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**Author:** Coskun, Begum  
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6. General discussion

The study reported in this thesis was started following a request from the board of a network of collaborating secondary schools in The Hague, the Netherlands that is responsible for the Rebound facilities in this city. Rebounds offer temporary (approximately three months) shelter to students with behavioral and educational problems that are so disruptive and so difficult to handle that available in-school support services do not suffice for these students. By receiving these problematic students Rebounds help to restore or maintain a positive school climate for the students and the teachers of the referring school. A second goal of Rebound facilities is to prepare the referred students for a return to their school, or for placement in another school. Rebounds provide students a second chance rather than removing them from school permanently.

The board wanted to know to what extent Rebounds reach the group of students for which Rebounds were established in the first place, viz. students with externalizing problems who disturb teachers’ instruction and students’ learning. In addition, they wanted to know whether or not referred students benefit from being send to a Rebound. For addressing the first question we analyzed profiles of referred students. We also analyzed disproportionality in referrals, i.e., whether or not immigrant children have a higher chance of being referred than national students, and leisure activities of referred students and their non-referred peers. The latter was done to not only look at the role of schools for students’ school adjustment, but also at students’ lives outside school. For analyzing whether or not Rebounds are beneficial to referred students, we compared the behavioral development of referred students to regular students who had behavioral problems comparable to the problems referred students had at the moment of their referral.

Rebound Students

As stated earlier most students referred to Rebounds are characterized by externalizing problem behaviors, particularly disruptive behaviors and verbal violence offences. Our analyses, in addition allowed to distinguish two groups of students: those who, next to externalizing problems showed internalizing behavior, motivation, and learning related problems and those who combined their externalizing problems with persistently truant behaviors. Although students mostly were referred through a regular placement procedure, the second group were students who frequently were referred through crisis procedures. This suggests that schools feel less in control when dealing with this group, which is a likely consequence of students’ truancy.
We also found that disciplinary practices directed at students referred to Rebounds are rarely instigated by serious offences, but usually by disruptive offences and attendance issues. This concurs with earlier studies (DeVoe et al., 2004; Frick, 2004; Munn, Johnstone, Sharp, & Brown, 2007; Ofsted, 2005; Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Furthermore, we found support for disproportionality in school disciplinary measures. Most Rebound students were male with an immigrant background. In our analyses these male immigrant students appeared to have a higher chance to be send to a Rebound than their national peers. The threshold for sending immigrant students to a Rebound may be lower than the threshold for their national peers. In any case, the average reported behavioral problems of immigrant students in Rebounds were less severe than the average reported behavioral problems of national students in Rebounds, even when controlling for respondents’ socio-economic status. These findings concur with earlier studies on disciplinary practices in the US (Bryan et al., 2012; Skiba et al., 2011; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008) and clarify that race and gender remain significant predictors of referrals. Furthermore, the findings resemble those among incarcerated youth in the Netherlands, where Moroccan Dutch youth are found to be incarcerated for relatively lighter offenses than Native Dutch youth (Veen, Stevens, Doreleijers, Van der Ende, & Vollebergh, 2010). These findings are suggestive of discriminatory practices. Hitherto, however, this cannot be concluded. Alternative explanations may be that the referred immigrant students come from schools were the policy states that students need to be referred to Rebounds quickly, immigrant parents may be less likely to protest, let alone effectively protest, a Rebound placement of their child, or the referral of immigrant students may be due to behaviors not adequately captured by the questionnaires used in the current study (cf. Skiba & Rausch, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011). Future studies should address why immigrant students in the Netherlands are more likely to be referred, even when the referred population of immigrant students reports fewer problems than the referred national students.

As expected, referred students reported lower school adjustment. In addition they were involved less in structured leisure participation and were less engaged in family activities than their non-referred peers. Family activities were found significantly related to school engagement. In line with this are several studies that demonstrate the developmental benefits of shared family meals among adolescents (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; Fulkerson, Story, Mellin, Leffert, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2006). These findings seem to underline that schools may be capable of helping students to improve their chances of a prosperous and healthy future, but that they “cannot compensate for society” as depicted so eloquently by Bernstein (1970).
What Works?

