



Employing the teacher–learner cycle in realistic evaluation: A case study of the social benefits of young people’s playing fields

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Marije Nanninga

CAB, Groningen, The Netherlands

Arie Glebbeek

University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Abstract

The teacher–learner cycle has been presented as an integral part of the realistic evaluation approach by Pawson and Tilley. Yet few studies have adopted this cycle explicitly and no studies were found in which the whole cycle was completed. We fill this gap through a case study of the effect of young people’s playing fields on anti-social behaviour in a Dutch community. The initiators of these fields were surprised that nearly identical fields seemed to work better in one area than in the other. Drawing on the expertise of all stakeholders, our study revealed that the initiators’ implicit CMO-schemes needed improvement and that contextual factors were significant.

Keywords

anti-social behaviour; playing fields; realistic evaluation; sport and delinquency; teacher–learner cycle

Introduction

One of the rarely applied principles in the realistic evaluation framework is the teacher–learner cycle. Yet this principle occupies a prominent position within Pawson and Tilley’s (1997) manifesto for theory-based evaluations. They recommend reconstructing policy interventions as an interplay of Contexts, Mechanisms and Outcomes. An intervention can only work when it (1) activates a change mechanism that overcomes a problem mechanism; (2) this can only take place under circumstances favourable to the effect of the mechanism. These ‘CMO configurations’ are theoretical in nature and therefore each policy intervention can be interpreted as the expression of a theory. The objective of the evaluation is to arrive at a better (or more refined) theory.

Corresponding author:

Marije Nanninga, CAB, Martinikerkhof 30, 9712 JH Groningen, The Netherlands.
Email: nanninga@cabgroningen.nl

Pawson and Tilley go to great lengths in arguing that, within this process of theory formation, the evaluator is not the only one who can lay claim to wisdom. The knowledge of 'what works for whom in which circumstances' is likely to be dispersed among a wide range of experts, policy-makers, practitioners and beneficiaries of the intervention. This dispersion is nothing less than a *division of expertise*, which must be utilized to develop the best possible theories. Hence the question 'who knows what?' must play a leading role when collecting data and reconstructing the CMOs. Beneficiaries often have the deepest insights into how mechanisms work (or do not work); the practitioners, due to their widespread experience, often have a good sense of the contexts that matter; and the evaluators, through their knowledge of the literature, are in the best position to generalize and identify more or less stable CMO configurations (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 160–1). These complementary insights can come together and stimulate each other in a dynamic process of confrontation and refinement of ideas, based on the principle of 'I'll show you my theory, if you'll show me yours' (1997: 169). Pawson and Tilley summarize this process in the 'teacher–learner cycle' concept. The evaluator formulates the provisional CMO schemes on the basis of initial findings, presents these to the relevant parties involved ('teaching'), verifies where they need adjusting ('learning') and thus comes to an improved version. This improved version is at the same time the expression of a 'mutual understanding' of the effect of the intervention. Given that improved policy theories are the ultimate goal of realistic evaluation, one would expect the teacher–learner cycle to be an integral part of its methodology.

Yet this is not reflected in the published research on realistic evaluation, at least not explicitly. Searching for 'teacher–learner cycle' or 'teacher–learner function' does not return any hits in the Socindex or the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences. Hence we widened the scope of our search to articles with 'realistic evaluation' or 'realist evaluation' in the abstract. This exploration also did not yield any examples of studies in which the whole process of the teacher–learner cycle had been completed. The articles were read with three questions in mind. (1) Is there an indication that the CMO scheme itself had been the subject of the discussion with practitioners? (2) Has the expertise of multiple types of actors been utilized? (3) Has the evaluation yielded an improved CMO theory? We found no studies for which all these three questions could be answered fully. However, studies with scattered elements of the cycle *were* found.

This state of affairs can be illustrated with a few examples. The first is a highly convincing application of realistic evaluation by Pedersen and Rieper (2008) on the liberalization of the electricity market in Denmark. This study produces a number of CMO schemes which clearly set out the effect (and mutual contradictions) of the separate elements of this complex reform. This result has partly been achieved by interviews with a wide variety of key actors, yet the article does not contain indications that the CMO schemes themselves were presented to these informers. The same conclusion applies to the study by Leone (2008) into the effect of a drugs deterrence programme in Italy, where a multitude of methods was used, but the ultimate statement (the CMO scheme) appears to be the sole achievement of the researcher. Greater interaction appears to have taken place in the third example. A study by Byng et al. (2005) into a new procedure in mental healthcare used retrospective interviews with key informants to discuss successes and failures of the approach, after which 'the discussion then focused on developing prototype CMO configurations for each outcome' (2005: 76). This is more explicit than an older RE study in healthcare, which reported that 'draft interim and final evaluation reports were shared with project stakeholders to test and seek validation of the analysis' (Evans and Killoran, 2000: 130–1). Lastly, the most successful cross-fertilization between theory and practice is found in a study into the applicability of an American programme for promoting supplier diversity within a British context. This is because the corresponding realistic evaluation of this policy transfer is carried out in the form of an action

research, in which the researcher designs the intervention together with practitioners (Ram et al., 2007). Unfortunately, this report does not describe an improvement of the CMO scheme during the process either.

