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Youth Initiated Mentoring in Social Work: Sustainable Solution for Youth with Complex Needs?

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Abstract

Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM) is a new approach in child and family services, in which collaboration with natural mentors from within the social network of the young person is central. Young people themselves choose a mentor from within their environment. This mentor is their confidential advisor and he or she stands up for the interests of the young person. In addition, the YIM is a cooperation partner for parents and social workers. Research into the long-term effects is lacking, therefore, in the current study, a total of 24 (former) YIMs were interviewed (14 women, 10 men). The ages of the YIMs range from 23 to 78 years ($M = 50$, $SD = 13.7$). On average, the YIMs know the young people for a period of 9 years and 6 months ($SD = 5.1$), family members not included. The YIM program were closed 6 months to 4 years ago ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 1.12$). The majority of YIMs keep in touch with the young person (75%) and currently most young persons lives at home or in within their community (79%). The YIM approach is a resilient and promising approach in social work, prerequisite that it is valued by parties involved.

Keywords Youth initiated mentoring · Out-of-home placement · Natural mentoring · Shared decision making · Youth at-risk

Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM) supports youth in identifying and recruiting natural mentors. This hybrid model is thought to bring together the strengths of informal mentoring relationships with the infrastructure and support provided by formal mentoring programs, while empowering adolescents to identify, draw upon, and strengthen existing relationships (Van Dam and Schwartz 2020). Compared to formal mentoring, youth-initiated mentoring requires fewer resources and is accessible to a broader range of youth than formal youth mentoring. An estimated 75% of youth report having natural mentors versus roughly 5% with formal mentors (Erickson et al. 2009; Raposa et al. 2017). In comparison to traditional formal mentoring programs, the YIM approach resulted in longer lasting relationships (Schwartz et al. 2013). Since then, this model has been adapted to fit other contexts as

well, for example as an approach to support youth at risk for out-of-home placements (Van Dam et al. 2017), as a suicide prevention strategy (King et al. 2019), and at high schools to support first generation college students (Schwartz et al. 2016). Evaluations of the latter have indicated positive effects on youth's help-recruiting skills, relationships with instructors, and academic outcomes (Schwartz et al. 2017; Parnes et al. 2020). A recent meta-analysis examined the association between YIM programs and youth outcomes across four domains: academic and vocational functioning, social-emotional development, physical health, and psychosocial problems. The findings indicated that YIM programs are significantly associated with positive youth outcomes. Results showed an overall medium effect size of $g = 0.30$ (Van Dam et al. submitted).

Although research shows beneficial effects of the YIM approach in the short term, research into the long-term effects is limited. How are YIMs and young people doing several months or years after the treatment has been completed? And how do YIMs look back on their YIM trajectory? These questions are central to this study. The focus is on various domains: the quality and sustainability of the relationship between the young person and YIM, the

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current situation of the young person and the support from social workers. These domains are briefly explained.

According to Whitney, Hendricker and Offutt (2011), two aspects determine the quality of the relationship: the emotional bond, including trust in each other, and the amount of time spent together. The existing emotional and trust relationship is one of the main advantages of the YIM approach (Van Dam and Verhulst 2016). Many young people have a relationship of trust with someone outside the family, such as a family member, neighbor, teacher or acquaintance (Van Dam, Smit et al. 2018a, b). Because the mentor comes from the social network, he or she knows the young person and the family. This familiarity ensures a safe environment for the young person (Van Dam and Verhulst 2016). As a confidential advisor, a YIM can offer various forms of help, such as emotional support by listening, practical support by offering transport or a place to sleep, conceptual support by thinking about choices and moral support by, for example, setting limits for a young person (Van Dam and Verhulst 2016).

