What explains enhanced psychological resilience of students at VMBO schools in the Netherlands?

The Positive Deviance Approach in Action.

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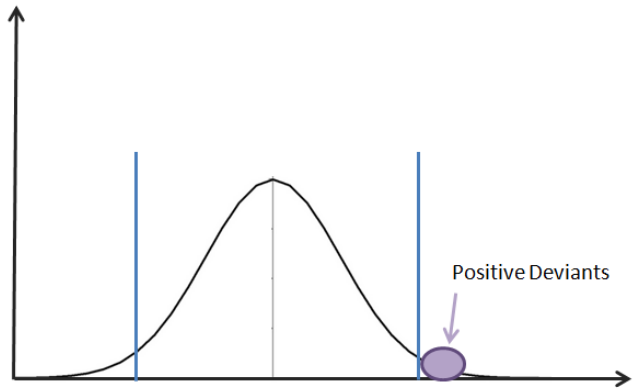
Positive Deviance approach

The Positive Deviance (PD) approach to social change is an innovative method that enables communities to discover the health wisdom they already have and to act on it. The premise of PD is that in every community there are certain individuals or institutions whose uncommon behaviors or practices enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers who have access to the same resources. The behaviors and practices of these individuals or institutions are 'positive' because they are doing things right, and 'deviant' because they engage in behaviors and practices that most others do not (Singhal, 2011).

This first large-scale PD project in the Netherlands by the Center for Media & Health in collaboration with the Rotterdam-Rijnmond Public Health Service, Trimbos Institute and The University Texas at El Paso sought to identify positive deviance practices that enhanced psychological resilience among students of Rotterdam's VMBO schools who hailed from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority immigrant groups (Center for Media & Health, 2011).

Figure 1: *Positive Deviants are positive outliers*



The assumptions underlying a Positive Deviance project are based on a highly different inferential logic than what undergirds the logic of randomized control research designs with a pre-post control group. The positive deviance approach challenges social change practitioners to think outside of dominant frameworks. A PD project is an action-based research undertaking which is based on gathering data, especially with a focus on identifying positive outliers. In a positive deviance approach researchers are interested in the small group of people who deviate positively from the norm (mean value) and who do something which the majority does not do (see figure 1). While the normal curve valorizes mediocrity, the PD approach values the practices of those of the exceptional outliers, seeking to learn from what makes them succeed beyond their means (Singhal, 2013a).

PD values the gifts and capacities of ordinary people and institutions and in doing so it relocates where expertise lies in a community (in our case, the three PD VMBO schools in Rotterdam). PD emphasizes practice instead of simple awareness and knowledge as the route to change. It focuses on "how" (how some schools accomplish better mental health outcomes) instead of the "what" or "why" (Singhal, Buscell, & Lindberg, 2010). Unlike the best practices approach, PD interventions are designed in a way so that institutions and individuals can "act one's way into a new way of thinking rather than think one's way into a new way of acting" (Pascale et al. 2010, Singhal et al. 2014, Singhal & Dura, 2009).

Psychological Resilience

The Netherlands are the home of 16.864.852 million people (CBS 2014a). Around 1.011.617 of them are aged 12-16 (CBS, 2014b) of which 22 percent (CBS, 2012c) follow an educational track at a VMBO school. VMBO schools are preparatory vocational training schools mostly with students from a lower socio-economic status and/or a migration background.

Depression and anxiety disorders are a central problem in the Netherlands. Almost 7% of Young people aged 18-24 suffer from depression disorders (NJI, 2010). On average there are five to six

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students in a class who suffer from depression disorders (Van der Zanden & Van der Linden, 2013). There is a pressing need for innovative interventions, practices, and methodologies to enhance the psychological resilience of adolescents, especially among minority immigrants who hail from low socio-economic status.

The overall aim of this PD project is to identify positive deviance practices that enhanced psychological resilience among students of Rotterdam's VMBO schools who hailed from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority immigrant groups. That is, what helped them deal better with the stresses and anxieties that are a normal part of life. The aims of this PD project are:

1. To identify 'positive deviant' schools and discover already-existing psychological resilience practices among students in VMBO schools in Rotterdam who hail from lower socio-economic backgrounds and minority immigrant groups.

