

About the Equip Program as a communal program in Holland and other countries.

This article is not written with the pretention of being overall complete. This is a brief overview of some of the activities with the Equip program and the ideas behind it to use 'The Equip program' as a communal method in Holland.

1. Introduction

Welcome to this text. Let me first introduce myself: I am a social psychologist and drama teacher; I am a qualified psychologist and director.

As an Equiptrainer I have taught the past ten and a half year teachers and youth care workers in Holland (and other countries like for instance Hungary, Estonia, Belgium and Ukraine too) to train the youths (for a big part also youngsters in "youth prisons") the Equip Program. I am also a kind of supervisor: after I trained the youth care workers and teachers I supervise them in the training of the youths. I think the English word 'Equip' is clear in itself: providing someone with necessary skills. In this article I will describe the stages of Kohlberg, Equip as an group approach (2), Equip as a communal method (3.1.), the four thinking errors (3.2.), the three main parts of the Program (4.1.-4.4.) and I will give a conclusion (5.) for the equip Program as a prevention method at the end.

As you might know Equip (or 'the Equip program' –also 'Equip for Educators-') is a method used in the USA for some years to equip anti social and criminal youths with social skills and correcting their thinking errors. They are trained and equipped (so from there comes the title: 'The Equip program') with these skills to prevent them to roofoed once they are out of jail: to prevent recidivism. Research indicated that youngsters who got an Equiptraining in a closed institution had a recidivism percentage of 15 %; clients who did not 40,5 %. (Leeman e.a., 1993) You can say that the chance for a client to fall back after an Equiptraining is three times as small in comparison to a client who did not have Equip.

This program provides the youngsters who are training with a new perspective. The first time (in FC Teylingereind, the closed institution –in other countries mostly called 'a youth prison'- which started the Equip Program in the Netherlands) I spoke to a group of the youngsters here in Holland this idea of perspective was the thing that appealed to the clients the most: 'If it prevents me from coming back here I really want to do it' one of the clients said and the other youngsters agreed. In this sense the Equip program for educators also can work as an prevention method. Scientific research to the effects of the 'Equip for Educators Program' is currently being done by the University of Utrecht in Holland.

2. Equip and Kohlberg, the group approach.

Equip is a group or communal approach: the youngsters help each other to make social correct decisions. With the students I often made comparisons with soccer: you are trained for the match, but once you play the match you have to make your own, right decisions as a team. When you are send out, (because of foul play for instance) you are worthless for the team. With the Equip training it is the same: you are working together as a team and you support each other. When you fool around or de-motivate the others you can get a 'time-out': you stay out until you are motivated again.

The clients are 'equipping' either in closed settings in groups of 7, supported by 2 trainers, a youth care worker and a teacher. Or as a prevention method: they are in a class of 20 till 30

students, trained by one teacher. I am currently training and sometimes also supervising the teachers of some secondary schools in Holland who are working with the ‘Equip for Educators’ program.

Communication is a very important thing in the Equip Program, the cork on which the Equip program is floating. ‘Respect is in the Equip Program the basis of our communication’. In some of the closed youth institutions/ youth prisons this is also the base for a communal approach. The language is the same so the discussions between the youngsters (and the youth care workers) are having the same, communal ideas.

Respect for every particular individual, youngster or teacher. Scientific research showed that it is possible with specific programs to enhance the moral development of the adolescents. An institution or school with a stimulating moral climate is – according to Kohlberg- an institution characterized by a strong feeling for community and a fair decision making. (A fair decision is a decision through arguments, that does justice to someone after fair unbiased weighting out the rights of all people involved.)

In such a community there is also time for a discussion about the norms and moral considerations based upon of the equivalence of every individual. Equip wants to stimulate this discussion and certainly also the moral development also in schools and closed institutions.

Kohlberg states that there are six stages of moral development

	Stage	At approximately age
▪ <u>Preconventional</u>		
Obedience and Punishment (conscience external)	1	0-5
Individualism, Instrumentalism (negotiating)	2	5-11
▪ <u>Conventional</u>		
„Good boy/girl“ (mutual respect)	3	11-16
Law and Order (contributing positively)	4	16-20
▪ <u>Postconventional</u>		
Social Contract (achieved by few)	5	20 and older
Principled Conscience (achieved by fewer)	6	20 and older

Considering the age of the students, they should be arguing at stage 3. We can see in scientific research (a.o. Brugman and Aleva, 2004) that children who are in youth prisons and tend to be more anti-social are more often using arguments at stage 1 and/or 2, compared with their peers.

