

Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice –  
2020 – Volume 29, Issue 1, pp. 3–20  
<http://doi.org/10.18352/jsi.623>

ISSN: 1876-8830  
URL: <http://www.journalsi.org>  
Publisher: Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences  
Open Access Journals  
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Category: Theory

# CULTIVATION OF NATURAL MENTORS TO STRENGTHEN RESILIENCY IN YOUTH: A PROGRAM THEORY OF YOUTH INITIATED MENTORING (YIM)

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## ABSTRACT

Natural mentoring relationships are supportive relationships that form organically between youth and important non-parental adults (e.g., friends, teachers, athletic coaches, extended family members) from within their existing social networks. These relationships are thought to foster positive youth development and buffer against risks, particularly those associated with the transitions that characterize adolescence. Providing youth with the opportunity to identify and engage a non-parental adult from their social network in a mentoring relationship constitutes the Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM) approach. The current article describes the aim and context of this new approach, its target population, the intended individual and societal outcomes, and how these outcomes may be achieved. We also describe various YIM program models addressing universal,

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selective, and indicated preventative approaches. Our goal is to provide social work practitioners with the tools to carry out their work and to provide direction for researchers to test hypotheses about YIM.

### **Keywords**

Youth Initiated Mentoring, natural mentoring, prevention, adolescence, social capital

### **SAMENVATTING**

Natuurlijke mentorrelaties zijn ondersteunende relaties die organisch groeien tussen jongeren en belangrijke niet-ouderlijke volwassenen (bijvoorbeeld familieleden, vrienden, leraren en sportcoaches) vanuit hun bestaande sociale netwerken. Deze relaties hebben een positieve bijdrage aan de ontwikkeling van jongeren en vormen een buffer tegen risico's, met name tijdens de overgangperiode naar (jong)volwassenheid. Het ondersteunen van jongeren in het identificeren van natuurlijke mentoren in hun sociaal netwerk, is de basis van de JIM aanpak: Jouw Ingebrachte Mentor. Dit artikel beschrijft het doel en de context van deze nieuwe aanpak, de doelgroep, de beoogde individuele en maatschappelijke resultaten, en hoe deze resultaten kunnen worden bereikt. We beschrijven ook diverse toepassingen van de JIM benadering in diverse contexten: universele, selectieve en preventieve benaderingen. Ons doel is om (zorg)professionals de tools te bieden hun werk uit te voeren en om richting te geven aan onderzoekers om hypothesen te testen over JIM.

### **Trefwoorden**

Jouw Ingebrachte Mentor, natuurlijke mentorschap, preventie, adolescentie, sociaal kapitaal

### **INTRODUCTION**

A natural mentor may be a non-parental relative, neighbor, teacher, friend, or someone from a religious community who is a confidant and advocate for a young person (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2016; Van Dam *et al.*, 2017). Natural mentoring relationships form organically between youth and older or more experienced individuals within their existing social networks. Natural mentors may enhance youth's sense of belonging and mattering to significant others (Bowers

*et al.*, 2012; Erikson, 1968; Lerner, Von Eye, Lerner, & Lewin-Bizan, 2009). Natural mentors can also provide a range of different types of support, such as informational support, i.e., giving advice about work or education, emotional support, i.e., providing comfort and encouragement, to instrumental support, i.e., and help applying for jobs or coping with day-to-day stressors (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009; Van Dam *et al.*, 2017).

A recent meta-analytic study on natural mentoring relationships showed that the mere presence of a natural mentor was associated with positive youth outcomes, such as academic, vocational and social emotional functioning, physical health and psychosocial problems with a small overall effect size (Van Dam *et al.*, 2018a,b). The association between the quality of the natural mentoring relationship (relatedness, social support and autonomy support) and positive youth outcomes yielded a medium overall effect size. 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 or quality of natural mentoring relationships and youth outcomes, indicating that natural mentors can be an important asset in the lives of youth with varying levels of risk. These results are promising, particularly since natural mentoring requires fewer resources and is more accessible to a broader range of youth than formal youth mentoring (an estimated 75% of youth have natural mentors versus 7% with formal mentors; Erickson *et al.*, 2009; Raposa, Dietz, & Rhodes, 2017).

Although the benefits of natural mentoring relationships are generally acknowledged, interventions rarely focus on such relationships due to the fact that they are, by definition, naturally forming, and therefore viewed as outside the scope of active and formal intervention. Instead, mentoring programs have focused primarily on formal mentoring, which involves assigning a volunteer mentor who was previously not a part of the youth's social network. Although this formal approach can be beneficial, too many of these relationships fail to 'gel' and develop meaningful ties, or they dissolve shortly after they began (e.g., Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Spencer *et al.*, 2014), in part due to difficulties in bridging cultural differences between the mentor and mentee (Spencer, 2007).