2. To discover the 'micro behavioral practices' of teachers, students and other staff members which help to enhance psychological resilience and mental health at the PD schools.

3. To amplify and promote the wider adoption of these PD micro behavioral practices to enhance psychological resilience in other VMBO school communities in Rotterdam, where students are not coping so well.

The PD research project here focuses on PD behaviors at the institutional level (PD schools) and the individual level (PD micro behaviors of individual actors e.g. teachers, counsellors, students, parents, etc). We use the term 'micro behavior' as in PD it is not uncommon to find that small behaviors at the individual level usually make a big difference at the institutional level. Usually, these behaviors can be adopted without access to any specific extra resources in a PD process that involves self -discovery and "acting one's way" (Pascale, Sternin, & Sternin, 2010).

Data Collection and Analysis to Identify the PD schools

To identify the PD schools the research team determined various inclusion criteria, which lead to the following PD research question:

Are there VMBO-B and VMBO-T schools in Rotterdam which have more than 150[1] students, which have more than 50% students with a migrant background, which are situated in a deprived neighborhood, which do not have access to any other special resources and which are highly mentally resilient (i.e. score of 10 or less on the SDQ data scale)?

To analyze which of the 52 VMBO schools in Rotterdam meet these inclusion criteria, the following instruments were used:

1. The *Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) scores* as part of the Youth Monitor Research in Rotterdam.
2. The *number of students* per school was researched on the internet, or telephone calls were made to the various schools.
3. *The percentage of students with a migrant background* was measured through archival data provided by the Rotterdam -Rijnmond Public Health Service.
4. Whether a school is situated in a *deprived neighborhood* or not was measured through the postcodes and the 'Social Index System' of the city of Rotterdam (Gemeente Rotterdam 2012).
5. Whether a school has *access to extra resources* or not was researched in collaboration with the Rotterdam-Rijnmond Public Health Service, a close collaborator of VMBO schools, especially when it comes to wellness.

To measure the mental health of students the Youth Monitor Research (YMR) in the Netherlands utilizes a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). With this standardized SD questionnaire, issues such as behavior problems, hyperactivity or problems with peers and family members can be identified. The PD research team used the data of 2009/2010 and 2010/2011[2] to identify the PD schools. The average score on the SDQ is 16 points. The higher the score, the lower the psychological resilience and the higher the rates of anxiety and mental health problems. The scores of all students are summed up for each school. Schools which scored 10 points or lower (lowest score is 8) on the SDQ were considered as PD schools.

These criteria were fulfilled by eight schools (out of 52) in total.

With respect to the criteria -- 'number of students at school' -- the desktop research showed that one of those eight schools had less than 250 students (also see footnote 1).

All eight school had more than 50% students with an immigrant background. In general Rotterdam can be considered as a region where a lot of immigrant families live. Four out of the eight schools had 85-100% of students with a migration background. Many of them have a Moroccan and/or a Turkish background.

Four of the eight schools were not situated in a deprived

[1] During the cross-check this PD criteria was changed from 250 to 150 students to not exclude some moderately sized schools.

[2] For the PD schools an extra cross-check in the years 2011/12 and 2012/13 was carried out to ensure that the positive trend continued to the most recently available data.

Table 1: Overview mean value of SDQ-scores (2009/10 and 2010/11) and inclusion criteria VMBO-schools

VMBO-school #	Mean Value SDQ-score (2009/10 and 2010/11)	Number of students (more than 150)	Percentage of students with a migration back-ground (more than 50%)	Deprived neighbor-hood	No access to extra resources
1	8.0	X	X	X	X
2	9.0	X	X	X	X
3	8.0	X	X	X	-
4	9.0	X	-	-	X
5	9.0	O	X	-	-
6	9.5	X	X	-	-
7	10.0	X	X	X	X
8	10.0	-	X	-	O

X =yes, - = no, o=not known

neighborhood, thus those four schools were excluded from the PD school selection. The PD research team also closely looked at the inclusion criteria of schools having access to 'extra resources'. For example, it was researched whether the schools are part of the 'Healthy School Program' or not. In this three-year Healthy School Program the schools get extra support to deal with topics such as bullying prevention, health nutrition or mental health. Four of the eight schools did not have any access to these extra resources.