The dominant pattern of the RE studies thus far clearly shows the unilateral reconstruction (and possibly testing) of the CMO theory by the researcher on the basis of interviews, policy documents, etc. The teacher–learner cycle recommended by Pawson and Tilley (1997) does not play a major role. Blamey and Mackenzie (2007) suggest that this may reflect the nature of realistic evaluation. In their comparison of RE with the theories of change approach (the other prominent theory-based approach to evaluation), they state that the difference can largely be found in ‘whose theory is being tested’ (2007: 446). With the theories of change approach, this is primarily the theory of the designers of the programme, which is articulated, owned and approved by a wide range of stakeholders. With realistic evaluation and its commitment to develop more or less generalized CMO configurations, it is closer to the theory of the academic. The realistic evaluator ‘goes on to suggest the most promising theories at more of a distance from the programme than in Theories of Change’, state Blamey and Mackenzie. ‘In this sense the theories generated, whilst partly emerging from discussions with stakeholders, are specified and owned more by the evaluators rather than approved and “signed up to” by the stakeholders’ (2007: 447). The authors conclude that both approaches are appropriate for different objectives and stages of the evaluation process.

This explanation may be accurate. There is an unmistakable difference between ‘practitioners looking at theory’ and ‘theoreticians looking at practice’. We nevertheless believe that the input of practitioners can also be productive within the RE framework when formulating the CMO theory. Hence in this contribution we demonstrate that a realistic evaluation certainly is possible while utilizing the full teacher–learner cycle. This is illustrated by a Dutch case study of the use of sports fields to combat trouble caused by young people. We will show how the initial intervention theory can be modified and contextualized. The result is a satisfying explanation of the limited (yet important) result of the intervention; an explanation that is the expression of a mutual understanding between practitioners and researchers.

The policy: using sports fields to reduce juvenile misconduct

One municipality, two playing fields: these fields were established in two post-war neighbourhoods with the objective of keeping young people entertained. It was hoped this would reduce nuisance and petty crime. After some time, the municipality concluded that the field in one neighbourhood had a better effect than the field in the other. Why?

At this point we, as researchers, entered the stage. We immediately recognized this as a clear-cut opportunity for realistic evaluation. First, this type of research question requires an explanation (thus suggesting a theory-based evaluation approach). Second, a practically identical intervention is performing better in one case than in the other. This is nearly a paradigm case, as outlined by Pawson and Tilley.

The Angelslo and Bargeres neighbourhoods (hereinafter referred to as areas A and B) are situated in the municipality of Emmen, a small town in the north of the Netherlands. After the Second World War, the town grew rapidly in the wake of industrialization. This resulted in both these areas being mass-built in the 1960s and 1970s. They are currently struggling with obsolescence and social deterioration.

In September 2004, a multifunctional sports field was opened in area A. This was a joint initiative of the municipality, the housing corporations and the primary school adjacent to the field.

The local police, a welfare organization and a community association were also involved with the plan. It was decided to develop a multifunctional field, as the field had to be attractive to all local residents. Furthermore, it aimed to accommodate the events of multiple organizations, such as the school, youth workers and the residents' association – an association of local residents formed especially for the purpose of managing the field. The field consists of a fenced-off concrete football pitch, a volleyball court, a basketball court, two table tennis tables and a long-jump pit. An athletics/roller-skate track surrounds these fields. This track can be flooded during winter to convert into an ice rink.

More than one year after the opening of this field, a similar field was developed in area B. This time the initiative was undertaken solely by the municipality within the framework of a subsidy scheme from the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. This subsidy scheme 'Neighbourhood, Education and Sports' was targeted particularly at underprivileged youth aged 4 to 20. The field in area B consists of a basketball court, a football pitch, a fenced-off football field and two table tennis tables.

Both fields can be freely accessed. As previously mentioned, the field in area A is managed by a residents' association. A similar association was not formed for area B. Instead, the caretaker of the nearby shopping centre supervises the field. The residents' association in area A also organizes field events. Through this connection primary school youth can participate in events supervised by students of the nearby 'Sports and Exercise' vocational training centre, each Wednesday afternoon. Less frequent events such as basketball clinics are organized for older children. The primary school adjacent to the field uses it during school time. Practically no events are organized in area B, nor does the school adjacent to the field make use of it.

According to the policy-makers, one of the main reasons for establishing the fields was problems in both areas in relation to crime and nuisance caused by young people. A number of years ago, the nuisance in area A was caused mainly by youth under the age of 20. This manifested itself in various places, including the shopping centre. In area B, the nuisance was mainly caused by a group aged 20 to 30. Local residents felt threatened by this group. The field in this area was established within the framework of the municipal project 'Youth and Safety'. The primary objective of this project was 'to reduce undesirable behaviour of 12 to 20 year-olds' (statement in policy document, 2004).