3.1. Equip as a prevention method.

Mostly, the Equip groups consist of about 5 till 10 youngsters and two trainers of the institute/ youth prison. The sessions are mostly held during day time and last for 1 hour, mostly 3 or 4 times a week, sometimes even more, sometimes a bit less.

With some of the founders, I think the idea of Equip as a communal program is a good one. The ‘correct yourself in thinking errors’ part is the part of the program which trainers can quite easily learn their students. If done thoroughly and systematically the youngsters can correct their own thinking errors. Correcting their own thinking errors will keep the youngsters out of trouble, out of problems (for which the Equip program uses 12 problem names) so also out of anti-social and criminal activity. The best way to invite the youngsters to talk about thinking errors is, to my opinion, tell them of your own mistakes (in the past for almost everyone certainly, but maybe also in the present) and be honest about the thinking errors connected to your own mistakes. For instance about your own addictions to smoking. I often use the example of the illegal copying of software and CD’s.

A lot of grown-ups are doing this in Europe, so I ask the adults who have to work with these youngsters and whom I train in the Equip method why they are doing this. They often say things like: 'everybody does this'; 'it is much cheaper this way', 'you can download it from internet' etc. The next step is then talking with the adults I train about the 'walk your talk' idea. If you are doing these illegal things yourself, how can you expect the children you train not to do these things?

I often compare this with smoking: the effect of non-verbal language is often stronger than saying to your children: 'do not smoke'. When you are smoking as a parent, the children who see you smoking will regard this as 'example behaviour' and even if you say that it is not good to smoke, will have a tendency to follow your behaviour and not the things you say. So in this situation of smoking this is quite clear, but there are a lot more situations with the wrong 'role model' behaviour. So one thing that prevents criminal things to happen is good model behaviour in every sense. And when you are behaving 'bad' yourself (like smoking or illegal copying or whatever things you might do) the best thing to do is being honest about it. Do not tell, in the example of smoking that you can quit any moment and that smoking is not that bad. You better tell that smoking is bad, that you can get lung cancer from it and that you are addicted and can not stop it. By being honest about it you at least will give a good role model in honesty, so you won't tell and teach children to lie about it. This also will give you as the Equip trainer the change to start an honest discussion with the children about these subjects. The more you discuss these kind of false arguments and the more honest you can be about these yourself, the better the Equip program can work as a prevention program.

The 'equipping as a discussion and communal method' is done in a highly structured program with four different 'steps'. The four steps are: 1. The mutual help meetings 2. Anger management and correcting thinking errors 3. Training the 10 most important social skills 4. Moral education by social decision making

Before we begin with the equip training of the youths the trainers are taught to give them this training. This happens in series of 'simulated Equip meetings'.

In this series of simulated Equip meetings the trainers are pretending that they are the youngsters so the others can exercise themselves as trainers. Video is used to give each other a good feedback. As some of the trainers can have a tendency to 'overact' the youngsters' behaviour this is quite a good exercise. When they practised as trainers with the 'role-playing' students they said that the training was harder sometimes because: 'we played the youngsters in their most impossible moods'.

About the four different steps:

The first step is the **mutual help meeting(s)**. This is maybe the most communal part of the meetings. In these meetings the youngsters can bring in their problems and talk about it. Or we can play a game with thinking errors with the youths to exercise. (For instance 'the Equip millionaire game'.) The second step consists of ten different meetings about anger management and the correction of thinking errors. The third step is the training of the ten social skills which are the most important to them. The fourth step is the step in which they are making a grown-up, moral fair groups decision. Back to the mutual help meetings and the problems the youths tell about. These problems are subsequently classified as 1 of the 12 problem names as defined by the method:

1. **Low self image**
2. **Inconsiderate of Self**
3. **Inconsiderate of others**
4. **Authority Problem**

5. Easily Angered
6. Aggravates others
7. Misleads Others
8. Easily Misled
9. Alcohol or Drug Problem
10. Stealing
11. Lying
12. Fronting

The first three are the general problem names. When you say that you have one of the other 9 problems, you always should know which one of the main three problems names you have also. It can well be that you will have more than two problem names.

