Flag System for residential youth care (RYC)

Report on implementation, outcome and satisfaction surveys

Summary

Introduction
In 2015 and 2016, during a test period of at least nine months, research was carried out into the RJ Flag System. This test implementation was part of a larger four-year project Healthy sexual behaviour in residential youth care that was carried out from 2013 to 2017 by a consortium consisting of: Accare Jeugd GGZ [Youth Care Regional Health Centre], Avans Hogeschool [University of applied sciences], Moviсie [Netherlands Centre for Social Development], Rutgers and TNO.

The aims of the project were:

- To further the legal capacity of (would be) professionals in RYC in relation to sexuality and sexual behaviour of young people in residential care
- To develop knowledge to successfully execute and implement the Flag System within organisations for residential youth care (RYC) and Higher Social Studies (HSAO).

The research was carried out by researchers from TNO and Avans University for Applied Sciences. It consisted of the following three sub-categories:

1. The implementation (how the Flag System is applied and used; has it been applied and used as intended? Which factors contribute or hinder the process?)
2. Outcome/realisation of aim (are the expected changes measured among the professionals concerned and in the departments?)
3. Appreciation/satisfaction in relation to the RYC Flag System (in how far are managers, group leaders and young people satisfied with the components and materials of the Flag System and its use?)

The research was carried out in the following types of institution:
- Youth and Parenting Support (care and coaching)
- Youth Care Plus (secure residential youth care).
- Youth Care Regional Health Centres [Jeugd GGZ] (for young people with serious psychiatric disorders).
- Orthopedagogical treatment centres (for youth with a minor intellectual disability).

In total, 12 institutions for residential youth care throughout the Netherlands took part in the research, each with one to five residential groups. The number of participating groups therefore amounted to 32 with in total 204 group leaders. All but one institution (Jeugd GGZ) worked with the standard version of the Flag System. For the research, the group leaders completed a questionnaire before the training (n = 180) and after the test period (n = 103). In total, 83 group leaders filled in both forms. There were also seven focus groups held in total with 57 people (group and team leaders). Managers from 11 different institutions were interviewed, and 16 young people from five participating institutions.

Results of the implementation research
In the implementation research a distinction was made between the introduction of the RYC Flag System (how the method was taken up in the organisation) and the implementation (how it was
used in practice in the groups). Introduction and embedding is a lengthy process. The internal project leaders who were responsible for implementing the RYC Flag System in their own organisation gave an average score of "six" nine months after the internal training for the implementation of the system within their organisation. Three of them found that the RYC Flag System was well embedded after the test period, but most thought that 'a lot still had to be done'. Project leaders as well as group leaders remarked that reorganisations, disturbance in the organisation and unrest in the group proved to be disruptive factors during the process of implementation.

The introduction in most cases consisted of providing a one-day internal training for group leaders of one or more groups. In some institutions, all staff were trained and the training was included in the training programme of the institution.

The implementation of the RYC Flag System in practice mainly consisted of applying the criteria of the system when judging situations that were considered to be potentially coercive. The 'language' of the RYC Flag System (allocating colours to behaviour) and theory behind the system (objective assessment on the basis of criteria) were widely applied. The RYC Flag System was, however, mainly reactively applied, especially in team consultation, in order to judge and jointly assess unclear situations more objectively. It was hardly used, however, as a methodology to discuss sexuality with the young people themselves and to teach them to assess situations more objectively.

How much influence the personal characteristics of the group leaders, organisational factors and characteristics of the context (the institution, policy, etc.) have on the implementation was also researched. Personal experience with sexual coercive behaviour or sexual violence sometimes played a role when assessing and discussing the sexual behaviour of young people, as well as anxiety about personal inner conflicts and conflict with colleagues. In focus groups the fear of 'being judged' was also mentioned: if a girl became pregnant or if another incident took place. Organizational factors such as time constraints, staffing levels and the unavailability of materials in the department (drawings, game) especially seemed to hinder the process. The research did not show in which contexts and type of institution implementation was more (or less) successful. All the institutions and groups had specific conducive and inhibiting factors, but their impact on the use was not measurable and showed no recognisable patterns.

Results Outcome Research
The outcome research examined the extent to which factors, which according to literature are of influence on the group leaders’ inability to act, positively changed after the test implementation of the Flag System. This appeared to be the case as group leaders reported having more knowledge regarding sexual development, the consequences of sexual trauma and the causes of sexual coercive behaviour.