Two years after the fields were set up, the initiators concluded that the field in area A performed better than the field in area B. The question posed by the municipality was why this was the case. In order to (help) answer this question, it was important to us, as researchers, to gain a better understanding of the factors that determine the success or failure of a multifunctional sports field. This resulted in the formulation of a wider research question: *Can offering sports facilities in a neighbourhood lead to a reduction of nuisance and criminal behaviour among young people aged 12 to 20? And if so, what are the conditions?*

It was clear to us that we could not answer this question in isolation. Identifying the active mechanisms and conditions would require us to dig deeper into the accumulated wisdom of the policy-makers, as well as to utilize the experiences and insights of practitioners, local officials (e.g. social workers, police officers) and of course the young people themselves. Initiating a teacher–learner cycle seemed the appropriate way. However, this method's division of expertise also invites the researcher to confront the intervention with literature. For this literature study the main question was whether there was experience elsewhere in using sport and sports facilities to combat the misconduct of young people. And, second, whether these experiences were universal or indicated a decisive role for contextual factors.

Sport as an instrument: what the literature teaches

A search in the usual databases and some specialist sports sociology journals yielded little in terms of specific influence of sports *facilities* on crime and nuisance. Hence we continued our search in a more general direction using search terms such as ‘sports’, ‘physical activity’, ‘crime’, ‘delinquency’, ‘anti-social behaviour’, ‘criminal behaviour’ and ‘youth’. Overall, evaluation studies only discuss independent sports facilities when linked to events. Our overview therefore focuses on the wider theme of implementing sports *programmes* in order to combat the undesirable behaviour of young people. Most studies relate to secondary school students in Great Britain, the United States and Australia and mainly discuss the influence of sport on crime rather than nuisance.

The literature clearly demonstrates that policy-makers have high expectations of sports. Many policy documents assume that ‘the provision of sports and physical activities can make an important contribution to reducing crime and drug use amongst young people’ (Smith and Waddington, 2004: 279). Coalter (2000) also points to the widespread belief in the therapeutic value of sports in his overview study. However, many authors are of the opinion that to date there is little evidence to support this optimism, particularly the assumption of sports having a favourable effect on crime. There are few serious evaluation studies available and, unsurprising to the connoisseurs of realistic evaluation, when they are, they show contradictory results (Burton and Marshall, 2005; Nichols and Crow, 2004; Long et al., 2002). Evaluation research in this field, as indeed in many others, has to contend with the selection bias problem (Hastad et al., 1984). It is not unreasonable to assume that socially adapted young people are more attracted to sports than criminally inclined youths. Therefore, if a positive effect is found at all, it is difficult to say whether participating in sports itself leads to a reduction in criminal behaviour or whether criminals are more inclined to avoid sports or drop out or are made to leave sports programmes.

Taylor (in Coalter, 2005) emphasizes another problem, namely that the influence of sports on crime is mainly indirect. Success is based on a number of intermediating processes, such as improved fitness, self-confidence and the development of social and interpersonal skills. Hence Coalter points to the importance of identifying the relation between inputs, processes and outcomes. However, several authors conclude that the programme architects generally remain very imprecise or silent with regard to the specific mechanisms through which participation in sports may lead to the desired results (Coalter, 2000; Mason and Wilson, 1988; Segrave and Hastad, 1984; Smith and Waddington, 2004).

This latter observation is important. Without a specification of the active mechanisms, it is not clear which substantive theories or ideas are being tested by an evaluation, and so the results of impact studies are difficult to interpret. Hence while reading the literature we focused on possible mechanisms through which practising sports can improve the behaviour of young people. We believe that in the various studies and overviews a total of *six mechanisms* can be distinguished. These will be discussed here, partly with a view to answering the question ‘can offering sports facilities (playgrounds) be sufficient to activate these mechanisms?’

Reducing boredom

Boredom is often associated with depression, lack of concentration and loneliness, which are assumed to be conducive to crime. Hence Morris et al. (2003) deem it of major importance that attempts are made to prevent and reduce boredom among young people. In addition, most experts agree that when young people have little to do and are not stimulated through their environment, they will seek stimulation themselves. This often results in anti-social behaviour. Offering activities

to young people keeps them off the street and reduces boredom and, in turn, nuisance and crime. Catalano et al. (1998) indicate that offering something to do in this case is more important than the type of activity offered. The development of sports fields could therefore be a useful instrument.

Reducing uncontrolled leisure time

Related to boredom, yet different in its workings, Morris et al. (2003) discuss a second mechanism. According to them, sports can reduce the amount of uncontrolled leisure time. By participating in organized sporting events, the amount of time in which young people can do their own thing without third-party supervision is reduced and with that the opportunity to engage in undesirable activities. When young people participate in events where a sports leader is present, they are less likely to misbehave, while the chance of being caught committing criminal acts is increased. However, this mechanism is unlikely to gain momentum without organized activities. The mere existence of sports fields does not make a difference to the amount of uncontrolled leisure time.

These mechanisms have the potential to reduce crime and nuisance, but do not intervene in the personality structure of young people directly. Many authors suggest that practising sports can indeed affect the personality or the way of thinking among participants. The following mechanisms embody this assumption.