Table 1 shows the VMBO schools in the years 2009/2010 and 2010/2011 that scored very high on psychological resilience (8 to 10 SDQ points) and met other PD inclusion criteria. On the basis of these criteria, three schools have been selected as PD schools (number 1, 2 and 7). These are the Mavo Delfshaven, the Libanon Lyceum and the Lucia Petrus Mavo.

Data Collection and Analysis to Identify PD micro behaviors

To identify the PD micro behaviors, the research team applied an iterative approach. First the Lucia Petrus Mavo was approached, followed by Mavo Delfshaven, and then the Libanon Lyceum.

The following research methods have been used to identify PD micro behaviors that may lead to a better mental health:

- In-depth interviews with staff members from the schools, students and parents;
- Participatory observations;
- Photo documentation;
- Informal interviews;
- Feedback sessions with the schools.

A total of 26 in-depth interviews were held at the PD schools: Lucia Petrus Mavo (N=10), Mavo Delfshaven (N=9) and Libanon Lyceum (N=6). The average duration of these interviews was 105 minutes. All interviews were transcribed word-by-word.

Several times, as warranted, role-plays were done between the interviewee and the researcher to discover and enact possible PD micro behaviors (see photo 1) .

Beside the in-depth interviews, group interviews have been done with students (N=5) at the Lucia Petrus Mavo and mothers (N=5) at the Mavo Delfshaven. In addition telephone talks have been done with mothers (N=2) from the Lucia Petrus Mavo.

While making visits to the three PD schools, the PD research team observed many situations of daily school life. Important information was gathered during and after class, in the teachers' room, during lunch breaks, and during social conversations inside and outside the school building. The PD research team made notes from all the visits and observations

at the schools, which were used for the data analysis to identify potential micro behaviors that helped enhance psychological resilience.

In addition to formal and informal interviews, photo documentation played an important role in this PD research project. Pictures can tell more than words. The PD team took photos during the visits at the schools, during the interviews, informal talks and other situations, to capture attributes of the ambient environment and detail the discovered micro-behaviors. At Lucia Petrus Mavo, 336 photos were taken, at Mavo Delfshaven 123 photos, and at Libanon Lyceum 172 photos.

The PD research team also organized feedback sessions with the staff members of the PD schools. During these feedback sessions, participants reflected on the micro-behaviors the PD research team had discovered, and clarified the details on several of them, adding and subtracting, as warranted.

The collected data from the individual interviews, photos, observational notes, and group interviews were qualitatively analyzed. The data were clustered into important topics for each PD school. The PD researchers made analytical notes and discussed these notes with the whole team of PD partners. Based on the feedback sessions with the staff members at the PD schools, micro behaviors with respect to mental health were approved, concretized, and/or deleted.

This PD project on mental resilience was also guided by process evaluation. All partner meetings during the project period were tape recorded and important decisions were written down. With this it was possible to trace back and monitor important decisions that had been made during the project.

Photo 1: Social worker on the right does a role-play with one of the PD researchers

Results PD Micro Behaviors

The PD research team discovered various micro behaviors of staff members, teachers, counsellors, and other personnel of the PD schools that contribute to the mental resilience of the students. At the three PD schools, 85 different micro behaviors were identified. In the following section, we outline ten most important micro behaviors which contribute to enhanced psychological resilience of the VMBO students and which are replicable.

PD micro behavior #1:

The concierge welcomes students every morning at the entrance (Photo 2). He does this to make meaningful interpersonal contact with the students each day and to build trust with them. With this behavior, the concierge encourages students to arrive on time and enter the school building in an orderly manner every morning. When the concierge discovers any "strange" aspects to a student's behavior (a student trying to hide their tears, for instance), he contacts the mentor or team leader of the student. If students are late, they are admonished by the concierge. At exactly 8.30 a.m. the school entrance closes. Students who are too late, have to ring the doorbell to enter.

