engh. Identifying the characteristics and problems of youths must therefore have a clear place in the intake procedure.
- *Increase transparency and co-operation*
Den Engh should break free from its isolated position. In addition, there should be an increase in the receptiveness to criticism and the openness for change. It is all about making the bottle-necks experienced by placement staff (family supervisors) discussable, co-operating with partners (e.g. with respect to after-care), the exchange with the Ministry of Justice and answering more scientific questions about the approach (e.g. questions from this study). This is an important precondition for a successful continuation.

The suggested modifications are so substantial that it is doubtful that an organisation can deal with them on its own. In our opinion the setting up of a scientific committee to oversee the improvement process should be considered. Important components of this process should be the reorientation of the theoretical foundations and the integration of *What Works* principles in the Den Engh approach.

The justice system

- *Study of reoffending*
It is not known whether or not the theory adopted at Den Engh forms a sound basis for a treatment method. For this reason the SGS-method cannot be judged an effective method, but neither can it be judged an ineffective method. Together with the potential reorientation, a thorough study into the effects of the SGS-method for youths with learning difficulties should be undertaken. Only then will it become clear whether or not the treatment method gives the desired effect, which is that the SGS-method prevents reoffending. If it is chosen to follow the proposal to fundamentally alter the programme, then a study into reoffending should take second place.
- *Registration*
Registration must improve. Obtaining data about the numbers of youths in the (Tulp) system currently requires a great deal of effort. Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice and Den Engh both arrive at different numbers.
- *After-care*
One further aspect that evidently needs improvement is after-care. There is a very large gap between life in and around Den Engh and society. In general this applies to the return to society of youths who have spent time in a young offenders' institution. As far as boys with learning difficulties are concerned, this demands even more attention considering their

limited capacity to gain a place in society themselves. They deserve intensive supervision of living, working and free-time when stepping over from a closed, well organized and 'protected' environment to the outside world. An After-Care Covenant clearly establishes that the responsibility for carrying out after-care lies with Juvenile Rehabilitation. Nevertheless, the current approach is often insufficiently intense to allow the adequate supervision of a youth back into society.

The Ministry of Justice is working on improving after-care (specifically on the development of compulsory after-care). Agreements should be made with Den Engh regarding the completion of this after-care. The option of leaving after-care to Juvenile Rehabilitation is - in our opinion - insufficiently effective. The availability of finance plays an important role here.

- *Multiple offenders*

The programme for multiple offenders is tested in this study against the questions posed in the assessment framework, but is only mentioned in descriptive form. The reason for this is that the programme has an experimental status and is still in full development. The following have been deduced:

- The programme for multiple offenders is a derivative of the SGS-method. This method receives positive results for just two of the elements of the assessment framework, whereas it receives seven reasonable and nine negative results. Den Engh has not provided a theoretical basis for the application of the SGS-method to the multiple offenders target group. The multiple offenders programme is a 'dilution' of the SGS-method. It is not specifically adapted to multiple offenders and does not conform to the responsiveness principle. The group approach in a homogenous group does not relate to this target group.
- The activities (Middle Ages, Robinson Crusoe) do not relate to this group. The group supervisors indicate that there is resistance by the boys to the activities offered by the programme.
- The boundaries of the programme have not been made sufficiently clear for the multiple offenders target group and the intake is marginally, as well as retrospectively, tested by the Ministry of Justice. The question is whether or not the 'right' target group is placed at Den Engh.
- The image held by the people responsible for placement is predominantly negative. This is, amongst other reasons, caused by the lack of clarity in programming and the duration (varies considerably) and previous experience with boys placed at Den Engh.
- The boys interviewed express negative views about Den Engh.

Based on these deductions, the question is justifiably whether or not the SGS-method should continue to be applied with multiple offenders. Our advice to the Ministry of Justice is, following discussion with associates in the four major cities and Den Engh itself, to seriously and critically look at the viability of the SGS-method for this target group. In our opinion such a rethink could be included in the progress meeting of an experiment that was started a few years ago. Based on a further analysis of the strong and weak points of the SGS-method for multiple offenders, a balanced decision can be made between, either a fundamental renewal and restart of the SGS-method for multiple offenders, or running-down this component completely. If a fundamental renewal is chosen, a rethink of the theoretical groundwork and possible effective components would be

useful. In the longer term, this could take the form of a study into the figures for reoffending by former participants of the programmes. Considering the political importance, the large number of parties involved and Den Engh's 'damaged' position, we advocate the employment of an independent external party to lead this 'rethinking' process.