3.2 The four thinking errors

When the youngsters know that their problems can be classified this way we can work towards changing them. The Equip method says that you get these problems by making one or more of these thinking errors:

- 1. Self centered (the most important and general thinking error.)**
2. Minimizing/Mislabeled
3. Assuming the worst
4. Blaming others

In the mutual help meetings or in the thinking error game, the youths learn that they are making these thinking errors and that, because they are making these thinking errors they do things they should not do. When advancing in equip the youngsters learn that they can think differently and that by thinking differently they also can act differently. For instance: when you get pushed by someone they learn not to think: *'I have to defend myself'* but: *'I am not going to die when someone pushes me'*. This last form of thinking can prevent you from getting into fights.

To get back to the example of illegal copying of CD's and software: if someone says things like: 'everybody does this'; 'it is much cheaper this way', 'you can download it from the internet' etc. you as an Equiptrainer have to discuss these arguments as thinking errors. The 'it is cheaper' argument is being purely self centered; the 'everybody does it' is assuming the worst and blaming others and 'you can download it from the internet' is also blaming others. For smoking: 'it is not that bad' is of course minimizing it and an argument like 'I won't get old anyway and you have to die of something' is assuming the worst and being self centered too. Getting back to the thinking errors over and over again is supposed to get these thinking errors into the heads of the youths in such a manner that this will help to do the right things and prevent them from getting into trouble. So in this way it can work as a communal and a prevention program. The communal idea is especially that you create the same language and the same way of thinking in your youth prison. Some of the closed institutions/youth-prisons I know in Holland even know 'youth-councils' in which all kind of issues about the institute are being discussed and this thinking error language and way of working can be very helpful. This is also helpful in consequently developing the same language between the youth-care workers themselves and between the workers and the youngsters. The idea of mutual help, (deriving partly from the Alcoholics Anonymous groups) thinking errors and problem names can be an ideal starting point for a communal approach in youth prisons/ closed institutions.

Equip then continues with the three next steps:

1. Anger management and correcting thinking errors

2. Learning social skills
3. Learning to make a fair social decision (moral education)

4.1. Anger management and the correction of thinking errors

Anger management consists of ten steps during ten different meetings:

1. **Evaluating anger/ aggression:** re-evaluating, re-labeling, anger management (not eliminating anger.)
2. **Anatomy of anger (AMBC)** Self talk (mind) as a source of anger. Early warning signs (body). Anger reducing self-talk.
3. **Monitoring/correcting thinking errors** Gary's Thinking Errors exercise. Daily logs.
4. **More anger reducers** Deep breathing, backward counting, peaceful imagery. Anger reducers to 'buy time'.
5. **Thinking ahead to consequences** thinking ahead or if-then thinking. Types of consequences (especially for others). TOP (Think of the Other Person)
6. **Using 'I' statements for constructive consequences** 'You statements' (Put downs. threats). Use of 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements.
7. **Self-evaluation** Self evaluation, self reflection. Talking back to thinking errors. Staying constructive.
8. **Reversing** things you do that make other people angry. Reversing exercise (correcting Blaming Others error)
9. **Self as victimizer** Victims and Victimizer exercise. Consequences for victims. One's own victimization is no excuse for victimizing others. TOP (think of the pain your actions have caused others)
10. **Victimizer and grand review** the mind of the Victimizer exercise. Conclusion of how to deal with anger and consciousness raising.

