

FINAL REPORT A process evaluation of the implementation of Signs of Safety within Youth Care Support Centers and Youth Court Social Services and the examination of its meaningful outcomes for client and consultant in Flanders, Belgium

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Summary (p. 77-81 final report)

This research report describes a process evaluation of the Signs of Safety (SofS) implementation process within the OSD department (OSD = 'Afdeling Ondersteuningscentra en Sociale Diensten Jeugdrechtbank' in Dutch = 'Youth Care Support Centers and Youth Court Social Services' in the Flemish part of Belgium) and its perceived impact. The process evaluation set three research objectives, namely, to gain insight into: 1) the various elements that ensure a sound SofS implementation; 2) the 'breadth' and 'depth' of the current SofS practice within the OSD department and 3) the meaningful elements of the implementation for the client system and their network, OSD-staff and external professional partners. Answers to these research questions were formulated using: insights from previous international implementation research (Work Package 1), an online survey (Work Package 2), individual structured interviews (Work Package 3), and a limited number of case studies (Work Package 4). A total of 208 OSD-employees, clients and their network, and external professional partners participated in the research.

The findings related to the first research question demonstrate that the OSD department is committed to the **four critical elements that** ensure a sound SofS implementation, namely leadership, learning, organizational alignment, and meaningful measurement.

For example, the results concerning the element '**Learning**' show that the department continues to develop as a 'learning organization'. There is a strong commitment to the 70:20:10-learning model, with an emphasis on sharing, reflecting, and doing things together, which is congruent with the model. The conditions for facilitating this learning are found at the individual and team levels, with consultants adopting a learning and critical attitude. Moreover, they mainly experience a safe climate to do so. However, the results also show that the implementation is insufficiently shaped by the voice of OSD-staff, the client system, and their network. OSD-workers feel they are not sufficiently questioned about how they experience the implementation (and the policy approach). The voice of the client system is questioned sporadically, but not structurally.

Concerning the element '**Leadership**', the findings show that there is a large and clear commitment from the management to implement the SofS approach. This seems to be a crucial factor in sustaining the implementation process. In addition, the majority of managers (cf., team coordinators, regional managers) mention elements of guiding, caring, and inspiring leadership. To strengthen the SofS implementation, however, according to consultants it is necessary that: there are more concrete guidelines on how the (minimal) expectations are in proportion to the complex reality and high caseload; that managers communicate the SofS implementation more strongly to external professional partners; and that managers have sufficient feeling with the practice. At the moment, consultants feel that the main responsibility for the 'good course' of a process remains with them and that this is not sufficiently supported by managers and regional staff members (cf., regional staff members support consultants in their practice work, but are not seen as managers with a leadership position). Shaping the practice together can help managers to better understand the complexity of the practice and to support

consultants authentically. Subsequently, this can create a shared basis, more understanding, and appreciation among the different echelons.

The findings on the **'Organizational Alignment'** element show that there are different speeds and emphases within the regions in the implementation process. Consultation platforms and documents aimed at uniformity (e.g., 'soundboard group', 'SofS practice guide') offer handles and guidelines, but their operation and content are insufficiently known among many employees. In each region, partnerships with external professional services are being developed and although the shared vision and approach are growing, staff members still come up against many challenges within this partnership. The ICT system is also being further aligned with the SofS approach, but according to staff members, there are still many growth opportunities to give 'Domino' (cf., digital registration system) a real added value in daily practice. On an individual level, there are various convictions about the nature of SofS (cf., approach vs. methodology), which can jeopardize a qualitative and honest implementation. According to consultants, the biggest challenge lies in the alignment between the SofS approach and the Flemish practice, which is characterized by a high caseload (cf., 50-80 files for one consultant). Although this is a known problem at all levels, according to consultants it is not being dealt with sufficiently. In addition, for many of the consultants, SofS does not offer sufficient handles to deal with complicating factors, while some of these factors are part of the specificity of youth care.

Finally, the survey data regarding the element **'Meaningful Measures and Monitoring'** show that there are various ideas about what meaningful measures and monitoring of SofS practice and implementation entail. According to some staff members, there is no clear and supported vision within the OSD department about what to measure and monitor, in what way, and why. According to staff members, the breadth of implementation is mainly measured through the online registration system 'Domino', but this method is not perceived as representative or valuable by several staff members. The depth of practice is monitored mainly through reflecting and doing things together during learning platforms. The impact of the practice, according to staff, is mainly measured and monitored through feedback conversations with client systems, but these only take place sporadically. A lot of staff members mention the need for more qualitative and structural follow-up of the SofS practice specifically and the implementation in general.