An assumed gain of the YIM approach is the sustainability of the relationship. A mentor who has been selected by the youth is expected to be present in the young person's life longer than the social worker. This person can therefore continue to exert influence over the long term (Van Dam et al. 2018). Schwartz et al. (2013) investigated the sustainability of informal mentoring relationships. In 76 percent of the cases, the young person was still in contact with his or her mentor nine months after the completion of the program. This number dropped to 56 percent at 38 months after the completion of the trajectory. The frequency of the contact also decreased. The young people who were still in contact with their mentor performed better at school and work and showed fewer behavioral problems, but no difference was found in substance abuse. Negative termination of a mentoring relationship warrants extra attention, since this can have harmful consequences (Spencer et al. 2017). It is conceivable that the negative termination of an informal mentoring relationship with someone from the social network is even more harmful to the young person or the family, because this is a well-known and trusted person with whom the contact then becomes (whether or not definitive) terminated.

In the short term, just after completion of a trajectory, beneficial effects of natural mentorship have been found in the area of well-being, physical and psychological health, social-emotional functioning, and school success of the young person (Van Dam et al. 2018a, b). Young people are also less often removed from home when they had a YIM (Van Dam et al. 2017). In comparison to traditional formal mentoring programs, the YIM approach resulted in longer lasting relationships, and with less erosion of program

effects (Schwartz et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the perspective of the YIMs several years later is unknown.

During the YIM process, the YIM is supported by social workers. The idea behind this is that the expertise from the social network is combined with professional expertise (Van Dam and Verhulst 2016). YIMs indicate that they find it important that the support is easily accessible, can help quickly and provides clear explanations. In addition, they would like to be well informed about developments regarding the young person and the family (Van Dam and Verhulst 2016). It is unknown what YIMs need once treatment is ended.

The current qualitative study looked at the experiences of former YIMs. The main question is: How do YIMs look back on the trajectory? This is divided into four sub-questions: (1) What has the YIM process done to the quality of the relationship (s) between the YIM and the young people / families? (2) How sustainable is the contact between the YIMs and the young people? (3) How are the young people doing after the project has been completed? (4) How have YIMs experienced the support provided by social workers?

Method

Participants

A total of 48 YIMs were contacted for this study, half of them agreed to an interview (14 women, 10 men, *Mean* = 50 years, age range: 23–78 years). For all YIMs, the trajectory from the assistance completed by 2018 at the latest. Most participants were Dutch 88% ($n = 21$), two participants have dual nationality, Dutch / Moroccan and Dutch / Surinamese and one participant is Iraqi. A majority 63% ($n = 15$) have a college or university education level. The relationship between YIM and youngster varies from family member 25% ($n = 6$), friend of the family 42% ($n = 10$), father or mother of friend of the youngster 8% ($n = 2$), neighbour 8% ($n = 2$) to neighborhood or youth worker 17% ($n = 4$). On average, the YIMs know young people aged 9 years and 6 months ($SD = 5.1$), family members not included.

Procedure

The participants were recruited through youth aid organization Spirit in Amsterdam ($n = 13$) and Youké in Veenendaal and Amersfoort ($n = 11$). The interviews took place from the end of March 2019 to the end of June 2019 in a place where the participant felt comfortable, e.g. at home, work or in a cafe. The interviews lasted between 45 min and an hour and were conducted by one of the three researchers. The first two interviews were conducted together to increase reliability. In qualitative research, the researcher is part of the measuring

instrument (Boeije 2014). By conducting the first interviews together, there is more agreement when conducting the other interviews.

Before the interview started, all participants signed an informed consent. They indicate that they are aware of the content of the study and that they can withdraw their participation. All participants gave oral permission to record the interview before the interview. The recordings were subsequently worked out in transcripts that were then sent to the participants for verification. All participants agreed to the transcripts and the use of the information. Feedback of the information increases the reliability and validity of the research (Evers 2015). Finally, all participants received a gift voucher of 15 euros.

Subjects

Based on the research questions, a semi-structured interview was chosen based on a topic list. In this way, direction is given to the interview, but there is also room to go along with the participant's story (Boeije 2014). The topic list consisted of five topics, at the end of each interview a short questionnaire was completed to collect demographics.