The influence of role models

According to Schafer (1969) and Coalter (2000), young people who often hang out with criminals are more inclined to show criminal behaviour themselves. However, young people who practise sports are under the influence of trainers and team-mates who set up a code of conduct that they must comply with. Furthermore, sport emphasizes the importance of traditional values, such as honesty, performance and discipline. These principles can be introduced to young people through relations with role models and thus be internalized and applied in everyday life. According to Coalter (2000), it can be as simple as sports leaving young people with not enough time on their hands to socialize with the 'wrong' friends. Offering sports facilities alone could, in principle, be sufficient to activate this mechanism. If these attract different kinds of young people, thus creating different kinds of encounters, new role models are given a chance.

'Character building'

Segrave (1983) emphasizes that sports can contribute to the development of certain qualities that, in turn, suppress criminal proclivities. This involves features such as self-control, emotional stability, optimism and in particular *self-esteem*. Segrave states that many psychologists and sociologists believe delinquency is often a response to an inadequate self-concept or a lack of self-esteem. 'Participation in sports enhances an individual's feelings of dignity and self-worth and precludes entrance into less conventional or deviant settings which might also provide opportunities for the development of a positive self-concept' (1983: 184). In a more recent contribution, Andrews and Andrews (2003) confirm this view. According to them, research has shown that participating in sports enhances self-confidence and self-esteem among young criminals and youth at-risk. Character building can thus be an important gain through sports, the more so since it is deeply anchored in the personality. However, it is clear this requires active and intense sports practising, rather than offering a playing field alone.

Substitution

Practising sports can serve as a substitute for other needs in several ways. The need for status is often mentioned in this regard, as underprivileged youth often seek status in crime to make up for lack of opportunity elsewhere. Thus Mason and Wilson (1988: 29) state that ‘sporting youths from low-income families may not have to engage in delinquent activities to gain status and respect’. Crabbe (2000) also discusses authors who believe that sports can serve as an alternative way to gain status if it cannot be obtained through social or economical means. Other needs for which sports can offer a substitution are the need for thrills and spills and the display of masculinity. By offering the right stimuli and by properly guiding the ‘hunger for excitement and danger’, practising sports can offer an alternative to crime (Andrews and Andrews, 2003; Coalter, 2000; Schafer, 1969; Segrave, 1983). Also for less serious infractions, such as just causing nuisance, sports can provide an outlet, since it offers a socially accepted opportunity to express the needs that young people naturally have. However, just offering sports facilities, as such, is unlikely to be sufficient to activate these mechanisms.

Reducing negative ‘labelling’

Schafer (1969) and Mason and Wilson (1988) all mention the labelling theory, according to which individuals of a lower social status run a greater risk of being labelled ‘criminal’ or ‘anti-social’ than individuals of a higher social status. They are also more likely to be apprehended and prosecuted for criminal behaviour. Consequently, they are more inclined to adopt the role of a criminal. If sportsmen were to have a higher status than non-sportsmen, this vicious circle could be broken. Athletic adolescents are less likely to develop the image of ‘bad boy’ than their less sporty counterparts. ‘As a result, they are less likely to get caught in the negative self-fulfilling cycle of action, labelling, repressive sanctions by teachers, increasing negative self images, identification with other troublemakers, rejection of school standards, further deviancy, further labelling, etc.’ (Schafer, 1969: 74). Practising sports at local playing fields is probably not sufficient to lose the ‘bad boy’ image. Yet labelling theory rightly highlights how easily negative images are created, initiating a chain of action and reaction between youths hanging about on the streets and irritated local residents.

The potential mechanisms are also contested in the literature. In addition to the difficult empirical demonstrability of their workings, questions are raised with regard to theoretical assumptions. A number of authors state that the belief in sports programmes is based on a too naive and noble image of sports, as sports also have their less positive sides (cf. Crabbe, 2000). Within this context, Smith and Waddington (2004) refer to the *Januform character* of sports. Beside the ‘Puritan’ image lies the ‘Dionysian’ image, reflecting the alcohol culture which is dominant in many sports. Crabbe further adds that an environment has been created within sports where violence and confrontation are deemed normal and where deceit and offences are more the rule than the exception. ‘Drug taking, violence, corruption, cheating, racism, homophobia, intimidation, sex scandals and other forms of criminal behaviour have become part of the very fabric of media representations of sport during the last decade’ (Crabbe, 2000: 381).

Other arguments are also used to indicate that sports need not necessarily have a positive influence on reducing crime. According to Andrews and Andrews (2003), certain types of sports can have the opposite effect on criminals. Traditional, organized sports represent a small-scale replica of orderly society and contain elements such as strict rules, authoritative figures and competition that deter marginal youth. Hence adolescents who deviate from society are unlikely to feel attracted

by traditional forms of sport (Sugden and Yiannakis, 1982). In addition, sports will not have a favourable effect on the self-confidence and self-esteem of young people in all cases. Especially when sports entail competition or strict performance levels, it can result in the very opposite. 'Indeed for every winner there is a loser whose self-esteem and motivation will be affected' (Andrews and Andrews, 2003: 544).

