Vocational schools as testing grounds for healthy behaviour

Enticing young people to adopt healthy behaviour is difficult. And even more so if they have a mild cognitive disability. With a 1.4 million Dutch Research Council (NWO) grant, WUR health scientist Kirsten Verkooijen's research team is going to work on this in four vocational training schools, together with pupils, teachers, and hopefully parents too.

In September, four PhD students from WUR, TU Eindhoven and Utrecht University will start working with pupils in the project Healthy LIFestyle for low liTerate teenagers (LIFTS). They will conduct trials using things like pedometers and challenges, to see how the pupils can be enticed to exercise more and eat more healthily. Mental health will also be addressed. Existing mindfulness apps might for example be adapted to see if they can contribute to wellbeing.

The researchers will start by discussing with pupils, teachers, healthcare advisers and parents, among others, what their wishes and needs are, says project leader Kirsten Verkooijen, associate professor in the Health and Society chair group. 'For example, if most children are brought to school by car, should we challenge them to cycle or walk?'

Challenge: involving parents

Verkooijen specializes in health education among vulnerable groups. 'One of the biggest challenges is going to be getting parents involved. About 30 per cent of the parents have mild cognitive disabilities themselves. They don't have a great network, and are not in the habit of going to sports clubs or eating a healthy diet. Traditional health education doesn't get through to them so effectively.'

Existing health curricula are not appropriate for these vocational schools. In five years' time, Verkooijen hopes to have a programme ready that is a good match. 'The vocational schools sector council is involved too, as are others such as the Special Heroes Foundation. They think this is important and, when we have our results ready, they will do their best to get them applied.' RL