In contrast, a new and innovative approach, Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM), supports youth in the process of identifying, recruiting, and maintaining relationships with potential natural mentors. YIM aims to empower youth to benefit from and optimize supportive relationships within their communities. Moreover, the addition of a YIM component alongside professional involvement for high-risk youth may improve outcomes and reduce erosion of impacts when professional involvement ends (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013; Van Dam *et al.*, 2017).

## THE YIM APPROACH

In this article, we describe a program theory including the aim and context of the YIM-approach, the intervention, its target group, the intended individual and societal outcomes, and processes through which these outcomes may be achieved. This is illustrated in Figure 1 on the next page. We describe various models of YIM within different contexts targeting different youth populations. Specifically, we discuss how YIM may be implemented in the context of universal, selective, and indicated prevention approaches and provide examples of programs implementing YIM at each level. All these lines of information together provide an initial program theory of YIM that can be used both to provide the social work practitioners with effective approaches and key considerations in implementing YIM and to provide researchers with directions for future research on YIM.

### Program

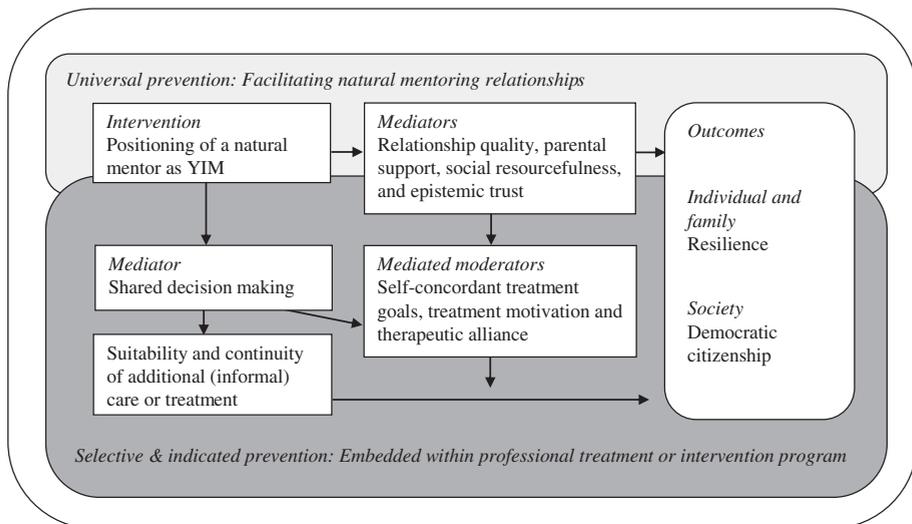
In this approach, a nonparental adult is identified, recruited, and positioned as a Youth Initiated Mentor (YIM). The intervention can be stand-alone without any involvement of professional service providers (e.g., teachers and care professionals) or can be embedded within the context of a broader intervention to improve general well-being and/or mental health. Positioning a natural mentor as Youth Initiated Mentor (YIM) creates new social dynamics between all participants; the position – a place or status – of individuals in a group represents cognition, emotion, action, and perception (Harre, Moghaddam, Cairnie, Rothart, & Sabat, 2009).

The YIM approach aims to have impact beyond the individual level, such as family resilience and democratic citizenship. Resilience refers to the ability to recover from adversity more effectively and resourcefully, and it implies both exposure to threat or adversity and the realization of positive adaptation despite having suffered significant setbacks (Luthar *et al.*, 2000; Sixbey, 2005; Walsh, 2002, 2003). Ultimately, the overall goal is to create adaptive (informal) collaborations with enough family resilience to cope with new stressful situations, and to work on productive solutions that respect the family members' autonomy.

At a societal level, the YIM approach resonates with the idea of a democratic society: in such a society involvement is central, all people have the right to develop their talents and the duty to use those talents in the service of society, and those involved have a responsibility and must take an active attitude (Delsen, 2016). In particular, youth are invited to raise their voice and are considered to be reflective actors who contribute to society, and adults are invited to engage with and support youth in their community (Biesta, 2009; Dewey, 1916).

