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"It is also just a house, so to speak." Youth experiencing the living environment in alternative and traditional residential youth care in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Over the past several decades, residential youth care (RYC) has faced several challenges in providing a positive living environment that meets the needs of youth. Traditionally, RYC has been characterized by short-term placements, groups with large numbers of youth (8–12), and placement on residential campuses with multiple RYC units. In recent years, alternative RYC settings have been developed with the aim to provide home-like, long-term and individualized care for youth within the community. These alternative settings include home-like groups and family-style group homes (with live-in professionals). The purpose of this study is to gain insight into youth experiences with the living environment in both alternative and traditional RYC. We interviewed 33 youth both alternative and traditional RYC. We used a combination of deductive and inductive coding to analyze the interview data. In alternative RYC settings, some youth mentioned a sense of home and emphasized their connections to social groups. As the shift to alternative RYC settings continues, we can expect to see more opportunities and fewer barriers to healthy development for youth in RYC. Some challenges remain in all RYC settings, such as the end of youth care at the age of 18, and distance from family members.

KEYWORDS

Living environment;
home-like groups;
family-style group homes;
residential youth care;
qualitative research

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Professionals in RYC facilities can begin to incorporate elements of a home-like environment today.
- Professionals should pay attention to and facilitate youth access to their own social networks and the broader society.
- The government should invest in aftercare to support youth until they become independent, if needed.

As stated in the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (Art. 20), vulnerable youth need a supportive and continuous living environment in which they can maintain and develop attachment

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relationships with persons in a caregiving role, and an environment that can create conditions for healthy development (United Nations General Assembly, 2009). When young people are placed in out-of-home care, one type of care is residential youth care (RYC). Most RYC facilities operate in open settings. However, secure RYC facilities are available in some countries. Secure placement is usually considered when a youth is a danger to themselves or others (Lausten, 2023). In the Netherlands, approximately 42,000 young people are in out-of-home care, representing 9 percent of all youth receiving care. Of these, more than 18,000 are placed in (secure) RYC (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2023). As emphasized by the United Nations Guidelines, it is crucial to provide a living environment that aligns with the specific needs of young people in care.

Young people in RYC have often been exposed to traumatic experiences in the past, including abuse, neglect, and mistreatment (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016). These young people frequently deal with complex family dynamics and significant challenges related to attachment and behavior (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016). Young people in RYC are generally older than those in foster care; for instance, most enter RYC during adolescence (Knorth & Harder, 2022; Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016). Therefore, we use the term “youth” to refer to both children and youth in our study.

Over the past decades, there have been several challenges in providing a positive living environment in RYC and meeting the needs of vulnerable youth in RYC in the Netherlands and other European countries (Thoburn, 2016). Initially, RYC is seen as a last resort because of the belief that young people should be raised in a family environment (Knorth & Harder, 2022; Leipoldt et al., 2022; Thoburn, 2016). RYC may be provided on a short-term (temporary) basis, focusing on treatment and finding a permanent placement. However, because many young people cannot return to their (foster) parents and present complex problems, they often experience multiple placements within RYC settings (Christiansen et al., 2010; Nijhof et al., 2020). *Traditional RYC settings* focus on (short-term) treatment and are often located on separate campuses (on a separate field with multiple RYC units). The large number of youth (eight to twelve) in traditional RYC led to a one-size-fits-all approach (e.g., no individual differentiation in raising conditions) (Nijhof et al., 2020). Criticism of the traditional RYC living environment led to the development of the alternative RYC. Since secure RYC units in the Netherlands have also been criticized for their lack of quality, alternative RYC facilities should also be considered as a solution for serving the most vulnerable youth, such as those with aggressive behavior, especially since secure units must be closed by 2030 (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2023).

Globally, there is a shift toward smaller scale (e.g., lower number of youth) and family-style RYC models, which are considered innovative (United Nations General Assembly, 2009; Whittaker et al., 2016). In recent years,

alternative RYC settings have been developed in the Netherlands. These settings aim to provide a living environment that is as home-like as possible. For example, by locating these facilities in “regular neighborhoods” (i.e., not on a campus with multiple RYC units), and to provide long-term and individualized care (Ammerlaan et al., 2022). Examples of alternative RYC settings include *home-like groups* and *family-style group homes* (Knorth & Harder, 2022; Y. G. Riemersma et al., 2024). Home-like groups have a maximum number of eight youth per house, but often they accommodate four to six youth; these facilities are also known as small-scale RYC (Knorth & Harder, 2022; Nijhof et al., 2020; Van Schie et al., 2020; van Schie et al., 2023). The characteristics of family-style group homes are similar, but in family-style group homes, youth are placed in the homes of professionals. On average, six youth are placed in the homes of educationally trained professionals (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016). To date, little is known about the living environment in alternative RYC settings in the Netherlands, and whether the individual needs of young people in these settings are being met.

