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Purpose of the pilot

The Aggression Regulation Training (ART) was developed in America. The Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice initiated a test on a small scale at Dutch schools. The ART was designed to counter aggressive behavior at an early stage in order to reduce subsequent violent criminal behavior. The current report serves as a process evaluation of the pilot phase. The implementation of the ART was assessed at nine schools in three different cities by means of interviews as well as (online) questionnaires and observations. The interviews were conducted with students, parents, teachers, principals and project leaders. The current process evaluation will answer the following questions regarding the ART pilot: Was the ART implemented as instructed by the intervention manual? Are any adjustments necessary? These two main questions are further divided into three sub questions (components): 1) implementation, 2) support and 3) lessons learned & subsequent revisions for improvement.

The ART is a training aimed at reducing violent behavior. It is a group training based on cognitive-behavioral therapy directed at Social Skills, Anger Management and Moral Reasoning. The original design stipulated that the ART training should be given to high school students with aggression problems. Furthermore, the trainers would receive a three day course prior to the ART sessions. Students would be selected using pre-determined selection instruments and the training would consist of thirty meetings, three times per week. However, this number was reduced to a minimum of twenty four meetings, two to three times per week, after consulting with the American Goldstein Organization.

The schools, trainers and students that were studied.

The evaluation included eight VMBO-schools and one MBO school. Random selection of schools was not possible as fewer schools participated than expected and not all types of schools participated with the ART training. The limited number of schools meant that it would not be possible to make statistically reliable assumptions regarding differences between cities, schools, groups or trainers. The ART training included eighteen trainers, of which thirteen were also teachers at the schools. Not all trainers considered themselves to be sufficiently experienced to deal with more problematic students. The trainers generally rated their education favorably, and praised their instructors. However, they would have preferred further instructions as well as more time to better deal with the more difficult students. A total of 50 students, of which 64% male, commenced with the ART training. One school (six students) abandoned the ART program before completion. A total of seven students dropped out in the remaining eight schools. The dropout rate is 26% if the school which cancelled the ART program is included. The dropout rate is 16% however (seven out of 44) when this school is not included. Interviews with the students, trainers, and principals seem to indicate that a poor selection procedure was the main cause for the dropout rate. The current selection procedure allowed for students with limited motivation and especially difficult aggression problems to be admitted to the ART.

The implementation

The ART pilot had various problems at the outset: time taken to properly prepare for the ART training was insufficient due to pressure to get the project underway as soon as possible. Schools registered for the ART training encountered unexpected surprises, and some of these schools cancelled their registration as a result. The first phase of the project (winter 2009/2010: two schools) was plagued by uncertainty and sudden changes due to the abrupt start and insufficient experience amongst those involved. Especially problematic communication & changes in ART project management proved to be too strenuous. The second phase of the evaluation (winter 2010/2011: seven schools) showed considerable improvement. Information material and contracts developed by the new project management (Halt-Kennemerland) reduced ambiguity. Schools involved in the second phase had a much better idea of what they were signing up for. However, the second phase did reveal several structural issues. The ART project management agreed to several changes (also during phase two), allowing implementation to deviate from the original design. This mainly applies to the *selection procedure*. Pre-determined selection instruments were supposed to be utilized to measure problematic aggression among students. These instruments were not always used. Selection instruments were replaced during phase one, and abandoned all together in phase two. It is impossible to determine if the intended group of students was selected, because selection instruments were not utilized (properly). The careless selection seems to have contributed to several problems; including the student dropout rate, premature cancellation of the ART program in one school, disruption of classes, and the inclusion of students with an IQ too low to effectively participate. A second change approved by the project management (during phase one) involved the minimum time requirement for the training. The training was shortened since scheduling during regular school hours proved complicated. Only two out of eight schools offered the thirty sessions as stipulated in the original design. Five out of eight schools offered the amended goal of 24 sessions. Two schools offered fewer, but longer sessions to match the time requirement of 24 in class sessions. All but one school managed to follow the instructions received from either their coaches or the three day training program. The evaluation also reveals that trainers deviated from the original design on their own initiative. In fact, homework was rarely discussed, and communication with the parents regarding training content was more limited than intended. The evaluation also shows that trainers were fairly competent, but that the quality of the ART implementation can be improved.

The Support

The ART training received considerable support from the schools that were studied. Teachers and principals deemed the training well designed, and pointed out that they see the potential merits. However, it is not clear if every school will continue offering the ART training in the long term, especially after the ART is no longer subsidized. Students are generally not very enthusiastic at the outset. However, some of them grew more optimistic as the training progressed. Parents seem optimistic (from the limited data available regarding parents), although they know very little about the training content matter.

Lessons learned & subsequent revisions for improvement

This process evaluation shows that the organizational aspect of the ART was not granted sufficient time, and that procedures evolved over time. It was uncertain at the outset if there

was in fact a need for such an intensive training, let alone if schools were able to meet the minimum requirements for implementation. This uncertainty proved problematic. The ART was mostly implemented as intended, but the ART project management did make some amendments regarding requirements (departing from the provisional ART training recognized by the NJI). The current evaluation revealed that the first phase suffered from numerous teething problems. It would however be a mistake to confuse teething problems with structural issues in implementation. Some of the troubles apparent during phase one have been mostly resolved. Abandoning the merits of the ART due to (partially) resolved problems would be tragic. The ART seems to be a very promising intervention, warranting sufficient attention and time to ensure a proper implementation. The second phase of the project showed a considerable improvement in available time for schools to prepare, as well as improved communication among schools. This led to a considerably smoother process of ART implementation. Nevertheless, the second phase revealed several issues which require attention. The original design was amended hastily and for practical reasons, without sufficient consideration for potentially detrimental effects to the integrity of the ART program. However, effectiveness of the ART training in this format has not yet been shown at Dutch schools. Therefore, changes in the original design may not necessarily be detrimental to the effectiveness of the program. The potential risks of the identified “issues” for the effectiveness of the training are as of yet unknown. It is important to reduce the risk of diminished ART effectiveness by 1) reducing ambiguity regarding which components are essential to the training and which may be amended, 2) researching which of the implemented changes had a positive, or negative impact on ART effectiveness, 3) finding or developing an effective instrument for selecting students and 4) further developing the selection and coaching of the trainers. Investigating to what extent design changes will influence effectiveness and feasibility may improve the effects of the ART on the behavior of participating students.