## Population

Relationships with natural mentors serve as a promotive factor for youth in the general population, fostering positive youth development, and as a protective factor, which buffers against individual and environmental risks for negative youth outcomes (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). For low-risk youth, facilitating natural mentoring relationships may serve as a universal preventative strategy that can help them achieve goals, cope with challenges, and navigate their identity (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Schwartz *et al.*, 2017; Van Dam *et al.*, 2018a,b). For youth with greater risk factors, YIM may serve as a selective preventive strategy with the positioning of a YIM in their lives potentially offsetting individual and/or contextual risks; for example, adolescents often attribute their capacity to thrive despite adversity to the support of a caring adult (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). In these circumstances, YIM may also supplement additional interventions and protect against erosion of effects after shorter-term interventions have ended (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013; Spencer *et al.*, 2016). Finally, for those facing the greatest challenges, YIM may serve as an indicated preventative strategy in which the addition of YIM to professional treatment can increase treatment motivation and effectiveness, including addressing erosion of treatment effects (Van Dam *et al.*, 2017).



**Figure 1: Program theory YIM approach.**

## **Mediators**

We differentiate between mediators and mediated moderators (Fairchild & McKinnon, 2009). Mediators are factors that are responsible for the desired effects of positioning a natural mentoring on youth and family resilience and democratic citizenship, in all three categories of prevention. We distinguish four potential mediators: relationship quality, parental support, social resourcefulness, and epistemic trust.

In *relationship quality*, we include (a) mentoring relationship quality, including emotional closeness between the mentor and mentee (b) frequency of contact, (c) type of support provided, and (d) duration of the mentoring relationship (Rhodes, 2002). Research suggests that YIM approaches result in closer and longer-lasting relationships than traditional assigned formal mentoring (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013; Spencer *et al.*, 2016; Spencer, Gowdy, Drew, & Rhodes, 2018).

Additionally, *parents can support* or discourage their children from developing relationships with extended family and community members. Research on YIM approaches indicates the importance of parental support of the youth-mentor relationship as well as the relationship between the parent and the mentor in determining the success of the mentoring relationship (Basualdo-Delmonico & Spencer, 2016; Keller, 2005; Van Dam *et al.*, 2019).

*Social resourcefulness* includes the skills and behaviors allowing youth and family members to request and maintain support from others (Rapp, Shumaker, Schmidt, Naughton, & Anderson, 1998). Preliminary research indicates that YIM skills workshops for youth can increase network orientation and help-seeking skills of youth (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Schwartz *et al.*, 2017).

*Epistemic trust* is key to the social learning process, referring to the trust in the authenticity and personal relevance of interpersonally transmitted knowledge, which enables social learning in an ever-changing social and cultural context, allows individuals to benefit from their (social) environment (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). Research suggests that the YIM selection process contributes to the youth's rapid development of feelings of closeness and trust in the relationship with the mentor (Spencer *et al.*, 2018). Other research indicates that the YIM process yields mentors with more similar backgrounds to their mentees than in traditional formal mentoring approaches, and that youth report this similarity as contributing to feelings of trust and to long-standing relationships (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013).

### **Mediated moderators**

Mediated moderators are factors that are hypothesized to be influenced by the positioning of YIM, and which moderate the effects of additional care and treatment on the desired outcomes. These are only active within selective and indicative intervention, but are also influenced by mechanisms that work in universal prevention. For example, if a mentor encourages a mentee to trust a professional, such as a therapist, the epistemic trust between a mentor and mentee (mediator) can improve the therapeutic alliance between the adolescent and therapist (moderator of treatment effectiveness), which in turn may influence the effect of delivered treatment on the youth's resilience. Together, they might explain how YIM increases the effectiveness of (informal and formal) care and treatment. We distinguish three potential mediated moderators: self-concordant goals, treatment motivation, and therapeutic alliance.

Natural mentors positioned as YIM might improve *self-concordant goals*: goals created with and embedded in the family's social network (e.g., family dynamics, culture, values, as well as social support and community resources). Self-concordant personal goals are selected for autonomous reasons, which increases goal-directed effort and successful implementation of intentions associated with greater treatment progress (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002), facilitating development in adolescents (Vasalampi, Salmela-Aro, & Nurmi, 2009), and thus increasing treatment effectiveness.