A positive living environment has a positive impact on the daily lives of youth in RYC and is fundamental to their healthy development (Leipoldt et al., 2019, 2022). Providing a positive living environment in RYC is not a clear-cut approach, as there is an interaction between youth, professionals, and the broader context (e.g., peers, parents, education, work climate) at RYC (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Because youth in RYC have often been exposed to traumatic events in their past, such as abuse, neglect, and negative interactions with caregivers (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016), it is essential for professionals to provide a positive living environment in which youth can heal from loss and trauma (Mota et al., 2023). For example, youth may not have developed a secure attachment style in their early lives because their parents were unable to provide a safe and stable living environment, which may affect future relationships (Bowlby, 1988). By investing in the relationship with youth, professionals can help foster more secure attachment styles.

When focusing on the concept of the living environment in research, previous studies on the living environment have been guided by self-determination theory (SDT), which views competence, relatedness, and autonomy as necessary for growth (Leipoldt et al., 2019). Competence refers to the extent to which certain tasks are appropriate for a young person’s abilities, such as the type of education (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Autonomy refers to the extent to which a young person can make his or her own decisions in daily life. Relatedness refers to a young person’s connection to others, such as parents, professionals, and peers in the context of RYC. An optimal living environment creates opportunities to meet these needs of youth. We view the living environment as a broad concept that encompasses a wide range of elements consistent with self-determination theory, the rights of the child, and the RYC Guidelines.

Therefore, the living environment also focuses on a family-like environment and a continuous living environment (De Lange et al., 2017; Deci & Ryan, 2012; UN, 2013, GC 14). This leads to a theoretical framework that includes the following elements related to the perceived living environment: home-like environment, professional sensitivity and support (building attachment relationships), structure (including daily activities), safety, autonomy, social networks, and the stability of care conditions (Y. G. Riemersma et al., 2024; Ten Brummelaar et al., 2018; Zijlstra, 2012).

Focusing on these elements, we know from research that a youth's sense of safety is stimulated in a home-like environment with positive relationships (Moore et al., 2017). A warm place where youth have control (autonomy) and can live an ordinary life (i.e., normality) is experienced by youth as a home-like environment (Levrouw et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2017). In terms of sensitivity and support from professionals, good professional treatment skills are essential predictors of a good relationship between youth and professionals (Harder, 2011). Youth value the reliability of professionals as an important aspect of relationships (Harder et al., 2022). A balance between on the one hand, providing empathy and support, and on the other hand, focusing on structure and treatment appears to be important (Harder, 2011). From other research, we know that youth value professionals who create structure and who treat people like people (De Valk et al., 2019b). Strong collaboration between parents and professionals can be beneficial for youth (Van den Steene et al., 2018). In terms of stability and permanence, youth in the care system report that they feel safest when they experience stability. From the child's perspective, stability also refers to little or no turnover of professionals and peers (Moore et al., 2017).

Initial studies on the outcomes of alternative RYC settings (i.e., focusing on small-scale RYC) show a more positive living environment compared to traditional RYC settings (e.g., large-scale RYC) in terms of the sensitivity of the professionals and the group atmosphere i.e., relationships among youth (Nijhof et al., 2020; Riemersma et al., 2024). In alternative RYC, there are opportunities (time) for youth and professionals to get involved (Ammerlaan et al., 2022). Young people receive more attention from professionals, and professionals find it easier to focus on individual needs (Van Schie et al., 2020; van Schie et al., 2023). Young people report a good relationship with other young people because these young people move less (Ammerlaan et al., 2022; Nijhof et al., 2020). In other studies, young people and professionals report that small-scale care settings are quiet and home-like (Van Schie et al., 2020; van Schie et al., 2023). Youth can relax emotionally because there is less conflict in the care setting compared to previous placements in traditional RYC (Van Schie et al., 2020). A stable placement in RYC can foster a sense of family and belonging (Thoburn, 2016). Additionally, youth are more positive about the longer work shifts

for professionals and the smaller number of professionals, which may contribute to stability and quietness (Nijhof et al., 2020; Van Schie et al., 2020; van Schie et al., 2023).

As summarized above, the early results of the research on the experiences of youth, parents, and professionals in alternative RYC settings are promising. More research into these settings is also highly relevant as developments in the Netherlands and other Western countries are proceeding rapidly. Providing a positive living environment in alternative RYC is more than just splitting a large RYC facility into two small-scale houses. Unlike previous studies, our research examines a wide range of alternative RYC facilities, taking into account not only facilities that serve fewer youth but also the type of neighborhood (regular) and length of stay (long-term). Previously, we have quantitatively compared alternative and traditional RYC settings, and these results indicated a significantly greater sensitivity from professionals and a more positive group atmosphere in alternative RYC than in traditional RYC from the perspectives of youth, parents, and professionals (Riemersma et al., 2024). Complementing to this quantitative analysis, we need knowledge about the individual needs of youth and their experiences with alternative and traditional RYC settings. The study uses a broad range of living environment factors, including a home-like environment, social networks, and stability. In studying the individual needs and experiences in various facilities, the perspectives of youth should be emphasized, as they are the people who experience the living environment and should be involved. This is in accordance with Art. 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child; Young people have the right to freedom of opinion and expression (UN, 1989). The purpose of this study is to gain further insight into the living environment in alternative and traditional RYC settings from a qualitative perspective. We will answer the following exploratory research question:

How do youth experience their living environments in both alternative settings (home-like groups and family-style group homes) and traditional RYC settings?