Photo 2

"I welcome the students each morning when they come in. A lot of them greet me. Others I know are not a morning person. They are more into themselves. Then it can happen that we give each other a quick smile." (Concierge)

PD micro behavior #2:

Mentors and teachers call parents on the phone not only when there are problems, but also when a student does something good. For example, when a student did a good job in welcoming new students and their parents during an "open school day," the parents were contacted to affirm the positive behavior of their ward. These positive affirmations have a rippling effects on parental and student engagement with school, including enhancing their sense of belonging.

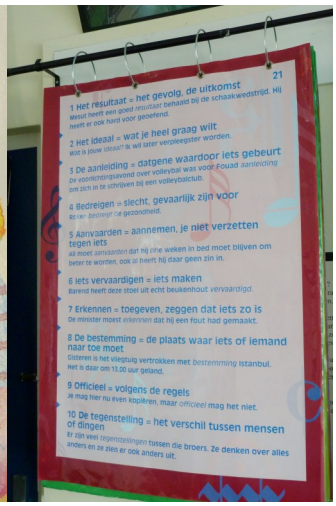
"Then we make a call and tell the parents how great their daughter helped, that she is a real talent. Of course parents like to hear those things and are surprised that we call." (Director PD school)

PD micro behavior #3:

School administration sends birthday cards (Photo 3) to all students via post. Also, there is an electronic information board in the main hall indicating which students and teachers celebrate their birthday on a given day. For other important events, such as graduation day (Photo 5) or Christmas, the students also receive a postcard, designed by the team leaders of the VMBO department.

Photo 3

Photo 4



"Last year shortly before graduation, one student said to me: I have my birthday in two weeks. Do I also receive a card (although I will shortly graduate)? I said: 'Of course until the first of August you will receive a card. Until that time you are officially enrolled.' For the students it is very important to receive their birthday cards." (Team leader VMBO department).

PD micro behavior #4:

The social worker of the school creates a social matrix together with the student to understand the student's situation and their support system at home, at school, and with friends. In the social matrix he notes whether the student has a positive (++), neutral (±) or negative (--) relation with family members or peers. Once the matrix is

plotted, the social worker purposely chooses to focus on those social support systems that the student finds to be affirming. This strategy allows for the social worker and the student to develop trust and affirmative conversations.

"I create a social matrix to describe the situation of the students at home, at school, twith friends etc. It's a simple technique and gives a very good overview. I like to emphasize positive things when I have a conversation with the student. I also note extra information about the students, such as personal interests (e.g. being a fan of the soccer club Galatasaray). Next time when I meet the student, I can have a conversation with him about the soccer club". (Social worker)

PD micro behavior #5:

In the PD schools, the Muslim students (as most immigrants are) are allowed a free day to celebrate Non-Christian holidays. The non-Muslim students are invited on those days to do other social activities, for example bowling or watching a movie together. This creates mutual respect for each other's cultural and religious practices.

Photo 5

"We try to consider the personal needs of the students as much as possible." (Team leader)

PD micro behavior #6:

Staff members invest much time and energy in building interpersonal contact with the students: the team leader and concierge almost know all faces and names of the students. Personal dedication and attention seems to be an important attribute for staff members at the PD schools. This behavior is observed in the way individualized attention is provided.

"Of the 400 students at school… I know from at least 300 exactly what is going on in their lives. I mean, not whether they have had a bad mark in mathematics. But if something has happened at home, I can see it when I look at them, e.g. when a family member passed away." (Team leader)

PD micro behavior #7:

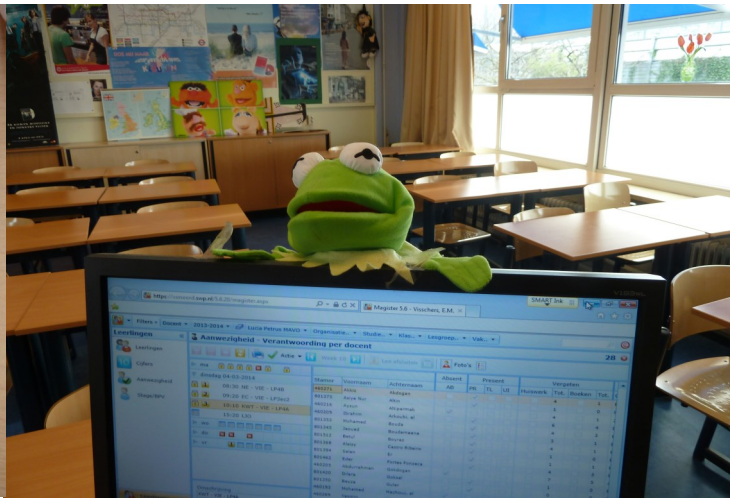
PD schools stay in close contact with shops and other neighborhood establishments, where students may go during break time. If students misbehave at these locations, team leaders are directly informed by neighborhood shop managers, and immediate action is taken.

"This is part of our monitoring system. The students know that if they misbehave in a shop, they have to spend their breaks for some days or a week inside the school building." (Team leader)

PD micro behavior #8:

School career tutors, who have a Turkish or Moroccan background, play a key role in engaging parents/mothers in school activities (especially as many of the parents hail from the same background). Mothers are invited for morning meetings to discuss specific topics of interest i.e. dealing with adolescence or ongoing trends with youth and social media. Most mothers of the students have problems with the Dutch

Photo 6



language. In the PD schools, the school career tutors with a Turkish or Moroccan background are always available during such meetings to welcome the mothers, make them feel at home, and to help them express themselves in the Dutch language.

"The language barrier makes it difficult to have contact with the school. I am mainly surrounded by people who have the same (Moroccan) background. Not long ago I never spoke Dutch. Now I try to change this. I can speak better now, but I feel embarrassed, because it is not that good. The meetings with other mothers are a 'safe place' for me. I can speak Dutch and I have (language) support when necessary." (Mother)

Summary of PD micro behaviors (MB)

MB 1 Concierge welcomes students every morning at the school entrance.

MB 2 Parents are contacted by the school (also) when the students achieve positive results.

MB 3 School administration sends (self-designed) cards to all students via post to congratulate them at various occasions.

MB 4 A social matrix is used to focus on the positive relationships and social support systems that the student finds to be affirming.

MB 5 Muslim students (as most immigrants are) are allowed a free day to celebrate their Islam holiday. Non-Muslim students are invited for outdoor school activities.

MB 6 The team leaders and concierges know almost all the names and faces of the students.

MB 7 The PD schools stay in close contact with shops in the neighborhood that are visited by students.

MB 8 Staff members are employed who are specifically responsible to involve parents/mothers in school activities. During these meetings Turkish and Moroccan speaking staff members help the mothers with the Dutch language.

MB 9 A handy system has been invented with metallic hooks to flip the language posters. In addition a staff member is responsible to flip the posters every week. Through these small acts (hooks and flips), the language poster program continues.

MB 10 Various classrooms are decorated to give them an informal and welcoming living room ambiance.

These and other micro behaviors that were identified in our PD research hold tremendous potential to enhance the psychological resilience and mental well-being of students enrolled in VMBO schools in Rotterdam and beyond.

PD micro behavior #9:

Many students at VMBO schools have problems with speaking, writing and understanding the Dutch language properly. That is why in Rotterdam a language poster program was started. Through flippable posters students learn 10 new Dutch words every week. These posters are an important part of the language-enhancement program. At one PD school the concierge improvised a handy system with metallic hooks (see Photo 4) to flip the posters, greatly extending their shelf life. In addition a staff member is responsible to flip the posters every week, so the class is ready for new words in a new week. Through these small acts (hooks and flips), the language poster program continues. In several schools, once the hole punches rip, the posters are unflippable, and the program stops.