Our evaluation study suggested that Rebounds are not more effective for Rebound students than the regular school program is for non-referred at risk students. Specifically, Rebounds did not reduce students’ cognitive distortions, externalizing behavior and antisocial behaviors. Precisely to achieve such behavioral changes Rebounds use the EQUIP program; a cognitive behavioral intervention. EQUIP aims to teach antisocial youth to think and act responsibly through peer-helping and skill-streaming methods (Gibbs, Potter, & Goldstein, 1995). The peer-helping method is based on the Positive Peer Culture (PPC) model (Vorrath & Brendtro, 1985) aiming to change negative peer pressure into a positive peer culture through targeting mutual responsibility by helping and learning from each other (Gibbs et al., 1995). The skill-streaming method is based on the Aggression Replacement Training (ART; Goldstein & Glick, 1987), with a strong component of restructuring behavior accompanying cognitions of antisocial youth. We expected that EQUIP, as an important building block of Rebound programs, would have had a stronger impact. A variety of reasons may explain these disappointing results. First, EQUIP is an intensive program and the fidelity of implementation is a real challenge. We could not systematically study the implementation of EQUIP in the participating Rebounds, but received signals suggesting that many students did not participate in the complete program. This is partly due to Rebound specific processing of students; students may start whenever the referring schools no longer can and know how to cope with a student (i.e., emergency or crisis placements) and may leave when better needs adapted support is required and available from other institutions. It is also important to note that the study conducted by Helmond, Overbeek, and Brugman (2012), found no moderating role of program fidelity in the reduction of cognitive distortions and recidivism, not even when a program fidelity booster was used. Second, Rebounds realize a concentration of students characterized by behavioral problems. This concentration may be conducive to an intensification of behavioral problems, through mimicking, mutual support or the creation of a social climate sympathetic to boasting about as well as conducting problematic behaviors (see for example, Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). The negative impact of the concentration of problematic youths is possibly stronger than the positive consequences of participating in EQUIP. Third, although most students referred to Rebounds are characterized by externalizing problems, a considerable proportion is characterized by other problems like, internalizing problems, learning problems and motivation problems. EQUIP is not adapted to the specific needs of these students. Finally, as indicated in the preceding section, students sent to Rebound lead challenging lives that go beyond the school. They lack well-structured lives and support from parents and other family members to participate in common, constructive activities. It could well be that neither schools, nor Rebounds and EQUIP can compensate for these suboptimal
resources for emergent adults’ development and social participation. Comparable disappointing findings were recently reported in a study on the effects of the EQUIP program with incarcerated, antisocial youth in the Netherlands (cf. Brugman & Bink, 2011; Helmond, Overbeek, & Brugman, 2012).

We did, however, find family time-spending to be positively related to school adjustment. This was the case for Rebound students as well as for students in regular schools. Family routines or shared family activities, particularly with adolescent involvement, so far received little attention in family research (Crosnoe & Trinitapoli, 2008; Roche & Ghazarian, 2012), but showed clearly positive relationships with adolescents’ academic achievement (both test results and school grades), positive expectations of adolescents’ about educational success (Roche & Ghazarian, 2012) and adolescents’ overall social adjustment (Lanza & Taylor, 2010; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). Perhaps, these findings hints at a necessary shift of focus in a needs adapted educational approach for youth with behavioral problems.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This thesis was based on cross-sectional designs which only offered correlational data. Though we used valid instruments, for some of the reported differences we can only speculate about the explanations. This dissertation would have benefitted from more in-depth qualitative observations that might have given us a better grasp on the potential explanations of the findings reported. Furthermore, this study, would have benefitted from direct observations of referral procedures and EQUIP sessions to get a more differentiated picture of selection and decision making processes in action and what these entail for interactions between students and school staff and possible cultural bias in inclusion and exclusion practices. Overall, this would have allowed for being more precise on whether or not the Rebounds included in the study properly and fairly serve the population for which they were established. Due to limited time to conduct the study and to the Rebound staffs’ refusal to allow us to observe during EQUIP sessions, we had to limit ourselves to self-report questionnaires instead. Knowing that self-reports have limited validity (Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescorla, 2002), we corrected as much as possible for potential biases by using well validated instruments, used and investigated frequently in Dutch and ethnically diverse youth samples.