The findings related to the second research question, namely **the breadth** and depth of the implementation, show that the frequency and manner in which OSD-staff deploy SofS practice varies depending on the region, the team, and the family with which they work. This diversity, however, compromises model fidelity. For example, according to staff, the Three Columns are used almost by default in every case, but other tools are more likely to be used depending on the time and context of the case. Whereas approximately one-quarter of the consultants and regional staff members use the Three Houses (or similar) as standard to listen to the child's voice and include it in the process, this is only 2% in the case of Words and Pictures. Although there is also a clear expectation from the department that in every case a network is created around a family, 1 in 20 consultants and regional staff members indicates that they rarely or never create a network around a family. Furthermore, 1 out of 5 consultants and regional staff members indicates that a safety plan (or similar) or a Words and Pictures is only made when there is enough time to do so. The availability of an external professional partner and the urgency of the case also play a crucial role in the extent to which a safety plan – and by extension, other SofS tools – are used. In addition, the vast majority of consultants and regional staff members feel that they have a strengths-based and solution-focused basic attitude when working with families. For example, the majority feel that they 'often' or 'always' work in a clear and transparent manner and show respect and appreciation for each person in the process. However, for many consultants and regional staff members, it is not simple to let parents, minors, and their network come up with their own solutions. More than half indicate that they only do this 'occasionally' or 'rarely'. Also,

for example, almost half of the consultants and regional staff indicate that the minor is 'occasionally' or 'often' involved as an active partner or is the focus in the trajectory, but by no means 'always'.

Regarding **the depth** of practice, 4/5 of the consultants and regional staff members indicated that their own thinking and actions in daily practice were in line with the SofS principles. However, an in-depth application of SofS tools and principles appears to depend on several factors. For example, the time available and the expectations and guidance of managers play a role at the organizational and team levels. At the individual level, among other things, the model inclination of the consultant and the preference for certain SofS tools have an influence. At the client level, the availability of network and external professional partners and the age of the minor play a role. In general, staff members try to pursue the principles of SofS in every trajectory, but for many, the core of SofS lies in the strengths-based and solution-focused basic attitude. How the SofS principles are pursued is therefore not strict and is determined freely by the consultant (in consultation with the team). Moreover, this is followed up to a limited extent by the manager, which again compromises model fidelity. Staff primarily mention two challenges to deploying SofS tools and outputs in-depth, i.e. lack of time and limited availability of external professional partners (who value and work with SofS).

Furthermore, OSD-staff, clients and their network, and external professional partners were questioned about the **perceived impact** of the SofS implementation (third research question). This revealed a perceived impact at four levels, namely at the level of: 1) the client, 2) the OSD-employee, 3) the team and 4) the organization, and this in the short, medium, and long term. However, the long-term outcomes should be interpreted with some caution, as due to the short duration of this study, no prospective research could be done.

At the **client level**, findings show that in the short term, clients experience more confidence and less anxiety/stress to form partnerships with OSD-staff and that in the medium term, they experience growth/recovery in family relationships. Long-term experiences include pride in their own journey and experienced personal growth. Few negative experiences are mentioned, next to the intensity the trajectory requires. OSD-staff notice in the short term that the client is more central to the process, that the minor is actively involved and listened to, and that there is more open, honest, and transparent communication with the client system. In the medium term, this (according to OSD-staff) ensures that clients experience less anxiety and feel (re)recognized in their role as a parent or network member. Although there are no figures to support this, some OSD-staff and juvenile court judges feel that SofS contributes to: fewer evictions; less resistance from the client system when evictions do take place; and a shorter duration of cases. Despite this perceived positive impact, OSD-staff experience that SofS can also contribute to (too) high expectations for the client system. Furthermore, OSD-workers indicate that, due to the high work pressure, they have to choose between families for whom SofS can or cannot be applied. As a result, the right to qualitative and equal support cannot always be guaranteed. The limited availability of external professional partners can also prevent families from getting the support they need, according to the staff.