Method

Design

This study was part of a longitudinal study into the psychosocial development of youth in different types of RYC over time, and was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Groningen in 2020. For information on the longitudinal procedure and sample, see Riemersma et al. (2024). The current cross-sectional study used qualitative data, collected between June 2020 and December 2022.

Setting

In our study, traditional RYC facilities offered short-term residential care (up to the age of 12 or 18), with a focus on treatment and finding a permanent placement. These facilities housed eight to ten youth per unit, located on a campus with multiple RYC units. Home-like groups, on the other hand, were designed to provide long-term care (at least a permanent placement until the age of 18) Home-like groups provide long-term care (at least until age 18) and haveaccommodating four to eight youth per facility. RYC in the Netherlands didoes not require aftercare, but some facilities offered care up to the age of 23. The characteristics of family-style group homes were similar, but in family-style group homes, youth were placed in the homes of professionals. Both settings were seen as alternative RYC. For more information on the characteristics of RYC facilities, see [Appendix A \(Table A1\)](#).

Sample

Youth were invited to participate in this study if they were living in one of the participating RYC facilities. In this study, 33 youth participated and completed the interviews. One youth moved from a traditional RYC facility to a home-like group and participated twice.

Youth in home-like groups and family-style group homes were, on average, older than youth in traditional RYC (see [Table 1](#)). Youth in family-style group homes had the highest number of previous placements. The total number of problems based on a behavioral screening instrument (SDQ) appears to be most severe for youth in home-like groups (Goodman et al., 1998).

Interview

Living Environment

We collected information on the living environment by using interview data. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to rank cards with

Table 1. Youth characteristics.

	<i>n</i> Youth	<i>M (sd)</i> age youth	% First placement	<i>M</i> total Problems (SDQ) when entering RYC setting (<i>sd</i>)	Min total problems	Max total problems
Traditional RYC	10	12.10 (2.85)	40	14.44 (5.62) ^a	7	23
Home-like groups	18	15.20 (1.10)	38.9	18.53 (7.51) ^b	3	30
Family-style group homes	5	15.89 (2.11)	20	16.80 (7.40)	5	24

self-report version of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The total problems scale is the sum of emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer relationship problems.

^a*n* = 9

^b*n* = 17

statements about the living environment (using Q-methodology) (Riemersma et al., 2024; Watts & Stenner, 2012). The statements were based on evidence-based guidelines for RYC in the Netherlands (De Lange et al., 2017), key features of alternative RYC (such as proximity to social networks), and feedback from two young people with experience in youth care (see [Appendix B](#)). This basis was consistent with the theoretical framework presented earlier. Participants were instructed to categorize 27 statement cards (or 20, if 27 is too many) related to the perceived living environment in a facility into three groups: “This is often true,” “This is partly true,” and “This is less true.” After making their initial selections, participants were then asked to arrange the cards on a magnetic whiteboard along a spectrum ranging from “This is the least true” on one end to “This is the truest” on the other.

We conducted an interview regarding the ranking to gain deeper insights into the experiences of youth with the living environment. The ranking task assisted the youth in articulating their experiences more clearly. The interview began with the question of how the participants experienced the tasks of ordering the statements, then the researcher asked which statements were easy and which were difficult to order, and the participants were asked if they missed important elements of their experiences with the type of care in the set of statements. After these questions, the researcher sought explanations about statements that were least true or truest. For example, the researcher might start with: You indicated that you recognized “The professionals think it is important to know how I am doing” as one of the statements that is the truest, can you explain that? More in-depth questions could follow. The interview ended with the following questions: “What are the statements (elements) that support you the most?” (Most helpful to you) and “What statements would you like to see more of?” (What to improve). After interviewing the participants, the researcher thanked the participants and ended the interview with a question that was low-key in nature. All interview data containing insights into the experiences of youth regarding their living environment had been included in the analysis, regardless of the type of question asked.

Demographical factors

Information about the demographics was collected by asking youth or caregivers questions about their sex, age or previous placements.

Procedure

At the start of the longitudinal study, RYC facilities were contacted via e-mail or phone and were invited to participate in the study, for example, by using

a network of alternative RYC settings in the Netherlands. After getting permission from the facilities, all youth were invited by a professional (e.g., mentor) to participate in the study when they came to live at the RYC facility. The researcher explained the study to the youth and parents before youth could begin the study. Youth and their legal guardians (parents or formal guardians) had to give their informed consent. For youth aged 16 and above, no informed consent from legal guardians was needed.

Data collection for this study occurred after the youth had spent more than two or three months in the RYC facility and were already engaged in the longitudinal study. The primary researcher had already established contact with the participants prior to the interview, as this study was part of a longitudinal project that involved data collection. As a result, participants may have been more willing to share their stories because they were already familiar with the researcher. All interviews were held face-to-face and took place at the RYC facility and were recorded. Young people could at any time indicate if they wanted a professional or a parent to join them during the interview. At the end of the interview, youth received a small gift (e.g., chocolate). For more details about the procedure, see Riemersma et al. (2024).

Data analysis

We transcribed the interviews using the program F4 Transkript (Dresing & Pehl, n.d.). After we transcribed the interviews and made all the transcription anonymous, we uploaded the transcriptions into Atlas.ti 23. In line with the theoretical framework, the concepts in the interviews included the home-like feeling (including normality and furnishing), the sensitivity and support of professionals (also use of individualized care and physical care), rules, structure and daily activities, social networks, autonomy, stability and future (De Lange et al., 2017; Zijlstra, 2012).

