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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the youth-initiated mentoring (YIM) approach for youth at risk for out-of-home placement. In this approach, a youth nominates someone from within their social network, and positions this person as a YIM to function as an ally for the youth and as a partner for parents and professional caregivers. Through interviews with six youth, six YIMs, and seven parents ($N = 19$), we examined the positioning of a YIM and sustainability. The results indicated that attitudes from participants toward asking someone or being asked to become a YIM varied from enthusiastic to cautious. Participants reported increased contact intensity and relationship

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quality. Two parents did not experience YIM as beneficial. Most participants expected that the YIM–mentee relationship lasts after professional care terminates. The results reveal that YIM is experienced as an ally, but it also has the potential to increase relational conflicts between social network members.

Keywords

youth-initiated mentoring, natural mentoring, positioning theory, youth at risk, out-of-home placement

Introduction

Although much research has focused on the role of parents in the development of children and adolescents, the role of other community adults, including family friends, neighbors, and teachers, has only recently been recognized as playing a vital role in the well-being of young people (Bowers, Johnson, Warren, Tirrell, & Lerner, 2015; Kesselring, de Winter, van Yperen, & Lecluijze, 2016). Studies suggest that approximately three-quarters of adolescents have natural mentors within their social networks (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Raposa, Dietz, & Rhodes, 2017). A natural mentor is the result of an organically developing relationship between an adolescent and an older or more experienced individual who provides guidance and support over time. In contrast, formal mentoring programs, in which a volunteer is matched with a young person, reach an estimated 7% of youth (Erickson et al., 2009; Raposa et al., 2017).

A recent meta-analysis of the effect of formal mentoring programs on positive youth outcomes showed a small overall average effect size of $d = .19$ (Raposa et al., 2018). Similarly, a recent meta-analytic study on natural mentoring relationships showed that the mere *presence* of a natural mentor was associated with positive youth outcomes, with a small overall average effect size of Cohen's $d = .21$ (Van Dam et al., 2018). The association between the *quality* of the natural mentoring relationship (relatedness, social support and autonomy support) and positive youth outcomes yielded a medium overall average effect size ($d = .43$), with the largest effect sizes for social-emotional development ($d = .55$), and academic and vocational functioning ($d = .40$), and a small effect size ($d = .20$) for psychosocial problems. Notably, at-risk status (for instance, teenage mothers, homeless youth, youth in foster care and children of alcoholic parents) did not moderate the relation between presence and quality of natural mentoring relationships on one hand and

youth outcomes on the other hand, which is a positive finding for adolescents with complex needs.

At-risk youth can benefit from natural mentoring relationships, but individual and contextual risk factors, such as high levels of family or neighborhood risk, can lead to generalized relationship dissatisfaction and negative expectations of the availability and social support of significant others (e.g., Shumaker, Deutsch, & Brenninkmeyer, 2009), which may negatively influence the mentoring relationship (Raposa, Rhodes, & Herrera, 2016). The lack of individual capacities, such as insufficient skills to develop and maintain reciprocal social relationships, make it harder for at-risk youth to organically develop natural mentoring relationships (Greeson, Thompson, Ali, & Wenger, 2015). Social workers are mainly focused on delivering care, and less on promoting social inclusion (McConkey & Collins, 2010) and increasing social capital (Hawkins & Maurer, 2012). Therefore, and based on the insights derived from studies on the effects of both formal mentoring programs and informal mentoring relationships (Raposa et al., 2018; Van Dam et al., 2018), the new hybrid youth-initiated mentor (YIM) approach was developed to support youth with complex needs to use the natural resources available in their extended family networks (Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013; Van Dam et al., 2017).

Although preliminary research on YIM showed promising results, important challenges related to combining natural and formal approaches to mentoring arose in practice. For example, if professionals intervene to deliberately take advantage of the expected positive effects of a relationship with an existing *natural* mentor, one may question how natural such a relationship remains, and whether its assumed intrinsic positive influence may be reduced or even lost by formalizing it. Professionals refer to this dilemma as the *natural paradox*. The current study examines the social dynamics within triads of youth, parents, and YIM, and how these dynamics may be influenced by the transition from natural mentor to YIM.