At the level of the **OSD-staff**, for many, the SofS approach offers a clear focus and clear vision, which in the short term gives them a grip and guidelines to work with. OSD-staff experience that their work is more context-oriented and that involving the network is more of a given than an option. In the medium term, OSD-workers say that the SofS approach also makes them more aware of the importance of a human approach, a strength-based and solution-oriented attitude, and the impact of their (power) position. Many OSD-employees indicate that in the long term the SofS approach contributes to more job satisfaction, energy, and a sense of meaning and satisfaction. In addition, 'doing SofS well' also brings stress and mental pressure to employees because the approach requires an intensive (time) investment. Some employees indicate that there is a risk of falling back into the 'old way of working' because working

according to the SofS approach is not considered feasible and/or involves too much stress and uncertainty.

At **team level**, SofS processes and forums appear to contribute to a learning climate, where people reflect together and exchange practices. Respondents report critical thinking, slowing down and frequent reflecting processes, where they reflect on how and in which ways a real difference can be made. The sharing of good practices and doing things together during these processes, forums, and trajectories also ensure that people feel connected and supported by colleagues. In the medium term, many employees indicate that they have the feeling that SofS offers support to go for the same goal with the team. Whereas people used to make very extensive reports before the implementation, the SofS approach facilitates guidelines to produce concise reports. As far as the negative impact is concerned, respondents indicated, among other things, that colleagues who do not accept the implementation and/or do not try to comply with the SofS principles create tension within the team.

At the **organizational level**, many employees experience that SofS contributes to a fundamental turnaround in the functioning of the OSD department, in which the organization focuses on what really counts, emphasizes the positive and dares to question itself. While a few employees experience growth in the parallel processes within the organization, for many employees there is still a top-down policy, in which the needs of practitioners are insufficiently heard. Experiences are also divided around the profiling of the department, which is linked to the SofS framework. While for some, the framework ensures that the department has a clear positioning and profile, both towards organizations inside and outside of youth care as well as the client system, for others it has just become more unclear what the position and mandate of OSD-staff entails. The implementation also appears to have a clear impact on the collaboration with partner organizations. In projects involving partners who endorse the SofS vision, the cooperation – in general – is pleasant, positive, and smooth. However, when a shared vision or plan of approach is missing, conflicts often arise and the collaboration is experienced as tiresome.

This research report led to **three deliverables**, namely a program theory, a SofS barometer, and an outcome table, which attempt to provide insight into the active elements and mechanisms of the current SofS implementation as well as to offer tools for further implementation. For example, the development of a program theory demonstrated that the current (limited) SofS implementation literature offers few concrete, clear and operational handles to give body to the program theory. Consequently, it was not easy to mirror and evaluate the current SofS implementation within the OSD department in light of the program theory. To address this issue, this report contains suggestions to adjust the program theory based on the research results.

Finally, this report describes four **recommendations** to further shape the implementation of SofS within the OSD department. First of all, the OSD department needs to clarify what its own objectives and finalities are and what it aims to achieve with the implementation of SofS, i.e. when does it comply with 'high-quality implementation'? What results are intended with the implementation and how will they be measured? This position statement is necessary to concretize how the OSD department wants and can further shape the SofS implementation in the coming years. Secondly, it is important to make additional investments in the work climate and staff welfare, as a SofS implementation can only succeed in a safe work climate where there are parallel processes at all levels. Third, it is essential for further implementation that the policy further considers what 'meaningful outcomes' are for the department and what vision they want to develop concerning registration and monitoring. To measure and monitor both the breadth and depth of practice, a complementary approach is valuable, supplementing an objective measurement of quantitative data (e.g., through a case management dashboard) with a measurement of the quality of practice (e.g., through a collaborative case audit). Fourth, transparent communication about (regional and team) differences in the implementation process seems essential to ensure that the model implementation is cohesive and integer. Although the open nature of SofS and

the diversity in regional management were deliberately chosen from a policy perspective, the difference it brings at the individual, team, and regional levels may stand in the way of a supported and consistent implementation.

In conclusion, the research shows that the SofS approach has a certain degree of support within the OSD department, can have a meaningful impact at the client level, and that the OSD department is making great efforts to shape the implementation in a qualitative way. The department tries to take time and space to think about how the Flemish operationalization of the SofS approach should look like and how it can be useful within the Flemish youth welfare. The implementation process is in full swing, whereby a lot has already been learned, but there are still many learning opportunities. For example, it is essential to reflect on what the own objectives and finalities of the SofS implementation are within the (complex) Flemish practice and how these can be monitored qualitatively so that the coherence and integrity of the future model implementation can be strengthened.