We used inductive and deductive code development. Some codes derived from topics on the research instrument based on the theoretical framework (by means of statement cards), while other codes were developed by the data itself (Hennink et al., 2015). The primary researcher coded several interviews in all three settings (e.g., home-like groups), resulting in a list of various themes. To check the validity of these themes, the researcher checked whether it was mentioned in multiple interviews. After the research team engaged in reflective discussions to review and refine these themes, the team identified the main themes and sub-themes. These main themes grouped together the sub-themes that addressed similar topics (Hennink et al., 2015). The main themes were primarily guided by the theoretical framework (such as the home-like feeling, stability), while the explanatory concepts (sub-themes) provided additional detail and referred to specific explanations (e.g., why do youth feel at home). During the coding process, relevant quotes related to themes or sub-

themes were selected to clarify findings. When using a quote, the names of young people were replaced with new names. The primary researcher discussed all stages with the research team.

Results

The experiences of youth with the living environment in alternative and traditional RYC settings were discussed by using the following themes: “feeling at home,” “connections and activities with peers and professionals in RYC settings,” “autonomy,” “visits by and distance to social network,” “daily activities,” and “stability in placement and caregiving.” These major themes reflected the concepts in the theoretical framework. Youth experiences were discussed by setting (e.g., home-like groups, family-style group homes, and traditional RYC). When findings were common to all settings, the findings were discussed together.

Feeling at home

A number of young people in alternative RYC mentioned that they felt at home there. The home-like feeling for youth in alternative RYC was related to having a positive relationship with professionals (e.g., they felt like family), feeling safe, being themselves, and being equal, not visiting their parents very often (e.g., no substitute home), having a home-like environment (e.g., just a house), doing activities together, having fun, having their own room with their own belongings, and not having to worry about things like money. Some youth mentioned that they valued the feeling of being at home the most helpful. One young person in a home-like group gave the following explanation for the home-like feeling:

Yes, that is mainly because of my own room of course. Because I have my own belongings that does make it a little bit more personal. And yes, it is also just a house, so to speak. And I feel safe there and I think it's cozy. (Thirza, 17 years old, home-like group)

One adolescent reflected on the fulfillment of needs related to money in a family-style group home:

That I can be myself [.]. And um. . . well that I don't have to worry about certain things, for example [.]. about money or something. . . .Not so of that I think ah. . . poh poh poh just spend money. No, but just, I mean, in group care [previous placement in traditional RYC], it's different, the money. Yes here if you need something you will get it. (Bo, 17 years old, family-style group home)

When youth did not feel at home in alternative RYC, they often mentioned that their home was with their parents. In home-like groups, this was also related to specific rules (e.g., not allowed to watch TV in pajamas), differences

from the parental home (such as the types of dishes served), and dissatisfaction with their room.

In traditional RYC, youth mentioned that they did not consider the place to be home. Similar to alternative RYC, some youth stated that their home is with their parents. Not feeling at home was also related to feelings of unsafety, bullying, rules, and living with multiple youngsters in one house. It was also related to not engaging in enough “normal” activities with professionals and peers (e.g., grocery shopping), lacking the freedom to set up their own rooms (e.g., not having their own mattress because of fire safety), experiencing limited autonomy, and lacking a home-like environment (e.g., not having their own keys or living on a residential campus with a large board displaying the youth care institution name). A youth in traditional RYC gave the following explanation for not feeling at home:

Keys, room alarms. Yes. Yeah we go to bed and that’s different for everybody by the way. But at eleven o’clock the room door alarm is activated so you can’t open your door. And if you want to go outside so you can open your door and just walk out but then the whole alarm goes off and everybody hears that from the main door.[.] It all feels so trapped that you can’t smoke at night. That you don’t have a key and that you can’t have a smoke at night. And you’re not allowed to call it that by the professionals, because the professionals themselves say to us: This is not your home. This is your shelter. (Anna, 18 years old, traditional RYC)

Connections and activities with peers and professionals in RYC settings

Across all RYC settings, youth described their peer relationships as positive, negative, or neutral. Therefore, it was not just a matter of setting. Positive peer relationships were evaluated as one of the most helpful elements among youth. In all RYC settings, some youth reported on the activities they do together with their peers, such as playing together, going to a party together, or going on vacation together. Participating in activities together facilitated positive interactions among young people, as one young person mentioned:

Apart from that, I really like the fact that we usually eat together. Because then you get to know each other a bit better. And then you do have a moment when you’re all together. (Yara, 16 years old, home-like group)

Having neutral or negative peer relationships in home-like groups related to not spending time together. For example, one youth mentioned that one peer spent a lot of time in the bedroom, while another youth mentioned to focus on socializing with own friends. Another youth in a home-like group mentioned that there were many peers and that the person simply did not like some of the peers. One youth in a home-like group also reported that she was the only girl

in the house and that she disliked the fact that her housemates used WhatsApp to communicate with each other:

I don't see them very often. And they are boys. I'm an only girl. [...]

