This dissertation is about professionalism of youth care workers in institutional youth care and Bureau Jeugdzorg and their contribution to the quality and effectiveness of youth care. The quality of youth care is determined by the effectiveness of the youth care interventions, the professionalism of the youth care workers and the level to which the youth care organisations are capable of creating good working conditions for the youth care workers.

The aspects that determine the quality of organisations and the professional performance of the youth care workers are under-researched till now. This dissertation focuses on the youth care workers themselves and the conditions under which they do their job.

Personal and work characteristics of the youth care workers are classified by the Quadrant concept of Beutler et al. (2004) with which all relevant characteristics of youth care workers can be organized. The Quadrant concept divides these characteristics into two dimensions. The first dimension identifies characteristics attached to personal and work variables. The second dimension identifies objective and more subjective characteristics of the youth care workers. The Quadrant concept consists of four quadrants that form a combination of the above dimensions. These characteristics are first described (in Chapters 2, 5 and 6) and then the relationship is investigated with a) the quality and effectiveness of youth care (Chapter 3 and 4) and b) the well-being of the youth care workers (Chapter 5) and c) the quality of the therapeutic alliance (Chapter 6). In Chapter 5 we also pay attention to the conditions under which the youth care workers have to work and the effect these conditions have on their well-being.

Quality of the organizations is connected with a) involvement of the youth care workers in development, planning and implementation of the treatment program, b) involvement of the management with the performance of the intervention, c) the degree the organizations create material and personal conditions for the youth care workers, d) the stability of the organization and e) the degree to which the youth care workers get freedom and responsibility to adapt the intervention to the specific needs of the clients.

In Chapter 2 we provide an overview of the objective personal en work bound characteristics of the residential youth care workers and youth care workers at Bureau Jeugdzorg. This study shows that part of the youth care workers have a deficit regarding their educational level. Their average age is about 35 years and the average experience in their present job is 5,3 years. The study also shows that the more the career possibilities workers have, the longer they stay in their jobs. The explanation for this could be that youth care workers who stay longer in their jobs have more chances to get a higher job position. However, it is also possible that more career development possibilities result in a longer stay of youth care workers in their jobs. Career development perspective can bind youth care workers to the organization.
Chapter 3 is a narrative review of studies of youth care worker characteristics that may contribute to the effectiveness of youth care. A personality and competency profile of successful youth care workers can be described. Regarding the personality traits the youth care workers should be emotionally stable, extravert, open and agreeable. The competencies they need to possess are a) developing a warm and positive relationship with youth, b) creating a safe and structured living climate, c) activate, involve and empower youth and d) adequate communicative competencies. A narrative review cannot claim empirical evidence, because there are no quality demands on the research designs of the studies that where included, like there are in a systematic review or a meta-analysis. These profiles therefore need to be studied empirically.

Chapter 4 describes a meta-analysis to examine the effectiveness of institutional youth care over the past three decades. We compared institutional Evidence-Based Treatment (EBT) with non-institutional EBT, institutional Care As Usual (CAU) with non-institutional CAU, non-institutional CAU with non-institutional EBT, and institutional EBT with institutional CAU. Only the last comparison yielded a significant and small-to-medium effect. This indicates that institutional care is effective if evidence-based interventions are provided. Unfortunately, no staff characteristics are reported in these studies, so we remain uncertain about their influence on the outcome of institutional youth care.

Chapter 5 addresses the well-being of the youth care workers at Bureau Jeugdzorg and predictors of their well-being in the area of working conditions and personal characteristics of the youth care workers. Next to effective interventions and good working conditions, the well-being of the youth care workers predicts the effectiveness of youth care. The level of well-being of the youth care workers is for 41% accounted for the individual characteristics of the workers. Competencies like Therapeutic Offered Conditions (TOC’s), structuring, empowerment and communicative competencies are related to a higher level of wellbeing, just as resilience, emotional stability, and experiencing positive work conditions are. More years on the job, work pressure, the personality trait openness, taking over for colleagues who are at sick leave, organisation stress en experiencing negative work conditions are related to a lower level of well-being. Multilevel analysis shows that team characteristics explain 12% of the differences in well-being. Herein, the experience of the working conditions and work pressure are crucial. The team culture and the way of communicating within teams about these aspects are related to well-being.

Finally, chapter 6 describes the therapeutic relationship between the youth in institutional care and their youth care workers. The quality of the therapeutic relationship is for 32% explained by characteristics of the youth care workers, and for 12% by characteristics of the youth. The main part, namely 55%, is accounted for by unique aspects of the relation between youth and the youth care worker. The relationship specific aspects seem to be more important than the personal characteristics of youth and their youth care worker.
In this dissertation the Quadrant concept of Beutler et al. (2004) is used to structure the relevant characteristics of the youth care workers. All relevant characteristics are described in the four quadrants of this model. The subjective personal characteristics (quadrant C) are with emotional stability and resilience linked to the quality and effectiveness of youth care. This also applies for the competencies, belonging to the subjective work characteristics (quadrant D). Beside these personal characteristics working with evidence-based interventions are also crucial to effective youth care. Furthermore, effectiveness is determined by the well-being of the youth care workers; well-being appears to be influenced by personal characteristics of the youth care workers. Besides, also team characteristics, like team culture and positive communication in teams, predict the well-being of the youth care workers. However, the subjective characteristics seem to be most important, with exception of the therapeutic alliance, as the uniqueness of the relationship itself seems to be most predictive of a good therapeutic alliance.

In the general discussion some important themes that result from these studies are discussed. The main themes are the age – gender – ethnicity, educational level, experience, personality traits, and competencies of the youth care workers. Moreover therapeutic alliance, evidence-based interventions, working conditions, team culture are discussed. These seem to be the main themes in terms of their relation to the quality and effectiveness of youth care.

To conclude, effective professional youth care workers are emotionally stable and resilient, and possess relevant competencies. This contributes to the quality and effectiveness of youth care. Furthermore, working with evidence-based interventions and executing the interventions as intended contributes to their effectiveness. Finally, good working conditions and a positive team culture support the professionalism of youth care workers.