"Every week the students learn new words. And every week we have a new language poster. This is important for us. We have a teacher at school who is responsible for the posters. I greet her every Friday afternoon, when she is turning around the posters." (Care coordinator)

PD micro behavior #10:

Classrooms are decorated jointly by the teacher and the students to give them an informal and welcoming living room ambiance. One teacher for instance, put (artificial) flowers on the table and paraphernalia from Harry Potter films are used to create a friendly atmosphere. Students also collected bonus points in a supermarket scheme to get the teacher a stuffed animal for the class room (Photo 6).

"With the flowers in the classroom I want the students to feel at home and to have a nice environment while teaching." (Teacher and Person of trust)

Photo 7: PD feedback session at the Mavo Delfshaven

Reflections and Lessons Learned

This first large-scale Dutch PD research project delivered many interesting results and insights. Some reflections and lessons learned include:

A positive approach gives positive energy: The PD schools participate in many ongoing studies and evaluations and as they usually focus on "deficits," schools often are told "they have to do better." This time it was the other way around. The schools received the news that they are positive outliers with respect to enhanced mental resilience of their students. This PD project gave them much energy. Despite their busy schedules, directors, team leaders, teachers, mentors, concierges, social workers, study career tutors, health coordinators, students and mothers actively participated in the PD research project. Further, staff members spent extra time and energy in spreading the results of the PD research, including publishing the report on their website, and participating in the final meeting for all the VMBO schools in Rotterdam. The PD schools are inspired through this new approach.

PD is not deductive hypothesizing: The PD approach flips upside down the traditional research approach of proposing a deductive hypothesis and testing it. During the PD research it was a constant challenge to let go of the old paradigm and to purposely 'think' and 'act' in the new PD approach. Questions were raised such as: "how do we know for sure that the results deliver a contribution to the mental health of the students?" A PD inquiry does not tend to answer the hypothetical deductive question a priori. It focuses on the discovery of *what* works, and is not preoccupied *why* it works.

Mixed Method Granularity: In PD projects, often Discovery and Action Dialogues (DAD) are employed to discover the PD micro behaviors that make the difference. In this research the decision was also made to do in-depth and informal interviews in addition to participatory observations. Such allowed us to obtain verbatim transcriptions, allowing us the kind of "deep dive" that PD calls for. In the growing PD literature, there are few studies that go into such depth at the level of micro-language, made possible by micro-probing of interviewees, which yields finely granular insights. Some of this granularity also emerged out of the photo documentation carried out in the PD schools. This was sometimes a real challenge because not all the students and teachers (specifically with a Muslim background) are amenable to being in photos. An essential prerequisite for carrying out photo documentation rested on building a trusting relationship with students, staff, and teachers.

Holistic approach with respect to school performances: The PD schools invest a lot of time and energy in their students and in their mental health. However, the schools are mainly evaluated by the national school inspection on other outcomes such as school grades and graduation rates. During the present research it became clear that a preoccupation with grades and graduation rates may take away time from activities that are critical to the mental health of the students.

Positive 'Deviance': During the project, the PD team in the Netherlands experienced that the term 'deviance' can have a negative connotation in different cultural contexts (also see Pascale et al. 2010; Singhal et al. 2010). The PD team dealt with this issue by translating 'positive deviance' as 'positive exception'. This term was easily appropriated and adopted by the PD schools. They took pride in letting other stakeholders know that they represent a 'positive exception' among VMBO schools in Rotterdam.

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The PD Approach of the Center for Media & Health in the Netherlands - project related links:

Center for Media & Health Website
http://www.media-health.nl/projects/positive-deviance

Positive Deviance interview with Martine Bouman:
http://vimeo.com/album/2526589/video/75217996

Positive Deviance interview with Arvind Singhal:
http://vimeo.com/album/2526589/video/74929562

Positive Deviance Workshop 2012, Center for Media & Health, Gouda, the Netherlands:
http://vimeo.com/album/2526589/video/57925188

Positive Deviance Workshop at the Netherlands Organization for Health Research and Development (ZonMw) November 2012:
https://vimeo.com/101492136

PD Project item in Drum Beat:
http://www.comminit.com/global/content/utilising-positive-deviance-approach-enhance-psychological-resilience-amongst-adolescent