Quality of the Relationship

To what extent has something changed in the quality of the relationship as a result of the YIM process? Questions were asked about the relationships at the start of the process and after completion of the process.

Sustainability of the Relationship

The question was whether there was still contact with the young person after completion of the process. If that was not the case, the reason for this was asked. If there was still contact, the frequency and manner of contact were discussed.

Current Situation Younger

The participants were asked whether they knew how the young person was doing. More specifically, if they knew the current living, school and work situation.

Need for Assistance

Finally, the experience of YIMs with the care provision was discussed. Questions were asked about good aspects of support for the care provision and for points for improvement or things that were missed.

Analysis

The computer program Nvivo 12 Plus was used to analyze the data. This program is a tool to code and analyze the different themes from the interviews (Boeije 2014). On the basis of the topic list and information from the interviews, a coding scheme has been drawn up in collaboration with the other researchers. This open coding, or the exploration phase, was the first step in the analysis. Axial coding then took place with the aim of ordering the collected data by giving each concept and characteristic a unique code that is the same across all collected data (Wester 2003). There have been regular consultations between the researchers about the use and adaptation of the coding scheme and deviating concepts and characteristics. In this way, internal reliability has been increased (Evers 2015). Finally, selective coding has been applied to integrate all concepts and features with each other to draw conclusions about the different sub-topics.

Results

Quality of the Relationship

A number of YIMs ($N=11$) indicate that there is a change in the bond with the young person before, during and after the trajectory. *"We have a completely different relationship now. That's very different from then"* (man, 45). Both positive and negative changes in contact have been mentioned. *"Among other things, more trust, a closer bond, getting to know younger people even better, more personal conversations and dealing with each other in a more mature way are mentioned as positive changes. The bond has definitely, definitely, changed. Much more trustworthy too"* (man, 45). Furthermore, some YIMs ($N=7$) indicate that the contact is more demanding during the trajectory and more casual afterwards. The fact that the contact is more demanding sometimes has a negative effect. As a result, there was more quarrel with the young person at a YIM than before the trajectory, because then there was less interference. Finally, a YIM indicates that the cooperation with the social workers also had a negative effect on the relationship. *"It was so forced at one point, that because of irritation I started to get rid of him too... He also saw me as some kind of snitch [traitor]"* (man, 30). This YIM has stopped the YIM trajectory and now there is good contact again, trust is slowly coming back.

A little more than half of the YIMs ($N=13$) indicates that the bond has stayed the same. *"The bond has always been very strong. From the moment, it's very small. It will stay that way"* (woman, 46). Of the 24 YIMs, two also say that the band did not get better, but neither worse, because they didn't feel they could get through to the youngster. *"But I*

noticed that it didn't really come from the child. He knew where to find me with difficulties. Or actually just not." (woman, 48).

The tasks of the YIM are mainly described in terms of practical and emotional support. YIMs tell that they mainly give the young people attention, support and talk together. "I've listened a lot" (woman, 78). Furthermore, a YIM can be a base or refuge. A place where the youngster can take shelter for a while. Five YIMs have (temporarily) taken the young person into their home during the trajectory. But more YIMs stated that the young person came to their home at fixed times or stated that the young person found peace and regularity at the YIM's home. "So, my job was just to make him feel comfortable here. Yeah, you know, this was a refuge" (woman, 42). Other practical things in which YIMs support young people are applying for jobs, doing homework, looking for housing and arranging schools.