Natural Mentoring Integrated in Youth Mental Health Care

A Hybrid Approach for Youth With Complex Needs

The YIM approach can be considered as a hybrid approach integrating formal and informal care, in which the focus is on empowering the adolescent's network through the positioning of and collaboration with an informal mentor, designated as a YIM. This informal mentor is a person (e.g., relative, neighbor, or friend) adolescents nominate from their own social network, who

functions as a confidant and spokesman for the adolescent, and as a cooperation partner for parents and professionals (Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2016; Van Dam et al., 2017). In the context of youth with complex needs, the mentor (or: YIM) works with family members and the professional team to increase or take advantage of the already existing resilience of the youth and family, and thereby improves their functioning (Van Dam & Verhulst, 2016). This fits with the international movement in child and family social work to make use of the strengths of families and their own social networks, and to stimulate client participation (Burford, 2005), and shared decision making between the client system and professionals (Bartelink, van Yperen, & Ten Berge, 2015). It is also in line with the involvement of the educative civil society, in which the joint activities of citizens in the upbringing of children and adolescents are emphasized (Burford, 2005; Van Dijken, Stams, & De Winter, 2016, 2017).

The YIM approach starts with a focus on “who,” in which the youth and family identify a member of the social network who could become the YIM (first phase). After identification of the YIM, the professional has a conversation with the nominated YIM to describe what he or she can expect and what type of support the YIM needs to fulfill this position. Subsequently, the focus is on “what,” that is, investigating each person’s perspective on the current and desired situation (second phase). The third phase is focused on establishing “how,” exploring how each participant can contribute to the desired situation. The final fourth phase is focused on “adaptivity,” that is, the degree to which the current informal pedagogical alliance can meet new challenges.

Previous research on the effectiveness of another hybrid approach combining formal and informal care, designated as family group conferences (a process led by family members to plan and make decisions for a child who is at risk for maltreatment), did not find robust empirical evidence for its effectiveness (Dijkstra et al., 2016). It even reported nonanticipated results that may be evaluated as negative from a family preservation perspective, such as an increase in the number and length of out-of-home placements for older children and minority groups. Therefore, it is important to know more about the social dynamics of integrating formal and informal care through the positioning of a social network member as YIM, and how people experience this positioning process.

Social Dynamics and Sustainability

Social dynamics concern the interplay between individuals and the groups in which they participate; the position—a place or status—of individuals in a group represents cognition, emotion, action, and perception (Harre,

Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothart, & Sabat, 2009). Position theory states that *actions* of people (verbal and nonverbal) create *rights and duties* between people and result in personal *narratives*, which in itself are *meaningful*. The combination of actions, rights, duties, narratives, and meaning creates the social dynamics in which the family members, natural mentor, and the professional navigate: the positioning process. This process results in new social interactions and dynamics between youth, parents, and mentors, but the way in which this occurs is currently a black box.

Position theory identifies three positions: the first-order status refers to being the candidate status for a position; the second-order status is to have an acknowledged but not completely accepted position, implicit or explicit; and the third-order status is “having a footing” or actually being valued and listened to. A natural mentor with “footing” should increase epistemic trust in youth, that is, the receptiveness to the social knowledge from their social environment (Harre et al., 2009), enabling youth to benefit from the knowledge available in the social network (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Fonagy, Luyten, Allison, & Campbell, 2017).

Collaborating with a YIM with footing—the third-order status—is collaborating with a YIM in which the youth has trust. But this does not necessarily mean the parents share this trust. They may not agree with the YIM selected by the youth, because of his or her background (e.g., school drop-out or drug abuse) or because of earlier negative experiences between parent(s) and this person. These differential narratives are crucial, because they result in different interaction patterns that create exchanges between youth and parent or youth and mentor, which may either support or undermine the success of the intervention (Keller, 2005).

Sustainability is an important benefit of natural mentoring (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Keller, 2005). Formalizing a relationship with someone already known to the youth may improve relationship quality and consequently increase its durability, because these mentors start with a high level of investment in their protégés and are less vulnerable to the disappointments and dashed expectations that may be experienced in formal mentoring relationships (Spencer et al., 2016).