Therefore various authors state that, in order to give sports a chance to reduce criminal behaviour, policy-makers should avoid overregulated environments. Sports must contain subcultural elements that attract subcultural youth, with little emphasis on competition, a focus on personally constructed objectives and a minimum of regulation. Preferable are those environments in which sports can be practised individually or in small groups. According to Sugden and Yiannakis (1982) 'outward bound' activities best meet these conditions. They provide delinquents with the opportunity to successfully resolve problematic situations by overcoming physical hardships in relatively non-competitive settings. These types of relatively unstructured activities enable everyone to raise their self-confidence, not just those who do well in sports.

Based on extensive literature research, Coalter (2005) comes to the following conclusion:

Available evidence suggests that outreach approaches, credible leadership, bottom-up approaches and non-traditional, local provision appear to have the best chance of success with the most marginal at-risk groups. A needs-based, youth work approach may be more appropriate than a product-led sport development approach. (2005: 31)

This implies that local facilities that are locally embedded, properly guided and not characterized by the imposing structure of traditional clubs, are likely to be an effective strategy. Local youth's playing fields could fit within this strategy, albeit subject to conditions. Within two or three of the theoretical mechanisms that specify an effect of sports programmes, they could act as an active ingredient.

The preliminary theory

Our initial discussions with the local policy-makers revealed that, in their eyes, there were two active problem mechanisms: *boredom* and *negative role models*. Since the two neighbourhoods offered too little distraction for young people, they started to hang about, seek excitement and get up to mischief, which ultimately led to a behavioural pattern in which nuisance and crime had become commonplace. In addition, the policy-makers believed that the younger children looked up to the older youths as role models. Children copy the behaviour of their peers, but since the older peers mainly showed negative behaviour (due to the first mechanism), the role models were negative. This would increase the risk of young people getting caught in a cycle of nuisance and criminal behaviour.

The policy-makers believed these problem mechanisms could be blocked by offering alternative ways of spending time and – as an extension thereof – offering alternative role models. The sports fields were the means to that end. We agreed with our discussion partners that this assumed effect could be illustrated through two (C)MO schemes (Figures 1 and 2). The C is in brackets as thus far the policy theory had not yet accounted for the role of context.

Armed with these schemes, we started our search for confirmation, refutation and qualifications. As stated previously, we explicitly asked our discussion partners to respond to these schemes (and, in due course, the adjustments therein). For the discussions with young people themselves we incorporated the basic ideas into the structured interview. During this research, we learnt facts and insights

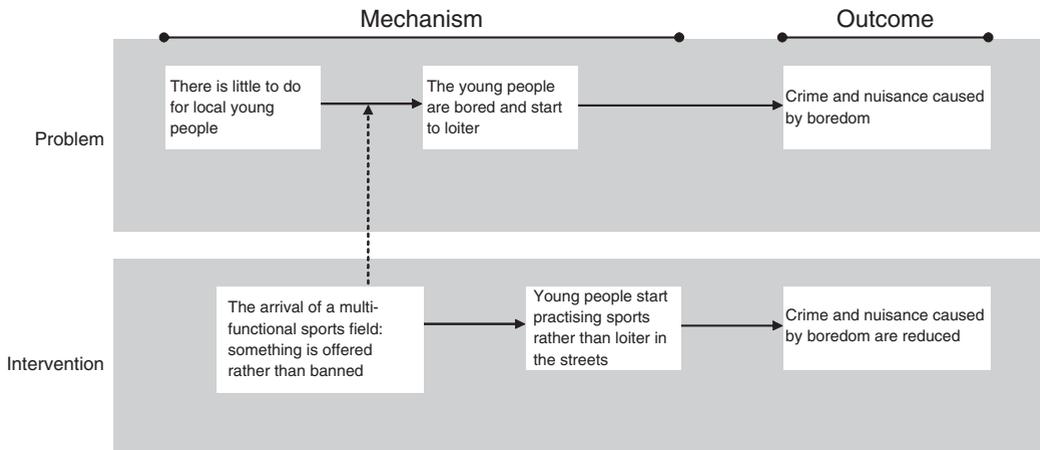


Figure 1. CMO scheme of boredom

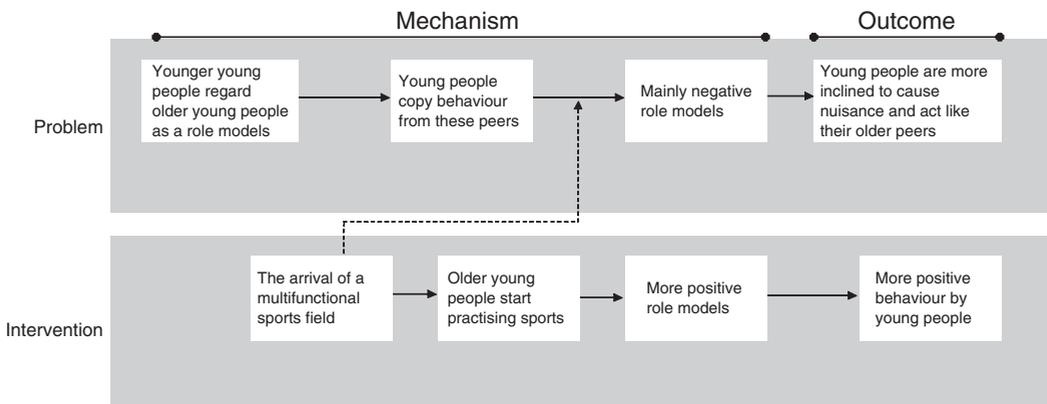


Figure 2. CMO scheme role model

into various aspects of the theory that necessitated modifications of the theory. Here we present the balance of these modifications, divided according to Outcomes, Mechanisms and Contexts.