Or, for example, in the Whatsapp group, all the time taking pictures of things in the bathroom of my stuff. Does anybody know who that stuff belongs to? Because it doesn't belong here in the bathroom, it belongs in your room. Like, you know, I'm the only girl here, so why don't you just come to me and say, hey, I don't like this, I just want to put you in your room and not do it on the group app, you know. (Nura, 17 years old, home-like group)

Another youth in a family-style group home reflected on the difficulties of interacting with other youth, e.g., she was shy and needed to adjust to the family environment. The young person indicated that no help was needed, just time.

Focusing on the experiences of youth in traditional RYC, some mentioned several negative interactions with peers, such as being bullied, experiencing frequent conflicts, facing dangerous situations caused by peers (e.g., broken glass), hearing unwanted noise in the bedroom, feeling annoyed by peers, or lacking familiarity with one another. They indicated that this could lead to feelings of unsafety. Some youth mentioned that they did not get enough help when they were in unsafe situations with peers. Factors mentioned by youth that can negatively affect professionals' help were substitute professionals and a low number of professionals that was present. One youth reported that some of the youth had been on "time out" [temporary stay] at another RYC facility, but the behavior and conflicts did not stop when they returned. One young person provided the following explanation for feeling unsafe in RYC:

No. Not for me, because I just feel, I just don't like it. That whole group. If I feel at home there then I have to, then all those irritating kids have to be gone first of all! And then I have to be the only one. Because only then will I feel safe. [...] as long as I'm going to be on this residential campus. ... I'm not going to feel safe there. Not for life. And I know that. [...] Well they're sitting there the other day threatening me with death. Well then you don't feel safe. (Felix, 10 years old, traditional RYC)

When the focus was on the relationships between youth and professionals, youth from all RYC settings reported on activities they had done with professionals. They mentioned that these activities with professionals, such as listening to podcasts together, had positively stimulated their relationship. They valued one-on-one time and professionals who shared their own stories with youth.

Youth in family-style group homes mentioned the conversations they had with everyone in the house. These conversations were about life and things they had experienced, but with a touch of humor. A young person in traditional RYC mentioned that spontaneous conversations were valued, rather than mandatory conversations at a certain time during the day (e.g., during

teatime). The amount of money of the organization (the RYC facility) could also play a role in the frequency of activities with professionals. A young person in a traditional RYC mentioned the following:

And I actually only had one activity together with my mentor and that's when I went for ice cream. And that's not really an activity. [...] Well? I also know that the group [RYC facility] doesn't have that much money, I know that too. But? Only at camp, it's actually, we actually do something fun every day. (Felix, 10 years old, traditional RYC)

Autonomy

Youth in alternative RYC and one traditional RYC reported a high degree of autonomy in their leisure time. For example, in deciding when to meet with friends or visit parents. Youth in alternative RYC mentioned being responsible for their own lives, such as their school performance, but also in deciding whether they want to receive treatment. Having autonomy was seen as something that was valued and helpful. One person said the following about the level of autonomy and their behavior:

But yeah, I guess they do care how I'm doing anyway, but I mean yeah, it's differently, just if you're more let go or something then, well you also feel less like you're screwing things up on purpose. (Bo, 17 years old, family-style group home)

Young people in home-like groups also reported some challenges related to autonomy, such as having limited autonomy to make appointments (i.e., professionals making appointments for them), professionals entering young people's rooms without permission, and information about youth being recorded in case files. For example, one youth said:

But I have to listen to them [the professionals], they don't listen to me.
Interviewer: Okay, can you give an example when they don't listen, for example?
Um, if I say I don't like them [the professionals] coming into my room, they'll come into my room anyway. (Grace, 14 years old, home-like group)

Youth in traditional RYC also reported some challenges related to autonomy. For example, children in one facility mentioned that they were not allowed to choose what to do in their leisure time, but the professionals decided for them. They mentioned that they could do activities for a certain amount of time (mostly 30 minutes) and that they had a certain amount of "freedom" that they could earn over time. "Freedoms" could be taken away if rules were broken, such as when one of the children stole from the RYC facility. Reduced autonomy was often experienced as negative by youth. In both traditional RYC facilities, youth had to stay in their room for (half) an hour, which was decided by the professionals as part of the program. Youth mentioned that they would like to be able to choose whether or not to rest or to spend this time with their peers.

Visits by and distance to social network

Youth in all RYC settings evaluated the opportunity for friends and family to visit as positive and very helpful. In home-like groups, they mentioned that members of their network could eat dinner or do the cooking at the RYC. For some youth in alternative RYC facilities, inviting friends could be difficult because they did not want their friends to know that they lived at an RYC facility, they had difficulty trusting people, or they preferred to invite them to their parents' home.

Several children at a traditional RYC facility mentioned that they had limited contact with friends. These young people were of elementary school age, and they had only been able to visit their friends when they were home visiting. One youth reported the following about visiting friends while at the RYC facility:

Because I have no contact with them [friends].

Interviewer: Okay. Is there anything that you would like to change?