This study could not investigate longitudinal behavioral changes. This is a rather common methodological challenge that scholars face when studying the effects of alternative education programs, like Rebound. Not only is the collection of extensive follow-up data time consuming and expensive, but, particularly in alternative education programs like Rebound students’ untimely entries into the program and early exits, make longitudinal data collection a daunting effort (cf., Cox,
As a case in point, in the current study we lost track of more than half of the Rebound students due to truancy, early transfers to (new or the same) mainstream schools, and referrals to external youth care services or juvenile youth centers. Future studies should attempt to achieve long-term follow-up records, for instance, by arranging good contacts with regular schools, youth care institutions, youth correctional facilities and potential employers of behaviorally challenging youth.

**Implications**

Alternative education programs like Rebound run a high risk to function as ‘dumping grounds’ for challenging, disruptive students (e.g., Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009; Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Moreover, as shown before, they are prone to disproportionality in referrals (e.g., Skiba & Rausch, 2006). This is likely to be a transactional process in that it increases the chances to be evaluated as ineffective and unfair (Van Acker, 2007). Nevertheless, most students in alternative education programs, like Rebounds, are referred due to disruptive externalizing behaviors (Lehr, Tan, & Ysseldyke, 2009). This means that schools are challenged by very real problems and in need of a program that serves as a ‘relief valve’. Rebounds have this function. If policymakers, administrators, and school staff decide to continue Rebound facilities, it is important to rigorously and continuously evaluate students’ progress and staff satisfaction (Tobin & Sprague, 2000), both as conditions for improvement of the programs and to make sure that students and staff feel safe and get from the program what the program is promising. Furthermore, through monitoring and continuous evaluation the chances decrease for ‘unfair’ treatment of referred students.

A second implication is linked to the finding that a minority position plays a role in disciplinary practices in that immigrant students had a higher chance of being referred while reporting less externalizing behavior than their national peers. Perhaps teachers are more likely to refer immigrant students, because they tend to evaluate their behavior in a more negative manner. To reduce this risk, schools are well advised to use school-wide positive behavioral support intervention programs (SWPBS-programs; cf. Fallon, O’Keeffe, & Sugai, 2012; Sugai & Horner, 2002; Vincent et al., 2011). This type of program aims to prevent maladaptive student behavior by ensuring all students that they are part of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices. This means that students as well as staff is continuously monitored for well-defined behavioral standards, and that discipline referrals are collected in a common and easily accessible, but well protected web-based registration system, and are evaluated carefully (Sugai & Horner, 2002). The fact that both in the US and in the Netherlands we found cultural minority students to be disproportionately affected by disciplinary referrals, suggests that next to improving the validity of
referrals, training teachers to be more culturally responsive to students’ learning and developmental needs, may further improve the quality of alternative education programs (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Monroe, 2005; Singleton & Linton, 2006, Vincent et al., 2011).

Thirdly, as stated before, this study has led to doubts about the validity of referrals to Rebounds. Rebound did not change students’ cognitive distortions, externalizing behavior and overt and covert problem behaviors. It is questionable whether Rebound facilities are adequate for all referred students. First, we found in our profile analyses of characteristics of students in Rebounds a group of students having difficulties with learning and their motivation for learning. Although, these characteristics were related to externalizing behaviors, the results suggest that underlying problems differ between these and other referred students. Rebounds may be less effective for these students. Rebounds have a strong focus on behavioral interventions, but are weak in their educational curricula and resources for adequate instruction and learning support (School Inspectorate, 2007). Students who have problems in coping with learning and the achievement challenges that school confronts them with, would likely benefit more from special educational tracks within or outside schools, than from Rebound. These students lose effective learning time in Rebounds.
References