Sustainable natural mentoring relationships are particularly valuable for youth with mental health needs, because they tend to prefer informal support rather than professional care; generally, seeking informal help is a first step that precedes professional service use (Rickwood, Mazzer, & Telford, 2015). To create sustainable relationships, the approval of parents on the involvement of others in childrearing practices is crucial, but parents may feel ambivalent about this. Research suggests that parents tend to prefer involvement of others in activities that do not focus explicitly on childrearing, but

assist them in handling parenting tasks or give them the opportunity to exchange experiences (Kesselring et al., 2016). Taken together, the YIM process might start with “high hopes” from all parties involved, but it is unclear how these expectations become sustainable realities in the context of an ongoing relationship.

In sum, natural mentors are embedded within the social networks of youth with complex needs, but these adolescents could use support to develop such a relationship. Therefore, YIM represents a hybrid approach in which professionals stimulate and facilitate youth to collaborate with their natural mentors. The positioning of these informal mentors by professionals results in new social interactions and dynamics between youth, parents, and mentors. The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain insight into participants’ perspectives on the shift in position to YIM (e.g., what participants experience when they are asked or ask someone to become YIM, what a YIM needs to fulfill his position, what his role or tasks are) and its effects on social dynamics and perceived sustainability. Qualitative in-depth interviews with all three triad members from six relationship triangles ($N = 19$ subjects) create a 360° perspective—the youth, his or her parent(s), and the YIM—and shed light on the positioning process and each perspective on sustainability.

Method

Participants

Six relationship triads included six youth between 15 and 18 years of age ($M = 16.3$, $SD = 1.21$), their parents, between 42 and 62 years of age ($n = 7$, $M = 51.3$, $SD = 6.0$), and the YIMs who varied in age from 28 till 55 ($n = 6$, $M = 41.8$, $SD = 9.3$). In total, 84% ($n = 16$) of all triad members were Dutch, one person was Antillean, and two were Guianese. All youth ($n = 6$) attended school, one attended a special education school. All parents and YIMs ($n = 13$) had completed formal education, varying between vocational training schools and university. Two YIMs were friends of the mother of the mentee, one was an ex-mother-in-law, one was a former cop, one a former school mentor, and another one was a friend of the youth.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from Spirit, a public youth care institution funded by the municipality of Amsterdam, which implemented the YIM approach to prevent or shorten the duration of out-of-home placements. Families with a child between 12 and 18 years old for whom an out-of-home placement was advised by the local child protection services and who were referred to Spirit were

offered this new approach to prevent out-of-home placement. If they declined, they received care-as-usual from Spirit, namely, residential treatment. All adolescents who accepted this new approach were encouraged to choose a YIM (phase 1); the families who actually collaborated with a positioned YIM were also invited to participate in this study. Treatment (e.g., systemic therapy, cognitive therapy, and psychoeducation) was delivered at home by professionals in collaboration with the family and YIM. Families who identified a YIM and completed the approximately 6 months' standard period of treatment were invited to participate in our study. In total, 21 families received a letter in which the research question was explained, and they were informed about their privacy and the scientific purpose of the study. After having been informed by means of a letter, all families received a phone call with more detailed information about the study, in which they were asked to participate. All three parties (parent(s), youth, and YIM) needed to consent to be able to participate. In total, 10 different family members agreed to participate, but within six families the complete triad agreed, and therefore were included in the study. Participants filled out an informed consent statement and received 5 euros for compensation.

The interviews were conducted with each participant individually to prevent influences from other triad members. Fourteen interviews were conducted face to face and five by telephone. The interview contained 22 open questions for parents, 21 for youth, and 19 for YIMs. The total duration of each interview was around 30 to 45 minutes. The interview was recorded and transcribed; the transcription was sent to each participant to make adjustments if necessary. All participants agreed with the transcription.

Measures

Demographics (e.g., age, gender, nationality, etc.) were collected through a short questionnaire after the interview. Based on literature study, we developed a topic guide, resulting in a semi-structured interview, which focused on the following two theoretical principles.

Social dynamics. Participants were interviewed about their action/response when they asked someone or were asked to become YIM (*actions*), about their ideas regarding what a YIM needs to fulfill his position and what his role or tasks are (*rights and duties*), and the impact of being positioned as YIM (*narratives and meaning*).

Sustainability. Because sustainability is an important benefit of natural mentoring, participants were asked whether they thought the YIM–youth relationship would last when professional care would be ended.