Uhhh yes... That I could say, uhhh... I go outside with them, like go to the city or something. (Antonio, 11 years old, traditional RYC)

The distance to social contacts varied from person to person and from RYC to RYC, as did the social network itself. For each person, living close to important people could mean something different. For example, sometimes reaching a person by bike or bus was considered close and sometimes it was not. In one particular home-like group, all young people lived close to their social networks (e.g., they were placed in their town), whereas in all other alternative or traditional RYC settings this varied from person to person. Living close to friends and family made it easier to visit them and gave the youth more control over their lives. Youth experienced being placed close to family and friends as positive and often mentioned this as one of the factors that was most helpful. For example, one young person said:

And. Now it feels better because I know that if I forgot something, for example, at home.

Then I can just pick it up myself now. (Daisy, 14 years old, family-style group home)

Some youth mentioned that important people lived relatively far away, and they had, for example, to take the bus to visit them; It was not possible to visit them spontaneously. Also, if they wanted to continue playing sports, they had to travel long distances. This was difficult to combine with getting up early for school or other daily activities.

Important people in young people's lives were also their siblings who lived in other out-of-home care institutions. Living close to a sibling was experienced as one of the most helpful factors by one young person. One youngster in alternative RYC was separated from siblings and would like to live closer to them. Visiting siblings took up a lot of time, combined with other life activities

such as therapy, talks with the guardian, and activities with friends. Another young person in alternative RYC appreciated the help of professionals in facilitating sibling contact, such as inviting siblings to the RYC facility.

Daily activities

Youth also reported on daily activities, including being able to participate in sports or other hobbies. Hobbies of youth included playing sports, listening to music, taking pictures, playing games, or hanging out with friends. Some youth in alternative RYC reported playing sports and having professionals take them to training (team soccer and horseback riding). Professionals helped them to choose and facilitate a hobby. Some youth mentioned that getting help with hobbies was one of the most helpful elements of support for them in RYC. Youth in traditional RYC were more likely to report not having a hobby or having a hobby on the residential campus, such as playing music in their room or playing soccer outside with their peers. A youth indicated for example:

I don't have any hobbies here so. I do have, but I can't finish anymore because I went here.

Interviewer: What were your hobbies?

I had swimming. [...] Hobbies are sports, and we don't have sports anymore. (Saskia, 9 years old, traditional RYC)

Stability in placement and caregiving

Some youth in alternative RYC reported that they did not know how long they could stay. In addition, some youth mentioned that they could stay for a longer period (till 18 or 23) due to the policy of a facility. They experienced long-term stays as positive and helpful, as an extended stay allowed for more rest, particularly mental rest. Some young people were able to stay until they turned 18, with a one-year extension in some cases. This is due to policy in out-of-home care. Moving because of turning 18 was a challenging experience. For example, one young person mentioned:

And it's kind of hard at eighteen to live on my own already or just go somewhere else. Because yes, it's just bit tricky because I have therapy now and school and new therapy and new school and just everything new and so a bit. I still find it a little bit difficult and especially because of therapy. So, they also made a plan together with my guardian to stay here for another year. [...] Hmm...yes of course I have one more year and at nineteen I really have to be out of here. But I would really like to stay until I can really do it myself and so on. (Nura, 17 years old, home-like group)

In contrast, youth in traditional RYC reported being able to stay only temporarily, being forced to stay for a period of time, or not knowing the length of their stay. None of the youth reported being able to stay for an extended period of time. A temporary stay was associated with a specific age range for placement (up to 18) or a focus on treatment, and often had a negative connotation. These youth had to move because it is part of the system. The feeling of being forced to stay was often associated with a desire to return to one's parents. Other youth did not have specific ideas about the length of stay. One young person said the following about a temporary stay:

I also find that irritating. That I'm only here temporarily. Because then I get used to being here and then I have to go somewhere else and get used to that again.

Interviewer: And what did you wish or want different in that?

That I my. . . that it's not so that for example my . . . to be able to do my further treatment that I have to go to a whole other place. Have to go to another place to another house another room. [. . .] Yes, because my room is here. Professionals here I am familiar with and so on. (Sari, 16 years old, traditional RYC)

Young people in all RYC settings mentioned that they appreciated being familiar with the entire team of professionals. It was a challenge to provide continuity of care in most RYC settings. Youth in home-like groups and traditional RYC mentioned the influence of different professionals during the day. For example, rules and support could vary from one professional to another, and professionals could become ill and need to be replaced. Youth in home-like groups emphasized the importance of having a good relationship with one or more professionals. Having a schedule in the house helped young people to know who was working and when. One factor that stood out positively was that youth in family-style group homes emphasized the continuity in their upbringing. There were two professionals in the family-style group home, and one of the professionals was always available to help. However, previous placements could have a negative impact on a youth's sense of continuity of care, as one youth mentioned:

Well now I know, but I didn't know for a long time. So, I'm still in such a mode that if I'm taken out of here now, I would think that's a pity, yes, a great pity, but I mean I can take care of myself fine then again so. I never really assume that somebody will take care of me. (Bo, 17 years old, family-style group home)

Some youth in traditional RYC reflected on the influence of substitute professionals, which could result in different rules or having to retell their stories.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the experiences of youth with the living environments in both alternative RYC (i.e., home-like groups and family-style group homes) and traditional RYC settings. In our study, youth in alternative RYC settings experienced the living environment as a place where

they could feel at home, had autonomy, often had neutral to positive relationships with peers and professionals, and had access to their social networks. Youth in traditional RYC experienced the living environment as a place they did not necessarily consider home, where they could have a structured daily routine, where several young people reflected on neutral or negative relationships with peers, valued relationships with professionals, and where youth could be visited by family. In general, feeling at home, positive peer relationships, autonomy, visiting friends and family, living close to a social network, getting help with hobbies, and long-term stays were the elements rated as most helpful by young people in RYC.