Although the YIM is mainly there for the young person, the YIM trajectory also affects parents, siblings and sisters. The YIM often plays a mediating role between the young person and the parents. Some YIMs also take it upon themselves to give explanations and advice to parents. Most YIMs emphasize that they put the interests of the young person first, but saw good contact with the parents as a prerequisite. "I don't think that if I'm no longer on speaking terms with her mother, I won't be able to do this" (woman, 48). In order to keep the connection good, it is important to make conscious decisions according to a number of YIMs: "You have to keep talking to everyone without getting the feeling that you are looking for or taking sides for someone. That's one thing you also have to keep thinking about" (man, 50). In practice this doesn't always turn out to be that easy. Some of the YIMs mention that they have been involved in the YIM role and the contact with the young person and the family. "That was switching between still being a family or becoming the care worker? That's a vague area" (man, 58).

Sustainability of the Relationship

Most YIMs ($N=18$) still have contact with the young person, of which 2 YIMs indicate that the contact was temporarily interrupted, this because of personal circumstances and because the contact was interrupted by the family. However, these YIMs now have contact with the young person and the family again. "At one point I met them again, I made contact with them again. And that was just like old times. In the past two weeks, I think I've seen them five times or so" (man, 35). The contact of the YIMs the youngsters still see usually consists of calling, sending messages and occasionally meeting the youngster. Most YIMs do indicate that the contact has become less frequent after the end of the trajectory. "You also have to let them go, don't you? She is now 18, she has a boyfriend, she deals with that a bit more,

so you have to let them go. Let them go. And when the time comes, you have to be there again, but that's pretty hard." (man, 47). Although with some YIMs, the contact is still as intense as it was during the process. "Yeah, I'll stay involved anyway. But that is also because he is still a child at home with us. So, then you talk to each other" (man, 50).

Of the 24 YIMs, six don't have contact anymore. A YIM says he's very sorry about this. The contact has been broken by the family after a move. This YIM would still like to be in the family's picture, but doesn't get a reaction anymore. Another YIM indicates that the friendship with the youngster's mother stopped during the journey. "So that's it for me. Of course, I reacted then, from Monday I call the social worker and I withdraw. And I did" (woman, 48). Furthermore, two of the YIMs indicate to have stopped contact themselves at the end of the trajectory. These YIMs found the trajectory very intense and have chosen to stop the contact. "I really said myself, I'm keeping a little distance. I just had to sort things out for myself as well" (woman, 46). The YIMs who no longer have contact indicate that they are still open to it. "For all three [father, mother and youngster], if they need me very much, they can always call me. Now and 10 years from now" (woman, 62).

Current Situation Youngster

Table 1 gives an overview of the current situation of the young person. It is divided into living situation, school and work. This table shows the situation as described by the YIM. A number of YIMs did not know exactly how the young person was doing at the time of the study ($N=4$). Most YIMs indicate that the younger person is doing better in the long run ($N=16$). Four YIMs indicate that the young person is not doing well yet. Not all YIMs knew if the young person has a job at the moment.

Need for Assistance

The YIMs have all had an introduction or initial interview with social work professionals. Most YIMs found this a pleasant conversation in which it became clear what the role of the YIM is and in which, to a certain extent, a plan was drawn up and agreements were made regarding the trajectory. "I have a good feeling about this kind of initial discussion. It was clear that we were here with different parties, and made agreements, in which he was also involved. And as far as I can remember he also indicated during the conversation that he was willing to do this. Even if he wasn't, of course he's an adolescent, he's not going to say that I think that's fantastic" (man, 65).

The contact with the social workers during the process varies per YIM. Some YIMs had weekly conversations and others hardly had any contact. In general, the YIMs are

