Young Led Civic Initiatives Report WP1

1. Introduction

In September we started working at Het Atheneum Hasselt with a motivated class of 20 students. The active school lab sessions were developed and implemented by UCLL researchers Nele Kelchtermans and Chloe Mentens. The content was closely monitored by Ine Kemerlinckx, teacher of the class group. In the active school lab sessions we started by introducing concepts such as participation, children's rights, the levels in participation, the decision making bodies and their authority and so on. After this, the students themselves went to work in smaller groups to carry out a research at their own school to see what could be improved and if they have a say in it.

Using brainstorming activities, students listed what they thought could be improved at school or what they would like to get involved in. Themes that are picked here are mainly based on the wellbeing of their fellow students. This content also leans most closely to their own expertise and interests and is in line with their field of study. Research questions or problems that students are working on, seperated per group:

- 'Explore how to strengthen students' motivation to come to school.'

- 'Help or make sure that all students enjoy going to school.'

- 'To prevent or reduce stress at school.'

- 'Not all students are motivated. Why is it and how we can change this by taking a critical look at the current system.'

- 'We want to improve the psychological well-being of our fellow students.'

- 'We believe it is important for each student to have a positive self-image.'

For each group, these are the chosen research questions or statements that they will work on. Throughout the school labs they continue to work in these research groups.

2. Practical and feasible solution

They were guided in setting up a scientific study using a tips and tricks booklet that was prepared by UCLL. In this booklet, they found tips on how to search for scientific sources online and how to analyze

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them. Per group they determined a main research question and 3 subquestions. At the end of this research, they should obtain an answer to their main research question

For each sub-question, we drew up a research method they could use for this purpose. The following methods were recommended: an interview with relevant stakeholders, a large-scale survey, a literature review. Each group planned each recommended method to obtain an answer to their sub-questions. For example, in a study of current motivation in school, the main question is how to better motivate students at school.

The first sub-question is: 'How is motivation determined and what factors play an important role?' The students investigated this through a literature review. The second sub-question is: 'What is the current state of motivation in school at this time. They figured this out by conducting a large-scale survey among their peers. As a third sub-question, they wondered what already existing initiatives are in place at school to motivate their students. For this, they chose the method of conducting an interview with relevant persons in the school, in this case the principal. The answer to their main question is a combination of the various answers to these sub-questions.

They received the necessary support and feedback each time during the sessions. Time is also provided here to reflect, discuss obstacles and so on.

The input gathered from the surveys, interviews, and literature review is mapped by group and presented as a research paper. The literature review is mainly for information and inspiration, the interview and survey are mainly to check their ideas about actions with other actors in the school and with relevant stakeholders.

This is a listing of the statements for each group with a brief motivation of why this is important to them and in what way they want to fix/add/improve/solve it (methodology). Their proposed solution is also added.

'Make school fun again!' (Laura, Tristan, Arjuna, Celia)

- o The students state, based on their literature review, that not everyone is motivated at school. They want to find out if this motivation can be improved by making small or large changes in the education system. Such as certain content adjustments in different lessons so that they are more attuned to the lifestyles of the students or major adjustments such as a complete educational reform.

- o 1. Starting point
  - We want to reduce the negative impact of school on the mental well-being of our peers.
- o 2. What do we want to do to improve the current situation?

- We want to organize a talk hour where students feel safe and comfortable to express their feelings. We want to make this a positive experience. We want to do this by organizing activities and themes.
  - What? A talking workshop
  - When? Several times a year, 1 hour
  - Where? In class
  - Who? Students per class.
  - How? By creating a comfortable vibe to empower students to talk about their feelings or worries.
- 3. Who can help?
  - Students involvement
- 4. We should pay attention to:
  - Plenty of variety in activities and continue to motivate students to make it a positive workshop.
- 5. Arguments to convince the school board:
  - According to the students, the school influences their mental being in a negative way. We want to do something about this.
  - The students will feel safer and more comfortable in their own school.
  - The students' motivation will improve.

'Psychological well-being of our fellow students.' (Britt, Isolde, Hanne, Maxime)

- Partly because of corona, these students are concerned about the psychological and mental well-being of their fellow students. They want to investigate where students can go to with their problems and whether this is sufficient.