Analysis

The first and second author conducted in-depth readings of the complete interview transcripts. An initial codebook was established based on the six areas we theoretically explored: (a) initial response to the invitation to become YIM, (b) requirements to fulfill the role of YIM, (c) vision on the role or task of a YIM, (d) changes because of formalizing the involvement as YIM, (e) a sense of purpose and meaning, and (f) perspective on the sustainability of the involvement of a YIM.

The transcripts were coded based on the initial codebook; new subcategories were identified to categorize participants. Initial themes were identified by the second author and verified by the first author, using the iterative thematic approach from Boeije (2005). During the initial coding phase (Step 1), we reviewed the transcripts to identify emerging themes, based on the initial codebook. Next, we noted possible relations between codes and groups and developed descriptive codes and categories (Step 2). We then conducted our final analyses by reviewing the code clustering (Step 3). The last author served as master coder, reviewing the work of and providing feedback to the other coders to ensure consistency in coding across cases. Coders met biweekly to discuss questions and clarify definitions related to coding categories. Transcription and data analysis were in Dutch; key quotes were translated into English.

Results

In this part, we describe the findings in detail regarding the social dynamics, for example, the functioning of the triad, the actions (invitation and response to the question becoming YIM), the perceived rights and duties of a YIM, and the value of this positioning (narrative and meaning). We also report our findings on sustainability of the YIM–mentee relationship. The results are organized in Table 1 to give an integrative image, after which they are described in more detail.

Social Dynamics–Triad Functioning

Position theory distinguishes three positions: the first-order status refers to being the candidate status for a position; the second-order status is to have an acknowledged but not completely accepted position, implicit or explicit; and the third-order status is “having a footing” or actually being valued and listened to (Harre et al., 2009). In all triads, the actual position of the YIM was identified in one of the three described positions, indicating this typology

Table 1. Integrative Overview of the Results of the Three Stakeholder Groups.

	Adolescents (n = 6)	Parents (n = 7)	YIMs (n = 6)
<i>Actions</i>			
Action/response to invite/invitation	Proactive (n = 3); cautious (n = 3)	Proactive (n = 4); cautious (n = 3)	Proactive (n = 3); cautious (n = 3)
<i>Rights</i>			
Needs to fulfill YIM position	More contact and agreements (n = 3); nothing because YIM is “good by nature” (n = 3)	Practical information and professional support (n = 3); nothing because YIM is “good by nature” (n = 4)	Treatment information (n = 2), contact with professionals (n = 4), agreements (n = 4)
<i>Duties</i>			
Role and/or task of a YIM	Personal care and support (n = 5), guidance and advice (n = 2), and practical support (n = 4)	Personal care and support (n = 7), guidance and advice (n = 7), practical support (n = 6), and “not taking sides” (n = 2)	Personal care and support (n = 6), guidance and advice (n = 4), practical support (n = 3)
<i>Narratives</i>			
Change because of becoming YIM	Relationship intensified (n = 5), no change (n = 1)	Relationship intensified (n = 4), relationship worsened (n = 1), no change (n = 2)	Relationship intensified (n = 4), merely formalization of existing position (n = 2)
<i>Meaning</i>			
Personal value of YIM	Meaningful (n = 6)	Valuable (n = 5), problematic n = 2)	Valuable (n = 2), unnecessary (n = 4)
<i>Sustainability</i>			
of the YIM relationship	Stays meaningful (n = 5) No expectations (n = 1)	An active bond (n = 6) No expectations (n = 1)	Relationship remains (n = 6)

Note. Numbers of reactions can add up to more than the numbers of respondents in the respective stakeholder group, because respondents may have mentioned more than one aspect. YIM = youth-initiated mentoring.

might help differentiate between the positions a YIM can obtain. For example, in one triad, the mother did not support the decision to work with a YIM and the choice her son made. Therefore, the YIM remained in the first-order “candidate status,” mother (53):

My son may choose her, but that doesn’t mean I can talk to her. I agreed, because if he (her son) wants this, go ahead, I can’t say he must choose someone else. But she was involved with my son too strongly, which I understand from her (the YIM) perspective, but to me it meant we couldn’t relate anymore.