Table 1 Current situation youngster

	Living situation	School	Work
1	Institutionalised care	No	No
2	With parent(s)	Yes	Unknown
3	With parent(s)	No	Yes
4	With parent(s)	Yes	Yes
5	Independent	Yes	No
6	With parent(s)	No	Yes
7	Institutionalised care	Yes	No
8	With parent(s)	No	Yes
9	With parent(s)	Yes	Unknown
10	With parent(s)	Yes	Unknown
11*	With parent(s)	Yes	Yes
12**	Institutionalised care	Yes	No
12**	With parent(s)	Yes	Unknown
13	With parent(s)	No	Unknown
14	Foster care	No	Yes
15	Independent	No	Yes
16	With parent(s)	No	Yes
17	With parent(s)	Yes	No
18	With parent(s)	Yes	Unknown
19	Institutionalised care	Yes	Yes
20/21***	With parent(s)	Yes	Unknown
22	With parent(s)	Yes	Yes
23	With parent(s)	Yes	Yes
24	With (former) YIM	No	No
Total	At home, independent and with family/relatives: 19 Institutionalised care: 5	No: 9 Yes 15	No: 6 Yes: 11

*Guided two youngsters (brother and sister) in a process

**Did two different courses with two different young people

***Married couple accompanied a young person in a process

positive about the contact with social workers. They indicate that the social workers were easily accessible, that the joint conversations were meaningful, that the YIM himself was given the space to share feelings and grief and that the young person was well involved in the process. The YIMs who had little contact with the social workers indicated that they did not feel the need for this very much either. These YIMs see their role more in relation to the young person and attach less value to the assistance. *"Sometimes I forgot all about it... you know, I got a phone call every once in a while... It was a bit of a mandatory number every time"* (woman, 42).

One of the most important criticisms is the intensity of the project. A large number of YIMs ($N=15$) indicate that they experienced the trajectory as intense. Some YIMs think that the young person was already too deeply involved in the assistance to be supervised by a YIM. *"You know, it really wasn't easy anymore. And I think the YIM is quite accessible. You have to take care of someone all the time, but if someone*

always goes into the criminal framework, you think, "Hey, what do you do then?" (man, 30). The YIM trajectory is seen as an alternative for out-of-home placement, although a number of YIMs indicate that out-of-home placement is necessary. *"But she was eventually placed out of the house. And of course, the goal of a YIM is that this doesn't happen, but it was just necessary. Because it wasn't going home anymore, so then it was quickly over again"* (woman, 29).

At the end of the trajectory, 14 YIMs had a final conversation. This conversation mainly serves as an evaluation moment, as a conclusion of the assistance for the young person and YIM and it is also used to make arrangements for a possible follow-up. In most of the final interviews it was indicated that if the YIM would still need support at the end of the trajectory, this is possible. In general, the YIMs were satisfied with the final interview. Some even ended it festively with cake. *"I had a final conversation. We had, I had brought cake, and then we had a final conversation. We ended it, with the family, with everything"* (woman, 58). One YIM, described a different experience: the final conversation had the wrong approach by focusing on what went well during the trajectory, while according to the YIM the trajectory had not gone well at all. *"And I thought to myself, from what went well, no let's talk about what we can learn from this. What can we make better next time... that's just to praise the whole trajectory to heaven"* (man, 30). The other YIMs ($N=10$) didn't have a final call. Reasons for this are, for example, the abrupt stopping of the trajectory due to eviction or quarrel and the slow bleeding to death of the trajectory. Half of them indicated that they had missed it and the other half explicitly indicated that they did not need or want a final conversation. *"I just thought I'd check it out. Maybe I'm stubborn about it, but if you don't listen to me, then I don't have to sit down for an evaluation either"* (man, 30).

Discussion

The aim of the current research was to investigate the experiences of former YIMs. It looked at the sustainability and quality of the relationship, the long-term effects for youth and the experienced support from the social workers. The experience of the YIMs was generally positive. Especially the feeling of having achieved something and the feeling of having (had) an influence on the young person are mentioned as valuable. This relates to the quality of the relationship: because a YIM takes a different position in the family, different social interactions arise, which can lead to a change in the quality of the relationship (Van Dam et al. 2019a, b). The use of a YIM trajectory created more conflict and tension in some relationships. This is a confirmation of the natural paradox (Van Dam et al. 2019a,

b) in the sense that, by formalizing the natural relationship, a negative influence on the relationship can occur. The natural paradox is also partly negated, because a number of YIMs mentioned a positive change in the quality of the relationship with the young person and the majority of YIMs experience no change in the quality of the relationship with the young person. For them, the process was very natural and self-evident. The majority still have good contact with other family members, but a number of trajectories have ended with a negative change in the relationship with other family members, with some YIMs now no longer having contact with certain family members. This means that careful thought has to be given to the choice of the YIM, for example by collaborating with parents during the selection process of a YIM, which is appreciated and empowers them to suggest mentors or vetoing mentors they felt were not a good fit (Spencer et al. 2019).