- 1. Starting point
  - How can we improve the psychological well being of our fellow students?
- 2. What do we want to do to improve the current situation?
  - Breaking the taboo of mental health. By involving people who have or have had mental health problems themselves. We want to let them talk about their experiences to make the subject open for discussion.
    - What? Invite people with psychological problems to have a small talk
    - When? During the seminar of 'push your limit's' (1hour) for every two weeks during 1 trimester.
    - Where? At school
    - Who? Young adults and adults who want to talk about their experiences
    - How? Involve students on a creative way. The experiences of the 'speaker' can be a theme that will be discussed in group.
- 3. Who can help?
  - School board to give permission

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- Stakeholders to bring us into contact with people who want to visit our school to talk about mental health
- 4. We should pay attention to:
  - It is important to have a clear communication between the schools and the goal of these activities should be well motivated.
  - What if we can not find enough people who are willing to talk?
- 5. Arguments to convince the school board:
  - Several studies show that people who tell about their own experiences can help others deal with their mental health problems.
  - It is also applied in other schools with success
  - It doesn't cost any money.
- 6. Step by step
  - Convincing and involving the school board(by the students) – Timing: during the webinar of 12th of march.
  - Networking and contacting potential people to invite at school – Timing (depends on Covid 19)
  - Involve the students who are interested to discuss the potential themas/ structure of the workshops - Timing (depends on Covid 19)

'How we can increase students' self-esteem.' (Anouck, Hellen, Tuur)

- We want to gain a view of the factors that currently influence their fellow students' self-esteem. Based on this, they want to initiate initiatives to improve the self-esteem of their peers.From personal experiences, these students can see that not every student has a positive self-esteem. Through a literature review, they gained a better understanding of the importance of a positive self-image. Based on a survey of their peers, they want to find out the main causes of low self-esteem and how their self-esteem can be stimulated. On the basis of interviews with confidants and the school administration they found out what actions already exists in the school to stimulate the self-esteem of their students.

- 1. Starting point
  - How can we improve the self esteem of our fellow students?
- 2. What do we want to do to improve the current situation?
  - Throughout the school building we want to place mirrors with compliments written on them. This can increase students' self love'.
    - What? Placing mirrors with different compliments on them.
    - When? As long as possible (and change the compliments every now and then)
    - Where? At school
    - Who? Students

- How? With lovely quotes (removable ink).
  - o 3. Who can help?
    - School board to give permission
    - Students to share their inspirational quotes
  - o 4. We should pay attention to:
    - Who is in charge of this project, how can we maintain this initiative?
  - o 5. Arguments to convince the school board:
    - It is only a minor intervention.
    - It brings a positive vibe.
    - There is nothing to lose?
  - o 6. Step by step
    - Provide the material that is needed (by the school) – Timing: anytime
    - Provide the quotes (by the students) – Timing: anytime
    - Attach the mirrors with quotes.

'What is the relationship between the educational level and student motivation?' (Luna, Lucca, Maithé)

- o Based on their literature review, the students state that, as time goes on, school becomes less and less loved. They took an interview with the studentscouncelors to ask their opinion. In their questionnaire, the students found out what the main cause is among students why they would not like to go to school. They also collected ideas of what the students think the school can do to change this.

- o 1. Starting point
  - What is the current state of our fellow students motivation? (To what extent is this influenced by the school system?)
  - The taboo between the different study directions.(There is little contact between the different fields of study, which creates prejudices).
- o 2. What do we want to do to improve the current situation?
  - An activity in which students of different study directions get to know each other and each other's interests.
    - What? A day filled with activities
    - When? Several times a year, during a whole day.
    - Where? Depends on the activities that will be selected
    - Who? Students from Hasselt, over the different schools. So as a student, you get in touch with students from other schools and with different interests/skills.
    - How? A working group will be formed across schools to determine the activity. Online, the opportunity is offered for all students to register.

- o 3. Who can help?
  - School board, teachers and students
- o 4. We should pay attention to:
  - It is important to have a clear communication between the schools and the goal of these activities should be well motivated.
- o 5. Arguments to convince the school board:
  - It should have a positive impact on the motivation of students to come to school
  - It should reduce the taboo that exists between different study directions
  - Students can learn new skills and insights in an interactive way…
- o 6. Step by step
  - Considering and drafting activities (by the students) – Timing (depends on Covid 19)
  - Involve the school board (By the students + school board) – Timing (depends on Covid 19)
  - Involve other schools (By the students + school boards- Timing (depends on Covid 19)
  - Spread the message and involve as many students as possible – Timing (depends on Covid 19)

'Motivation at school.' (Hailey, Romeo, Jutta)

- o At this school, students are given the several hours per week of free space. These hours are filled in according to the student's own interest such as: art subjects, drama, sign language and so on. However, according to the pupils, the choice is limited. They have done research on intrinsic motivation and are convinced that students will be more motivated to come to school if there is more attention for their own interests and talents. Based on their interview with the school board and survey among other students they want to know if it is possible to add extra options.