Method

In order to find out how the sports fields performed, we collected data using different methods. First, we conducted extensive desk research. We studied all the relevant policy documents of the municipality with regard to the project ‘Youth and Safety’ and the multifunctional sports fields. In addition, we collected and analysed statistical data from areas A and B. Examples include demographic data, police records and data from a local residents’ survey.

Subsequently, the interviews with the various stakeholders were of major importance, as they taught us about the varying perceptions of the performance of the fields. In addition to municipal

policy-makers, we spoke to welfare workers, youth workers, local coordinators (who deal with problems of safety in the neighbourhoods), local police officers, a shopping centre caretaker, members of the residents' association and the chairman of the shopkeepers' association. A total of 15 people were interviewed. We also observed young people aged 12 to 20 at both fields on multiple occasions and, if they agreed, asked them to answer to a structured questionnaire. A total of 20 young people were interviewed in area A and 14 youths in area B.

All interviews with our informants were semi-structured. This means that questions could be clarified at all times, enquiries extended and that questions could be added or skipped. Interviewees were provided with a maximum of background information about the research in order to create mutual understanding and to ensure the answers would be more coherent. Following each interview, an intervention CMO scheme was created, which was subsequently presented to the next respondent. He or she could reject the CMO scheme, agree to it or specify it further. This way the teacher–learner cycle was completed in a dynamic fashion.

Modifications of the theory: outcomes

We began by checking the available statistics for clues to see if the sports fields performed as expected. The police records showed a diffuse, but partly sobering picture (see Table 1). Since the arrival of the field, crime in area A had risen rather than fallen. This applies to both the number of juveniles apprehended and the number of juvenile cases forwarded to the judicial authorities (for possible further prosecution). In contrast, however, the number of nuisance reports received in the year the field was opened did show a significant fall and has remained steady in subsequent years. In area B, the picture is more or less the same, albeit more ambiguous with regard to crime. The number of juveniles sent to the Public Prosecutor has risen, whereas the number of juveniles apprehended has fallen. Since the arrival of the field, the number of reports of nuisance has clearly fallen.

Causal inferences on the basis of these statistics are of course uncertain, but it seems that the sports fields have had a positive effect on nuisance in the local neighbourhoods. This is also reflected in the interviews with the parties involved. They conclude that nuisance has been strongly reduced since the arrival of the fields. For crime – the more severe outcome – there is no evidence in that direction. This corresponds to the results of the literature research, which also conveys a strong sense of doubt in the ability of sport and sports facilities to counteract more severe forms of misbehaviour. Our discussion partners confirm this doubt. The hard core of loitering

Table 1. Youth care and Crime areas A and B

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Area A					
No. of apprehended juvenile suspects (aged 12 to 17)	17	15	22	17	24
No. of juvenile suspects sent to the Public Prosecutor	18	21	23	32	49
No. of reports of nuisance	77	45	42	41	43
Area B					
No. of apprehended juvenile suspects (aged 12 to 17)	10	22	15	7	6
No. of juvenile suspects sent to the Public Prosecutor	13	29	15	17	33
No. of reports of nuisance	83	96	81	75	54

Source: Police Records, 2008.

The squares mark the presence of the fields

youth in area B, which is closest to committing crime, does not practice sport at the field, but just ‘hangs out’ there. The local police officer noted that previously this ‘hard core’ were the strongest in their claims that there was nothing for them to do in the area. He now asks himself whether this group wants to do anything at all, because now that the field is in place they still do not act. The local welfare worker endorses this view and concludes that ‘this solution does not catch the real criminals’.

Therefore, our first modification is that the outcome of the policy theory must be reassessed. The sports fields can play a role in reducing nuisance, but they cannot reasonably be expected to be as effective in fighting crime.

The observations of our discussion partners are also important for another reason. Although the figures show more or less the same pattern for both areas, the policy-makers were under the impression that the field in area A performed better than in area B. The reason can be found in the different use of the fields. In area A the field is mainly used as a playing field, whereas in area B it (also) served as a place for the hard core of youths to hang around. This move to the field did lead to less nuisance reports in the local neighbourhood, but did not bring about an improvement in the atmosphere. This impression of our discussion partners is confirmed by the data from the local residents’ survey. The 2006 survey results showed that a larger proportion of residents felt occasionally unsafe in area B compared to residents in area A. The main reason for not feeling safe is ‘the (loitering) juveniles and/or youth’. In area A it appears that none of the young people previously causing the worst nuisance have ever been spotted on the field.