4.2. The second of the three remaining steps: social skills

The social skills part is a training which consists also of ten different meetings:

1. **Expressing a Complaint Constructively** Think ahead what you'll say, etc. say how you contributed to problem
2. **Caring for someone Who is Sad or Upset** Notice and think ahead. Listen, don't interrupt. 'Be there'.
3. **Dealing Constructively with Negative Peer Pressure** Think, 'Why?' Think ahead of the consequences. Suggest something else (less harmful).
4. **Keeping Out of Fights** Stop and think. Think ahead to consequences. Handle the situation another way.
5. **Helping Others** Think, 'is there a need?' Think ahead how to help, when, etc. Offer to help.
6. **Preparing for a Stressful Conversation:** Imagine ahead your feelings, the other's person's feelings (TOP). Think ahead what to say. Think ahead how the other person might reply.
7. **Dealing Constructively with Someone Angry at You** Listen openly and patiently. Think of something you can agree with, say the person is right about that. Apologize or explain, make a constructive suggestion.
8. **Expressing Care and Appreciation** Think if the person would like to know you care. Think ahead what you'll say when, etc. Tell the person how you feel.

9. **Dealing Constructively with Someone Accusing You of Something** Think of how you feel, tell yourself to calm down. Think if the accuser is right (TOP) if the accuser is right, apologize/make restitution; if wrong, say it isn't true, it's a wrong impression, etc.
10. **Responding Constructively to Failure** ask yourself if you did fail. Think what you could do differently. Decide, plan to try again.

These are the ten social skills (from the Goldstein, one of the founders of the Equip program, list of about 50 social skills) from which the youngsters are profiting the most, also in preventing them from getting them in to anti-social and criminal behaviour.

Learning these social skills goes in four different stages:

1. Understanding the social skill because it is shown to them
2. Try to do the social skill by role playing
3. Improving the social skill by the feedback you get on your behaviour
4. More fine-tuning and generalisation by exercising this new learned skill in different challenging situations.

The students should use and fill in a Social Skills Practice Sheet, on which is written a task they should do between the meetings and they can score how well they think they have done a certain task. This sheet they take with them to the next meeting so we can see which social skills the clients can exercise in more challenging situations.

Furthermore the students learn then to do these social skills in steps. For instance when the social skill is:

Expressing a complaint constructively: 1. Identify the problem 2. Think ahead what you'll say 3. Express your complaint 4. Make a constructive suggestion

Here we can also see that these social skills are at the same time a very good starting points for a more communal approach in youth prisons. When the youngsters are for instance more able to express their complaints more constructively then we have a better chance for communal solutions when there are problems in the institutions.

4.3. The third step (and the fourth step overall) are the meetings in which the group makes a just social decision.

The goal of these meetings is to train the youngsters in making a grown-up, moral fair groups decision. By doing so the members help each other in their moral development They do so by talking about different problem situations. This talking starts by answering questions about the problem situation. For instance:

Alonzo is walking along a side street with his friend Rodney. Rodney stops in front of a beautiful new sports car. Rodney looks inside and then says excitedly, "Look! The keys are still in this thing! Let's see what it can do! Come on, let's go!"

What should Alonzo say or do?

1. Should Alonzo try to persuade Rodney not to steal the car?

Should persuade/ should let steal/ can't decide (*circle one*)

2. What if Rodney says to Alonzo the keys were left in the car, that anyone that careless deserves to get ripped off? Then should Alonzo try to persuade Rodney not to steal the car?

Should persuade/ should let steal/ can't decide (*circle one*)

Etc. The youngsters should answer these questions for themselves and then talk about why they answer differently, if they answer differently. The experience with Equip in the USA and Holland is that the youngsters in the Equipgroups the majority, most of the time give the right answers. (For the youngsters in closed institutions in Holland, this is not always the case.) When in this example 4 out of 7 say that Alonzo should convince Rodney not to steal the car then this is the communal base to have a discussion. With an example like this it is easy to see that the students will correct each other, because mostly, 'even' in youth prisons the majority has the right idea. As an Equiptrainer you are there to lead the discussion the way the majority can convince the minority. Of course the youngsters sometimes do not think in majority right. Then, as an Equiptrainer, you should compliment and stimulate the minority to convince the majority. Of course there can be times that you will not succeed in this. Then be patient, because is also developing along the path of the group dynamics: first the group is formed, then they are storming against each other. The next step will be laying out norms (as a trainer and/or teacher you will support the positive norms) and the end will be a positive group or maybe a positive institution or youth prison of you are doing your work carefully. But this can take some time, so work good on a good communal start and be very patient and work step by step!!