Some of the most important differences between alternative and traditional RYC settings were found to be the home-like feel, room for individual differences in daily structure, access to the broader social network and hobbies, and greater opportunities of placement stability for some youth in alternative RYC facilities. The overall results of this study are consistent with the results of the living environment in studies that have focused on small-scale RYC units (Nijhof et al., 2020; Van Schie et al., 2020; van Schie et al., 2023; Visscher et al., 2022), and our own quantitative findings showing that youth, parents, and professionals report significantly higher scores for sensitivity and group atmosphere in alternative RYC than in traditional RYC (anonymous).

The present study showed that the living environment in alternative RYC settings appears to be set in the broader youth context, whereas traditional RYC tends to focus more on the individual and the youth microsystem (professionals, peers, and family). The focus on the broader context of alternative RYC is consistent with the principles of “therapeutic RYC” outlined in an international consensus statement (Whittaker et al., 2016). In terms of Bronfenbrenner’s (1994) ecological model, the mix of influences from different systems (individual, micro, meso, macro) interact and affect youth opportunities to participate in society. In traditional RYC, youth daily life took primarily place within the RYC facility, whereas in alternative RYC, youth had more opportunities to access other social groups (sports), which could contribute to greater opportunities for participation in society. Professionals, trainers, and parents collaborate to help a young person participate in sports and clubs, which is an example of the mesosystem.

Youth in alternative RYC settings seemed to report more opportunities to build social capital, e.g., these youth had more opportunities to access their social networks and were encouraged to join (sports) clubs outside the RYC facility. Youth social capital includes all relationships, contacts, and sources that can support youth (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Hoex et al., 2022). A long-term stay in alternative RYC can strengthen youths’ relationships with professionals and peers, resulting in youth having more social capital than youth with short-term placements (Rabley et al., 2014), which

are more common in traditional RYC. Building up social capital is fundamental for youth in terms of their identity development and later participation in the society.

In addition, our findings showed that traditional RYC settings have a standardized daily structure, with daily activities taking place primarily on the residential campus (see also anonymous). By their very nature, traditional RYC facilities may be more likely to be experienced as total institutions (Goffman, 1961), with living, education, treatment, and recreation all in the same place. It is argued that when youth stay in a total institution for a long period of time, it is difficult for them to cope with daily life on the outside because of their dependency on the institution. Our results showed that a standardized structure can be related to the reduction of autonomy experienced by young people and can be seen as a negative consequence of a repressive living environment (act of control) (De Valk et al., 2019a).

Our findings also showed that alternative RYC can create more opportunities for placement stability within RYC. A long-term placement can contribute to the attachment relationships between youth and professional (Mota et al., 2023; Rabley et al., 2014). However, from the perspective of youth in our research, stability of care remained a challenge in all RYC settings, due to the negative influence of substitute professionals, challenges in maintaining contact with their social networks, and the end of care at the age of 18. These challenges are consistent with challenges in other European countries, such as staff turnover, which can be explained by high workloads and underpayment (James et al., 2022; van Schie et al., 2023). In the Netherlands, there is no legislation on aftercare, i.e. the extension of youth care beyond the age of 18 (Strahl et al., 2021). However, care leavers report to struggle with employment, poverty, isolation and mental health issues (Strahl et al., 2021).

Based on the present study results, we suggest that placement in alternative RYC facilities may better meet the needs consistent with the rights of the child and key elements of a positive living environment, such as a home-like environment, relationships with peers and professionals, safety, personal autonomy, and stability (Y. G. Riemersma et al., 2024; Ten Brummelaar et al., 2018; United Nations General Assembly, 2009; Zijlstra, 2012). As this shift toward alternative RYC continues, we can expect to see more opportunities and fewer barriers to healthy development for youth in RYC, for example, by allowing youth to develop attachment relationships with professionals, peers, and continuing relationships with their own environment.

Strengths and limitations

A limitation of the present study is that we only examined living environment experiences once, after a few months of residence. Because some youth only stayed at the RYC facility for a short time, the information about the living

environment information had to be collected after a few months. Living environment experiences in a facility can change over time (e.g., attachment relationships with the professionals), so our findings may not provide a complete picture of perceived living environments at any length of stay (Rabley et al., 2014).

In addition, the characteristics of youth in alternative and traditional RYC were different in our sample; youth in traditional RYC showed less serious problems than youth in alternative RYC. This might be related to their age; youth in traditional RYC in our sample were on average 12 years old compared to an average of 15 years old for youth in alternative RYC. Youth experiences of their perceived living environment may be influenced by their characteristics, such as the number of problems they face. For example, other research has shown that youth with more severe problems and a high number of previous placements (more than five) have a more negative perception of the living environment than youth with less problems and previous placements (Leipoldt et al., 2019, 2022). Therefore, it is promising that youth in alternative RYC perceive their living environment more positively, despite a higher proportion of youth with severe problems and prior placements, particularly in family-style group homes.