Three other triads functioned in the second-order status as “acknowledged position.” Between these parent(s) and youth tension was experienced. However, the contact between parent and YIM and YIM and youth was positive: “The current situation at home is sometimes unbearable, at those moments I call her (YIM)” (girl, aged 17). In the last two triads, the third-order status (i.e., “having footing”) was obtained. The YIM was actually being valued and listened to, because all parties involved agreed with the positioning of the selected YIM. Mother (50) said, “If this approach works, I think it is wonderful to solve these issues with people you know instead of with unknown professionals.”

Social Dynamics—Actions

The suggestion to ask a social network member to become YIM evoked two types of reactions: *proactive* and *cautious* (Table 1), which indicates differences between and within families regarding the perception of asking others for support. For example, proactive youth ($N = 3$) said it felt good and natural to ask someone to become YIM, and that they did not experience any stress. One girl (aged 15) said, “Actually, I didn’t really need to ask her, she (the YIM) already mentioned she wanted to help, that’s why it was the obvious thing to ask her.” Proactive parents ($N = 4$) said bringing in a YIM gave them trust in the future of their child and made them feel less demoralized. Proactive YIMs ($n = 3$) thought becoming a YIM was the logical thing to do. Two of them felt honored and one was thankful to be able to help: “I had goosebumps when she asked me. This was so cool and of course I want to help!” (male YIM, 28).

Cautious participants were more hesitant: For youth ($n = 3$), one would have liked to have someone offering a listening ear, but did not want this person to be involved in his home situation, another youth thought it was a scary thing to ask. Cautious parents ($n = 3$) experienced the YIM concept as a “preliminary theoretical concept from professionals” and had mixed feelings about asking someone or about the person being asked, or were afraid to ask someone. Cautious YIMs ($n = 3$) were happy with the trust the youth had in them, but they also experienced some discomfort:

I was happy with the trust he expressed in me, but also a little cautious because I didn’t know him that well. I experienced tension about how to help him, because I knew so little about him or his family and friends. (Woman, 46)

Social Dynamics—Rights

The three participant groups all described rights associated with the YIM position, indicating a difference with nonpositioned social network members.

Youth ($n = 3$) thought the person who became their YIM ought to have (more) contact with their parents and themselves. In their opinion, agreements were necessary to collaborate with each other:

It was obvious that between my mother and the YIM a clear line needs to be drawn, indicating my mom is and stays the parent. This was necessary because it was difficult for my mom that I was about to express my feelings to another adult. It felt like stepping into her territory. (Boy, aged 18)

Several youth ($n = 3$) and parents ($n = 4$) thought the person positioned as YIM needed nothing extra because they were “good by nature”: “Normally you would say that a new person needs to know a lot about our personal situation, now this wasn’t necessary, therefore it was a good choice” (father, 62). Parents ($n = 3$) and YIMs ($n = 2$) thought a person who became YIM has the right to receive (practical) information about agreements, treatment plan, and family history. Some YIMs ($n = 4$) also wanted contact with professionals involved in treatment: “I missed some kind of education or support offered by the organization, in which it became clear what they expect from a YIM. Or support that YIMs meet one another, so they can support each other” (male YIM, 35). Four YIMs also wanted agreements about their newly acquired role as YIM, for example, about how much time they could be available.

Social Dynamics—Duties

In addition to the rights of a positioned YIM, the three participant groups described duties or responsibilities associated with the YIM position, furthermore indicating a difference with nonpositioned social network members. Adolescents ($n = 5$), parents ($n = 7$), and YIMs ($n = 6$) identified offering personal care and support as the main duty of a YIM, meaning communicating with each other, offering a safe haven, being understanding, a spokesperson, someone to empathize with, and not being “pushy.” “She definitely needs to understand me, especially because a new person (the social worker) becomes involved. She understands me and can help me to understand things and can explain things to me in a language I understand” (girl, aged 15). Offering guidance and advice was identified as another important duty of YIMs, including aspects as translating youth’s needs to adult language, functioning as a bridge between parents and youth, mediation, supervision, and being more objective. The third perceived duty involved practical support, such as keeping a daily rhythm and structure, offering accommodation if needed, a home to go to and attending meetings. “I felt like a helpdesk and maybe more importantly, I offered him a home” (woman YIM, 46).