They reported having more skills to enable them to assess sexual behaviour and make the subject discussable with young people and team members. There were significant differences noted between the pre- and post-tests in relation to personal effectiveness experienced by the group leaders. A significant (favourable) difference in attitude was observed in relation to ‘ease in being able to talk about sexual behaviour with young people’ and ‘accepting sexual behaviour as a normal development in young people’.

The extent to which they improved their assessment of the sexual behaviour of young people, their skill in discussing the subject and their ability to act pedagogically was also observed. They were given two scenarios (drawings) to assess. It was clear that they were less uncertain after the test period: in answering the question which flag belonged to a particular drawing, the answer ‘I don’t know’ was far less often given, and more group leaders knew how to act in a given case during the post-test. Actual behaviour in practice, however, remained little changed, as appeared from an analysis of situation sketches in their own department.
As well as the above-mentioned changes, changes were also observed linked to institutional rules and policy, and in relation to the relationships between professionals and young people and among professionals themselves. In general, the group leaders seemed to be more aware of the rules and policy in relation to sexuality after the test period. In several institutions, the rules relating to relationships between young people in a group relaxed and in a number of institutions less strict rules in relation to relationships between young people of different groups were applied. In this way, more consideration was given to the development tasks of the young people concerned.

Also, young people in some institutions were given more privacy. In a quarter of the institutions, young people could, for example, visit each other’s room where this was first forbidden. The researchers concluded that more structural focus was given to the subject of sexuality in general during the test implementation, that the rules in the group became more lenient, that ‘green behaviour’ was more accepted and that more was known about the policy on sexuality and the role of the liaison officer for sexuality. The context of the institution apparently did not have much influence on the implementation and use but rather the implementation and the use of the RYC Flag System ensured changes in the context – the rules and the policy.

Half of the group leaders thought that the relationship with the young people had improved, and four out of ten found that the relationship with colleagues had improved, in the sense that more openness was now experienced.

The researchers did observe the following, however: Because a comparison was not made with a control group, it could not be said with certainty that the changes between pre- and post-test were (completely) due to working with the RYC Flag System. It is possible that the changes measured were more a result of the training than using the RYC Flag System in the group – as the method was implemented relatively little in the daily work. Also, most institutions had been working with the basic version and the group leaders had already been trained.

**Results of the satisfaction survey**

This part of the research evaluated the level of satisfaction among the group leaders, the management and the young people when using the RYC Flag System, and its results. The satisfaction with train-the-trainer and the internal training was measured in relation to internal trainers and the group leaders.

The training was highly appreciated, for the train-the-trainer as well as the internal training (a score of almost eight was given for both). However, refresher courses were needed and more in-depth training. The ‘implementation’ part of train-the-trainer was considered too short and this agrees with the observation that the implementation of the RYC Flag System generally did not proceed as wished. This stumbling block was dealt with in the definitive version by paying more attention to this subject and by writing a separate implementation manual.

The different parts were – except for the game – generally appreciated. It is thought that the manual well reflects RYC practice, is easily legible and the subjects can be easily found. According to the group leaders, the pedagogical guidelines are generally what is required in RYC practice and can be easily adapted as required, but this applies to a lesser extent to RYC practice with youth with a (minor) intellectual disability and for young people with sexual trauma. The Oké game was also hardly used and received a lower score for attractiveness, its appeal to young people and adaptability to daily work. In the meantime, a new game has been developed (Flag System board game).

In relation to the results of working with the RYC Flag System, the group leaders generally found that the system aided them in observing and judging the sexual behaviour of young people and in enabling them to discuss issues with the young people concerned and/or with colleagues, and subsequently to react to the sexual behaviour of young people. The RYC Flag System helped group leaders to a lesser extent when discussing the sexual behaviour of young people with parents/carers.
The young people interviewed were generally positive about the RYC Flag System drawings and the explanation including flags and criteria. They found discussing the subject useful and felt the need to know more about boundaries.

**From research to the definitive version**

The conclusions from the research led to substantiated advice for the definite continual development of the RYC Flag System. As well as this, the conclusions were presented to an expert panel of professionals in practice and this also delivered advice for continuous development. All this ‘yield’ was collated by the consortium and translated into actions to fine tune the RYC Flag System to the current version.