A strength of the study is our qualitative approach with interviews about multiple domains of the living environment providing a rich understanding of how the living environment is experienced in different RYC settings and what challenges are encountered and why. We used a theoretical framework to set up the interview (De Lange et al., 2017), but the youth were able to talk about experiences outside of these concepts and to explain their experiences.

Furthermore, this study highlights the perspective of the youth themselves with regard to the perceived living environment. Although youth in RYC can suffer from complex issues (Leloux-Opmeer et al., 2016), 33 youth of different ages and with different histories were willing to discuss their experiences. By giving them this opportunity, we act in line with Articles 12 and 13 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which state that young people have the right to be heard and to express themselves (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). In addition, our study included different alternative RYC facilities, with different features, which is a good representation of the current innovations in the Netherlands (Knorth & Harder, 2022).

Future directions and implications

Since our results showed several challenges in the stability of caregiving, future research into the quality of working conditions and training for professionals is needed in all types of RYC. Although alternative RYC

facilities seem to offer more continuity of care, we need to know the needs of professionals with regard to working in small teams and preventing staff turnover to ensure continuity (2023; Van Schie et al., 2020).

Furthermore, although the first outcomes of alternative RYC seem promising, more research is needed on how to create home-like and ongoing living conditions for youth with complex needs in RYC. Alternative RYC may function as an alternative to secure RYC, and therefore we need more information on how to shift from a restricted living environment to an open and home-like environment for these youth, especially when dealing with aggressive or suicidal behavior (Nederlands Jeugdinstituut, 2023). We also need more information on long-term youth development and placement stability outcomes to gain further insight into the effectiveness of alternative RYC for the future of youth (Y. Riemersma et al., 2023). These outcomes should be carefully monitored over time in each facility.

To support the development of alternative RYC settings, the implementation of elements such as a home-like environment and continuing care conditions seem to be relevant. With attention to daily practice, all RYC facilities can begin today to incorporate elements of a home-like environment, such as allowing the youth to decorate their own rooms as much as possible. When considering a placement in RYC, professionals should pay attention to and facilitate youth access to their own social network. As our study results showed, access to one's own social network is highly valued, and can make it easier to leave or return to a previous placement. In addition, in line with our findings and policies in other European countries, the government should invest in aftercare to support young people until they become independent (Strahl et al., 2021).

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Appendices

Appendix A. Description of RYC facilities included in the study

Table A1. Characteristics of RYC settings in The Netherlands (all open facilities).

Facility	Target group	Length of stay		Location	Village or City	Live-in professionals	Professional-youth ratio during the day
A Home-like group	8 youth between 4 and 23 years old	Youth can stay up to the age of 23		Single living unit in a neighborhood	Village	Yes; with additional shift by other professionals	3:8
B Home-like groups ^a	3–6 youth per house per setting for youth between 12 and 18+ years old	Youth can stay until they are 18+ years old		Single living unit in a neighborhood	City	No	2:6
C Home-like group	5 youth between 12 and 18 years old	Youth can stay up to the age of 18		Single living unit in a neighborhood	City	No	1:5
D Home-like groups/ family-style group home ^b	4–6 youth per unit between 10 and 25 years old	Youth can stay up to the age of 25 (dependent on indication of care)		Single living unit in a neighborhood	Village	Yes; only in family-style group homes	1:6
E Family-style group home	4 youth between 8 and 18 years old	Youth can stay until they are 18 years (longer if necessary)		Single living unit in a neighborhood	Village	Yes	1/2:4
F Traditional RYC	10 youth between 6 and 12 years old	Youth can stay until they are 12 years old.		Campus setting (many RYC buildings)	City	No	2:10
G Traditional RYC	8 youth between 12–18 years old	Youth can stay 6 till 12 months (6 months on average), up to the age of 18		Campus setting (many RYC buildings)	City	No	2:8

^aThis facility contains two units: one for youth between 12–18 years old (1). There are four places for youth in the house and two places next to the house to prepare youth for independent living. The other facility focuses on youth 16+ (2). The youth-to-professionals ratio is lower due to independent living.

^bThis facility included multiple units. In this study, one family-style group homes and two home-like groups (one for youth 16+) are included. One family-style group home became a home-like group (with different professionals) during the study. This family-style group home is considered as home-like group.

Appendix B List of Statements

I can discuss everything with the professionals
I do fun things with the professionals
I think every week here has about the same scheme
I see this place as home
The professionals listen to me
The professionals are my role models
I know the rules to follow here
I think the atmosphere here is the same as at a friend's house
The professionals think it is important to know how I am doing
I have a good relationship with the other children who live here
The main focus here is on what I do well
My friends and family are welcome
I get support from professionals with my hobbies
I believe my parents are involved in making important decisions
I believe the professionals help me to communicate with my parents (or other important people)
I believe that professionals help me to communicate with friends
I can participate in the process of making important decisions in my life
I am being prepared here to become more independent
I always know who is looking after me
I have a place here where I can be alone
The focus here is on my needs
I have enough to eat and drink
I live near important people in my life
The professionals also help my parents with their problems
I can stay here as long as I need to
The professionals help me with school/work/daytime activities
I can choose what to do with my free time here