Social Dynamics—Narrative and Meaning

Interestingly, not all stakeholders experienced a change as a result of the YIM positioning process. Although youth experienced this person becoming YIM as valuable, some parents experienced this as problematic and for the majority of social network members the positioning as YIM was unnecessary. All youth ($n = 6$) said it was meaningful that the person was positioned as YIM. They experienced feelings of joy, reported good conversations, and perceived the YIM as someone “you can tell your story to” and as a spokesman: “You don’t constantly have a new counselor you have to go to, but just one person who is always there for you when you feel sad. I felt better represented” (boy, aged 18). Parents ($n = 5$) valued the positioning of a YIM; they experienced less stress and thought it was a relief that their child always had this place and person to go to. Some said ($n = 4$) they could always reach out to the YIM and perceived his presence as personal support and guidance, and another one felt understood. However, two parents experienced the positioning of the YIM as problematic. For example, the YIM helped in a crisis situation, but the contact went wrong after the positioning process: “I don’t have contact with her. During our first meeting, she made some statements that went down the wrong way. After this meeting, I really didn’t feel like having any contact with her at all” (mother, 53). Two YIMs said the process of being positioned mattered to them; it gave them “a good feeling,” “excitement,” and “more responsibility.” The majority of YIMs ($n = 4$) mentioned less or no effect, because they would have taken this role anyway: “It was explained with cards and pictures, but to be honest, I’m involved with the family, but not in the way these professionals put it” (male YIM, 44). Becoming a YIM was a formalization of their already existing role.

Sustainability

Most youth, parents, and YIMs agreed that the YIM–mentee relationship would last after ending professional care. Most youth ($n = 5$) thought the YIM would stay meaningful. They thought they still would have a place to go to when in need, discuss everything, and would see each other. A male adolescent (15) explained:

If professionals leave, I know I can still count on M. I can still go to her place when in need or when I have trouble with my mom. She will listen to my story, give me advice and maybe call my mom. She will help me restore stuff when I messed up.

One youth had no positive expectations about the relationship with the YIM when professional care would end, because his romantic relationship with her

daughter ended (the YIM was the mother of his ex-girlfriend). Most parents ($n = 6$) also expected an active bond to remain between their child and the YIM after the ending of professional care. Their expectations varied from keeping in contact, functioning as a safe haven, trusting the person, and keeping a guiding and supporting role. All YIMs ($n = 6$) thought they would still be involved; a female YIM (55) said, “When I became YIM I immediately told N. (youth) this wouldn’t change our bond and if professional care leaves, I’d stay.”

Conclusion and Discussion

This study focused on the social dynamics and sustainability when a social network member is positioned as YIM. Our main research questions were as follows: what do participants experience when they are asked or ask someone to become YIM, what does a YIM need to fulfill his position, and what are his role and tasks, what is the impact of being positioned as YIM, and is this relationship sustainable?

The families collaborating with a YIM “having footing” experienced less stress, because they actually valued the positioning of the YIM, whereas in the families with YIM remaining “the candidate” or “being acknowledged, but not accepted” participants reported tension between each other. Sometimes triads reported some tensions in their relationships due to ongoing (not YIM-related) arguments between parent and child. One triad reported tensions because the parent did not support the chosen YIM. The latter underscores the notion that parents are important during the mentor selection process. Previous research has shown that collaborating with parents during the selection process is appreciated and empowers them to suggest mentors or vetoing mentors they felt were not a good fit (Spencer, Gowdy, Drew, & Rhodes, 2018). Future research should indicate whether a natural mentor with “footing” increases epistemic trust in parents and youth (Harre et al., 2009), enabling the adolescent to benefit from the knowledge available in the social network (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Fonagy et al., 2017).

From all three different perspectives (adolescent, parents, and YIM) asking someone to become YIM was perceived either positive (proactive) or with some hesitation (cautious), which indicates that asking someone formally to become a YIM sounds natural, but can elevate stress. The insight that the position of the social network member changes after becoming YIM is supported by the fact that all parties agreed that the positioning is accompanied with rights, such as getting information, intensified contact, agreements, and duties, such as offering personal care, guidance, advice, and practical support. Although some parents and youth also stated that YIMs did

not need anything extra—and parents thought YIMs needed professional support and should not take sides—the fact that they all agreed on these rights and duties indicates a position as YIM differs from a position as an extended family network member in general.