Most YIMs, i.e. 75%, still had contact with the young person at the end of the trajectory. This percentage corresponds with percentages found above 75% in previous research (Schwartz et al. 2013; Van Dam et al. 2018a, b). Also, as in the study by Schwartz et al. (2013), YIMs indicate that the frequency of contact generally decreases after completion of the trajectory. The other YIMs no longer have contact, but are still open for contact. The causes for ending the informal mentoring relationship as YIM correspond with the causes for ending a formal mentoring relationship (Spencer et al. 2017), namely unforeseen personal circumstances (such as moving house), dissatisfaction or indifference on the part of the young person, dissatisfaction on the part of the mentor, slow extinction of contact because both parties put no effort into it, and complete silence on the part of the mentor. Another similarity between the YIMs and formal mentors is the connection between the quality of the relationship and sustainability. Good relationships between young person and YIM or formal mentor were ended more often due to external causes and weaker relationships were ended more often due to dissatisfaction or slow extinction. The YIMs who indicate that they felt they had achieved nothing with the process generally also have no contact with the young person in the long term.

At the follow-up, a total of 79% are living at home again or with a trusted person from within their community. This is in line with two previous studies, in which a total of 138 young people was included, where about 80–90% of the young people stayed at home, despite an earlier indication for out-of-home placement (Van Dam et al. 2017; Van Dam et al. 2018a, b). Three of the out-of-home placement also meant the end of the YIM trajectory. Although reducing the number of out-of-home placement has priority, YIMs also indicate that a YIM trajectory in

which a young person is placed out-of-home did not fail, they state that it is sometimes better for the young person because the situation at home was untenable.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was small, although in qualitative research saturation could occur with approximately six participants (Guest et al. 2006), which depends on the richness of the data and the degree of heterogeneity of the sample (Bryman 2012; Fusch and Ness 2015). Our study did not include natural mentors who were not willing to cooperate with social workers, which was roughly 20% of the participants in a previous study (Van Dam et al. 2017). Self-selection is another important limitation: those who agreed to be interviewed may have had more positive experiences or may have differed in other ways from those who refused. This is why the external validity of this study is limited (Bryman 2012). In addition, only former YIMs have been interviewed. For a complete picture of the experience with a YIM trajectory, parents, youth and social workers also needs to be interviewed.

Based on the current research, a number of recommendations can be made for follow-up research. Follow-up research should focus on demonstrating a (causal) relationship between a YIM programme and an improvement in the situation of young people in the long term. Current research gives an indication that most young people are doing well or better after a YIM trajectory in the long term. Another interesting angle is to compare the experiences of the YIMs with those of parents and young people. Do they look back on the YIM trajectory in the long term in the same way or does it differ?

This research gives a good picture of the different experiences of the YIMs, after the assistance has been completed. The majority of the YIMs stay in contact with the young person after the treatment has completed and in most cases the threat of out-of-home placement has been prevented. This makes working with a YIM a positive and promising approach in youth assistance, with an important task for the social worker, namely, making sure that the YIM is appreciated by all parties involved.

Author Contributions LD was the leading author, he designed the study, conducted the funding, did the interpretation of the data, and wrote the manuscript. LH supported with the data collection, interpretation of the data and writing the manuscript. GJS supported with the interpretation of the data and reviewed the manuscript.

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Data Availability Yes.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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