In these discussion about choices it is not only the answer the youngsters give, but also the argumentation that matters. Sometimes a client can give an unfair answer for an understandable reason. In an Equip situation where the family is poor and the son deals drugs to give the family a better income one of the youths in an Equipgroup can say for instance: 'It is not that bad he is dealing because his family depends on his money, he is giving them a living'. Or students can argue that they do not want to 'betray' one another. (As a trainer you can then start the discussion about when are you honest, what is honesty and what is betraying?) When you can lead the discussion back to the thinking errors you have again the communal base to talk about these situations and to arrive at a positive, communal conclusion.

4.4. Stages of the meetings in which the group makes a just social decision.

Given this kind of arguments the youths can have a discussion where you'll find most of the time that the majority of the group can convince the minority with good arguments. The idea is also that once back in the society the youngsters are strong enough to withstand peer pressure and keep their just opinion.

The goal of the meetings to make a just social decision is to make this decision as unanimously as possible.

In this meetings you can discern four stages:

1. Introduction of the specific problem situation
2. Helping to cultivate mature morality

3. Remediating moral development delay
4. Consolidating mature morality

In every equip situation these four different stages have to be dealt with. As a trainer you have to be able to time these stages. More specifically there are some sub stages in every one of the four stages:

1. Introduction

- Remind the group of the ground rules for discussion
- Make sure the group understood the problem situation
- Relate the problem situation to the group members' everyday lives

2. Cultivate mature morality

- Establish mature morality as the tone for the rest of the meeting

3. Remediate moral developmental delay

- Use more mature group members and the list of reasons to challenge the hedonistic or pragmatic arguments of some group members
- Create role-taking opportunities in other ways as well

4. Consolidate mature morality

- Make positive decisions and mature reasons unanimous for the group
- Praise the group for its positive decisions and mature reasons

(In general:)

- Were all group members interested and involved?
- Was constructive value found in every serious group member comment?
- Was the *should* supported and relabelled as strong (e.g. 'Yes, it does take guts to do the right thing..')

The rules for every Equip meeting are: 1. Listen to what others have to say 2. If you criticize another group member, give that person a chance to answer 3. Never put down or threaten anyone 4. Stay on the subject when you disagree 5. Never talk to anyone outside the group about what is said in the group. You can add some rules if necessary for a strong communal start in you own youth prison or closed institute.

5. Conclusion:

As for Equip as a sort of communal program I can say that I have seen very wonderful things happening in the youth prisons and closed institutions where I trained the Equip program. Some trainers told me that the communal atmosphere in the group or even in the institute really improved. Youngsters told each other also outside the training groups which kind of thinking errors they made, which even makes the communal approach more firm. Also the institutes which were really enthusiastic about the Equip Program developed a formula for 'communal approach for the whole institute about Equip' in which I trained the whole staff also in thinking errors. Youngsters discussed the Equip thinking errors also in other groups and with other staff-members, sometimes even with their parents. The most important thing is that the youth prison really want to organise this well and that the management themselves are trained in the Equip Program and will put good efforts in trying to succeed with the program, despite some inconveniences in schedules and so on.

If the management is not enthusiastic the ground for the Equip program will be less firm. But with a very good management there was even an institute who made their own promotional material about the Equip Program. Scientific results for the Equip Program in the USA and the Netherlands show positive (USA) and promising (the Netherlands) tendencies.

An important thing as an Equip trainer is being honest about your own thinking errors and discussing these thinking errors openly with the youngsters as a good role model. Repeating the thinking errors in different ways over and over again can be very helpful to use the Equip program as a prevention method. A bit of a humoristic tone to go with these trainings can help, but the essential thing is also that these are serious subjects about which you have to talk in a very serious way also.

With these parts of the Equip program equipped the youngsters should be able to deal with their aggression constructively and be able to withstand group pressure from their peers. And while living their life they should be a bit more able to avoid getting in to trouble. If the Equip Program is worked out well you can have a really good communal program working in your youth-prison and a wonderful time working with (your) youngsters with this program!! Thank you for your attention, the very best and good luck,

© Drs. Jan van Westerlaak, psychologist and trainer in Europe.
(You can email me to: westerla@dds.nl)

(The Equip books can be ordered in English from the site of the research press:
www.researchpress.com under the E of Equip.)

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