Modifications of the theory: mechanisms

The assumption that the playing fields lead to a reduction in boredom is confirmed by the interviews with practitioners and with young people. Young people conceive the fields as an alternative to boredom. Practitioners indicate that, since the arrival of the fields, the local youth has been given something to do. The fields act like a magnet and young people move to it *en masse*. They not only come to practise sports, but also to meet friends, to see and be seen, or to hang about. The fields provide young people with *their* place in the neighbourhood.

Although the mechanism of the role model was thought to be plausible by our discussion partners, concrete evidence substantiating its operation is lacking. Nobody knows whether, since the arrival of the fields, fewer young children are following their older peers down the wrong path or indeed, whether young children are copying behaviour at all. Furthermore, it was concluded that the adolescents on the field in area B hardly represent a positive role model for primary schoolchildren, since they do not practise sports, but smoke and drink alcohol instead. Although they do not appear to cause much of a nuisance, they cannot be held up as an example. Our conclusion is that the CMO scheme ‘role model’ had too little credibility to justify a place in the policy theory.

In keeping with this conclusion, a new mechanism surfaced during the course of our research: *reducing confrontations*. Youths loitering or playing football in the streets readily come into negative contact with the local residents. These confrontations can easily escalate into an exchange of abuse, arguments or other threatening situations, and in any case result in the local residents perceiving young people as highly annoying. Due to the arrival of the sports fields, young people no longer play football in the streets and this has shifted the centre of playing and loitering in the public domain from the neighbourhood to a specific location. As a result, the risk of a direct confrontation between young people and the public has been reduced. Thus the *experience* of nuisance at least will be affected. This new mechanism, converted into a CMO scheme, was endorsed by a majority of our discussion partners.

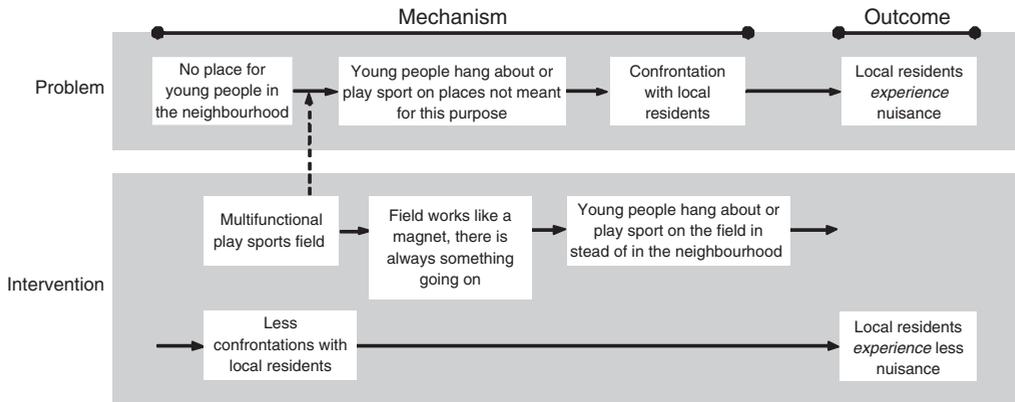


Figure 3. CMO scheme reducing confrontations

Modifications of the theory: contexts

As indicated before, the view that the field in area A performed better than the field in area B was widely held by our discussion partners. This is because the problem in area B has been shifted rather than solved. The adolescents loiter around the field instead of practising sports on it. This raises the question as to why the usage of two such similar fields could be so different. After our interviews with the different groups of stakeholders, we were able to identify the following contextual factors.

The user groups

A criminal, hard core of youths can be found in area B. A multifunctional field appears not to make much of a difference to this group. Such sports fields can only make a contribution to minor forms of nuisance, like those that prevailed in area A.

Local supervision and involvement

The residents in area A are more actively involved with the field than the residents in area B. An important aspect here is that the field in area A was an initiative of the neighbourhood itself, whereas the field in area B was initiated by the municipality. Furthermore, the informants indicated that area A is a working class neighbourhood where people know each other and are prepared to make a positive contribution to the local community, whereas area B is a modern, anonymous neighbourhood where social control is weaker, allowing nuisance caused by youths to escalate more easily. Area A benefits from a residents' association that conducts surveillance of the fields and regularly organizes events. In addition, the primary school uses the field, the vocational training centre 'Sports and Exercise' is involved and the shopping centre makes an occasional contribution in the form of sponsoring activities. The involvement and the supervision appear to contribute to the success of area A.

Location

The fields in both neighbourhoods are at some distance from the houses, as a result of which the local residents are not inconvenienced by noise and other overflows from the fields. This is important since tolerance levels towards young people are generally low. However, the field in area A

offers better access than the field in area B. Young people in area B need to cross several roads in order to reach the field, whereas the field in area A is located directly on the outer ring road of the neighbourhood. Additionally, the field in area A is located in open surroundings, allowing everyone to see what is happening on the field. By contrast, the field in area B is more hidden behind trees, allowing for less social control.

Matching needs

Finally, the informants indicated that the facilities must meet the wishes and needs of young people in order to motivate them come to the fields. These wishes and needs can differ according to neighbourhood and age group, as essentially they are social processes. Depending on the preferences of a small group of leaders, diverging patterns of how leisure time is spent can easily occur between the neighbourhoods. It is quite possible that such dynamics play a role in this case too. Practising sports clearly did not have a priority among the adolescents in area B.