In addition to previous qualitative research on the YIM approach (Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2016, 2018), our findings highlight the importance of the positioning process to become a YIM. The findings suggest what professionals call the *natural paradox*: How can professionals intervene to optimize relationship quality of the natural mentoring relationship without professionalizing this relationship too much? In other words, what is the right balance between supporting natural mentors to improve their relationship quality with youth, and at the same time respectfully appreciate the natural working mechanisms of this intuitively developed relationship? Future research should explore the sensitivity and systemic knowledge necessary to find a perfect balance (i.e., equilibrium) in this delicate situation, and to prevent professionals and formal mentors from causing damage to the vulnerable informal social networks of youth.

Although the relationship between YIM and youth may not be totally natural anymore, all six youth said it was valuable that the person was positioned as YIM. They experienced feelings of joy and perceived the YIM as someone “you can tell your story to” and a spokesman. Two parents did not experience the YIM as meaningful; he helped in a crisis situation, but the contact between them deteriorated. The other parents positively valued the positioning of a YIM; they experienced less stress and thought it was a relief that their child always had this place and person to go to. The positioning as YIM did not change anything for most YIMs, because they would have taken this role anyway. Two YIMs reported positive feelings about the positioning process. The findings gave more insight in the reticence of parents about involving others in childrearing practices (Kesselring et al., 2016). Nevertheless, they did not confirm previous findings that the social network may actively discourage youth and his or her parents from seeking help (Dozier et al., 2009).

Most participants thought the YIM–mentee relationship would last when professional care would be ended. Youth perceived the relationship as meaningful and the YIM to be a person to go to when in need. Parents expected and hoped for an active bond, while their expectations varied between keeping in contact, functioning as a safe haven, trusting the person, and keeping a guiding and supporting role. All YIMs thought they would still be involved, actively and supportively. Previous research has considered sustainability as an important benefit of natural mentoring (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Keller, 2005); the relationship increases stability in the social networks of youth (Keller & Blakeslee, 2013) and improves interactions with other adults

(Keller, 2005; Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liag, & Noam, 2006). Our findings indicate that the bond between a youth and his mentor is influenced by parents (Keller, 2005) but is also unique, that is, a distinct process.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was small, although in qualitative research saturation could occur with approximately six participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), which depends on the richness of the data and the degree of heterogeneity of the sample (Bryman, 2012; Fusch & Ness, 2015). None of the YIMs was a family member, which does not allow generalizing our study findings to YIMs as family members. This is why the external validity of this study is limited (Bryman, 2012). Future studies should take this into account and include family members who became YIM. Our study did not include parents and youth who were not willing to cooperate with a natural mentor, 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. Because parents' and/or YIMs' psychosocial or psychiatric problems may lead to interpersonal problems in the triad between YIM, youth, and parents, possibly causing the YIM approach to be evaluated as less beneficial, future studies should also assess the occurrence of parents' and YIM's (psychiatric) problem behavior. Prospective studies following the development of these relationships over time and beyond the therapeutic intervention are needed to more fully assess the social dynamics and sustainability.

This is one of the first studies examining the hybrid approach of natural mentoring in which youth, parents, and YIM are involved (cf. Spencer et al., 2018). Interviewing all participants on the same topics increased the internal validity (Everaert & van Peet, 2006), and by using a combination of structured and open questions, participants could express all relevant experiences (Galletta, 2013). Nevertheless, future studies should include professional caregivers, to get a complete picture.

An advantage of the YIM approach is that it makes use of already existing relationships in the context of a therapeutic intervention, which is in line with research showing that strong emotional connections between youth and mentor are important relationship features related to better youth outcomes (DuBois & Neville, 1997; Van Dam et al., 2017). Also, YIM relationships appear to be long-lasting (Schwartz et al., 2013) and are an alternative to formal mentoring where long waiting lists exist due to difficulties with the recruitment of volunteer mentors (Rhodes, 2002; Spencer et al., 2016).

The majority of participants reported positive experiences; nevertheless, some participants were cautious regarding asking someone or being asked to

become a YIM, and not all parents experienced the YIM as beneficial. Therefore, this approach can also elicit an increase of relational conflicts between family and social network members. Future studies should examine professional practices that may effectively facilitate the revenue of natural mentoring relationships without jeopardizing the existing organically developed relationships. This provides caregivers with tools to prevent possible further damage to the vulnerable social networks of at-risk youth when professional involvement aims to use natural mentoring relationships within a therapeutic intervention.

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