- o Their proposed solution is to get a clear idea of the interests of their fellow students and then based on this, see if it is possible to offer additional activities that the students can participate in during this free space.

'What impact does stress have on young people's lives and how to reduce it?' (Adna & Nermin)

- o The students of this group have the impression that many students experience stress at school. In a literature review they informed themselves about the different types of stress and how it is possible to prevent it. Based on their interview, the students found out what this stress among students is based on.

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o In an interiview with teachers, studentcouncelors etc they will make a lists of current initiatives at school to reduce or prevent stress and how they can add or improve initiatives against stress at school.

3.Actors involved

Students

The school sessions take place with a group of **20 students. They are very actively involved**. In consultation with the principal, we have been assigned this class that will work on both the school and the community labs during this project. The classgroup is in their second last year of secondary school and their main subject is human sciences. This is a theoretical orientation with a curriculum that focuses on subjects such as psychology, behavioral sciences, cultural sciences and so on. The class group is a close-knit group who are generally very motivated in school. The sessions take place during behavioral science classes.

They form smaller groups of 3 to 4 students in which they initiate their own research. In this research, they will look for, among other things, the current situation of their school. In most groups **a large scale survey** was done to find out the opinion of their fellow students. Each group chose its own relevant target group for the survey. This could be specifically one grade but it could also relate to all students in the school. **The surveys were successful and involved more than 300 students in total.**

Some research groups also chose to include the opinions of students from other schools in order to make a comparison. This makes that **dozens of students from other schools were also involved** in this study.

During the project, they keep their school and stakeholders informed by taking over the EducAction_hasselt instagram account.

Teachers and school manager

UCLL set the foundation for a cooperation with the Atheneum Hasselt and took the initiative for a possible collaboration. The principal of this school, Vanessa Oeyen, was very receptive and promoted the project within the school. She is also kept informed about the content of the project.

The sessions take place during behavioral science classes. Therefore, the content of the sessions was discussed in detail with Ine Kemerlinckx, the teacher responsible for this subject. The lessons themselves were largely taught by Nele Kelchtermans and Chloe Mentens, both researchers at UCLL but Ine Kemerlinckx provided feedback for the content of the lessons. She also monitored the quality and that the content was in line with the learning objectives.

Ine is present each time during the sessions. Between sessions, she also ensures that she can support the students in the research as needed.

To ensure the research has the intended quality, this research project is discussed during other classes. For example, for the subject Dutch they learned how to make a comprehensive summary. The students will be assessed on this research paper, so the students have to pay extra attention to their grammar and spelling. But also the layout and bibliography will be assessed. In their 'English class', students must write an essay. The theme for this essay is a summary of the research they conducted for the EducAction project. For the subject

In the research project, each group also applied the method of conducting an in-depth interview with relevant stakeholders. These stakeholders varied by group according to the purpose of the interview and the research topic. Relevant actors who were involved are; teachers, student supervisors, the school management, coordinators and parents. In the interviews, they want to look at the current state of affairs based mainly on these actors, what the existing initiatives are and how they can improve them. The students also already propose some solutions to map out their opinions.

During the webinar, all teachers will be invited.

Other experts

In the data analysis phase, we also engaged an internal expert from UCLL, Sebastiaan Jans, who is experienced in visualizing research results. In an active workshop, the students worked together with Sebastiaan to analyze and visualize their results from their surveys.

During the webinar, relevant experts will be invited (The community of Hasselt, other researchers, teachers and student from other schools, experts working on youth participation,...).

Conclusions

It was mainly important to give the students insight into the current structure of the school and to show that they themselves can play an active role in their own school. Because the students have worked with themes from their own field of interest, they are very motivated to bring the research to a successful conclusion. Because of the covid19 crisis it is somewhat less obvious to involve more stakeholders but the students manage quite well to form a nuanced picture about their themes. For example, during the large-scale survey, they noticed that the results were not always in line with their expectations; this indicates the importance of student representation. In addition, they also get to know their school better through the interviews with different actors within their school. This makes them more involved and gives them a better sense of responsibility.