These differences between the two fields are contextual factors that are crucial for the intervention to have a proper effect. They do (or do not) trigger the mechanisms of the policy theory. To be more precise: matching with needs and a susceptible user group seem critical for the ‘reducing boredom’ mechanism to occur. Location and local supervision are likely to be essential qualifiers for the ‘reducing confrontations’ mechanism. Combined in this way, these factors complete the CMO schemes.

Conclusion

Realistic evaluation has crystallized into an accepted method of evaluation and studies are gradually becoming available in which this method is more or less applied. However, our search for articles with ‘realistic evaluation’ or ‘realist evaluation’ in the title or the abstract did not yield any examples in which the whole process of the teacher–learner cycle had been completed.

We *did* complete our research and demonstrated that it is a feasible and valuable process. We were further helped by the fact that our subject, the effect of young people’s playing fields in a Dutch community, is a limited and practical subject. This undoubtedly facilitated the implementation of the recursive process of the teacher–learner cycle. Hence, also for this element of realistic evaluation, it is yet to be demonstrated that the approach can also be applied to more complex policy programmes (cf. Pedersen and Rieper, 2008).

In this case we feel rather confident that the exercise has provided us with a substantially improved CMO theory for the explanation of the fate of the playing fields. From the realist perspective, i.e. that the primary goal of evaluation – and science in general for that matter – is *understanding* what has happened (Manicas, 2006), this seems worthwhile. Although the procedure has led to a better and more balanced final result, it is not just the final result alone that counts. We believe the steps taken in that direction have also been valuable and enlightening. Virtually all realistic evaluations we have encountered only present the result in the form of the final (or single) CMO scheme. This is to be deplored, because we can also learn from ideas that, in retrospect, appear to have been less effective. Explication of what was rejected, modified and contextualized can help in the process of theoretical understanding, particularly because it focuses the attention on events and circumstances in which the general principle does not apply. It is *this* insight that is needed to accumulate knowledge in the sense of families of CMO configurations (middle-range theories) that are more or less stable and (re)cognizable (Pawson and Tilley, 1997).

We started our teacher–learner expedition by confronting the concept behind the youth’s sports fields with the literature. This exploration demonstrated that the ideas of the local policy-makers

had some credibility. 'Reducing boredom' and 'role models' were accepted principles on which the sports fields could build. The literature did, however, clearly communicate scepticism with regard to their chances of fighting real crime. Sports programmes are often powerless against crime, sports fields no less so. 'The physical layout of gangland provides a realm of adventure with which no playground can compete', say Sugden and Yiannakis (1982: 26) when summarizing this scepticism. This was also one of the first results of our teacher–learner cycle. Within areas A and B, crime did not fall (on the contrary), whereas nuisance did. This confirmation of the tenor of the literature would have remained hidden, if we had solely concentrated on the final CMO scheme – the reduction of nuisance.

The fact that the sports fields do have the ability to reduce nuisance can be partly explained by the boredom mechanism. The fields provide young people with something to do and offer them a place in the neighbourhood. However, as became clear from our discussions with the practitioners and young people themselves, it must be accompanied with a more social element. Nuisance is not a unilateral process, but the result of social dynamics. It is a process of action and reaction, in which young people and local residents are caught in a vicious cycle of annoyance, conflict, anxiety and incomprehension. The complementary mechanism ('reducing confrontations') that formulates this insight contains an element of the vicious cycle which we adopted from labelling theory. We regarded this mechanism as an enrichment of the initial policy theory. The third potential mechanism, that of the role models, did not receive much support from our discussion partners, although it was prominent in the literature and in the minds of the policy-makers.

Since our research was completed, the development of sports fields has become still more popular. In the Netherlands and other European countries, the co-called Cruyff Courts, named after and realized through the initiative of the great Dutch football star, are advancing quickly. In addition to their recreational purpose, the explicit objective of these fields is social integration. (For further information go to www.cruyff-foundation.org.) Some years from now, a (realistic?) evaluator will conclude that the results of creating these sports fields vary widely. At least, that is what our results foretell. Even for our practically identical fields, the contexts have shown to be crucial. This calls for some sense of modesty. Politicians can embrace grand ideas and academics can specify appealing mechanisms (such as the examples we found in the literature), but in the end the devil is in the detail. Or – to paraphrase the expression of the 'killjoy' – the killer is in the context.

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Marije Nanninga graduated in Sociology at the University of Groningen in 2006. The reported research was conducted during an internship at the Mulier Institute, Centre for Research on Sports in Society. At present she is a senior researcher at CAB, company for policy research and consultancy in the Netherlands. Address: CAB, Martinikerkhof 30, 9712 JH Groningen, The Netherlands.

Arie C. Glebbeek is Associate Professor of Sociology. At present he is also Secretary of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV). His specialty fields are the labour market, socioeconomic policy and the school-to-work transition. Address: University of Groningen, Department of Sociology, Grote Rozenstraat 31, 9712 TG Groningen, The Netherlands. [email: a.c.glebbeek@rug.nl]