*Treatment motivation* also moderates the effectiveness of youth care interventions (Van der Stouwe, Asscher, Hoes, van der Laan, & Stams, 2018). Motivation for treatment and behavioral change in general requires that the fulfillment of the basic self-determination needs for relatedness, autonomy and competence be satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Choosing one's own mentor is to a certain extent an autonomous choice from the adolescent, which implicates he or she has the competence to choose the 'right adult', which appeals to his relatedness with the people he is connected with. Research indicates that youth choosing their mentor – instead of parents or program staff – predicts durability of the YIM relationship, which in turn predicts treatment outcomes (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013; Spencer *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, qualitative research suggests that mentors can play an important role in encouraging youth to engage in and complete more challenging intervention programs and treatments (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013; Spencer *et al.*, 2016; Van Dam *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, *therapeutic alliance* moderates the effectiveness of youth professional care interventions (McLeod, 2011; Murphy & Hutton, 2018). Therapeutic alliance consists of three interdependent

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aspects: the personal bond between client and therapist, the agreement on therapy goals, and the agreement on tasks of therapy (Bordin, 1979; 1994), also known as the affective aspect (i.e., the personal bond) and the collaborative aspect (i.e., agreement on goals and tasks) (Elvins & Green, 2008). Qualitative research on the YIM approach suggests that therapeutic alliance related to additional treatment or intervention (mediated moderator) may benefit from a close relationship between a mentor and mentee. For example, in one study youth reported that mentors monitored the progress towards their goals and motivated them to achieve these goals (Spencer *et al.*, 2016), and in another study youth described experiencing their mentor as an ally during decision-making processes related to professional treatment (Van Dam *et al.*, 2019).

When additional diagnostics, care and/or treatment are necessary, shared decision making, and the suitability and continuity of (formal and informal) care should profit from these mediated moderator effects.

### **Outcomes**

As a relatively new approach, there is limited existing research on YIM outcomes. Current research and evaluations of various models of YIM have focused primarily on individual outcomes rather than family or societal outcomes. Although outcomes vary based on the specific model and target population (described below in YIM models across different contexts), there is an increasing, albeit small, body of evidence for the capacity of YIM to improve youth outcomes. In one study, youth who identified and maintained relationships with a YIM demonstrated better academic, vocational, and behavioral outcomes, including higher educational levels, more time employed and higher earnings, and fewer arrests (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013). Another study indicated that the involvement of important non-parental adults may help prevent out-of-home placement of adolescents with complex needs (Van Dam *et al.*, 2017). Finally, research indicates that YIM workshops teaching students to recruit mentors and other supportive adults can increase willingness to seek support and improve relationships with instructors as well as academic outcomes, such as grade point average (Schwartz *et al.*, 2017).

Notably, the program theory we have described is nascent and require more research to test processes and effects (described further in Future directions below). In the next section, we will describe the application of YIM for three different types of prevention.

## **YIM MODELS ACROSS DIFFERENT CONTEXTS**

The YIM-approach is suitable across a range of contexts resulting in different models indicated for different populations. Specifically, youth with more complex needs require greater professional expertise and support in identifying, developing, and maintaining a supportive relationship with a YIM (Fonagy, Luyten, Allison, & Campbell, 2017). Generally, three categories of prevention are identified for people with different levels of risk factors: universal, selective and indicated (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). We use the different prevention categories as intervention contexts in which natural mentoring can be embedded.

### **Universal prevention**

At this level, youth are provided with knowledge and opportunities for skill development related to recruiting mentors, typically in a group context and directed at a general population. They are encouraged to reach out to natural mentors within their social network and cultivate circles of support. Adults who typically have contact with youth (in school, afterschool, or community settings) may also be encouraged to provide informal support to youth in their communities and/or be provided with tips and strategies for connecting with youth. Within this model, mentoring relationships are not formalized or monitored by a professional or outside agency.

Example: Connected Scholars is a program designed to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to allow adolescents and emerging adults to recruit mentors and cultivate supportive relationships throughout their lives, with a focus on those who can help them develop and move towards their academic and career goals (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). This approach is typically used in non-clinical settings, such as school, afterschool, and postsecondary settings. Research suggests that the intervention can increase network orientation and willingness to seek support, decrease help-seeking avoidance, and improve academic outcomes, including relationships with instructors and grade point average (Schwartz *et al.*, 2017). Since this kind of intervention is delivered in a group setting and does not involve a formal mentoring relationship, it may eliminate some of the infrastructure and potential liability required in other models, but may not provide sufficient support for youth with more complex needs and challenges.

### **Selective prevention**

In selective prevention models, youth are encouraged to identify and reach out to a potential natural mentor, typically in the context of a program that can support the relationship. This may include a case worker or professional who works individually with an adolescent to explore the adults within their network and the types of support needed. Depending on the program structure as well as the adolescents' needs and the natural mentors' needs, the professional may have direct contact with the natural mentor to provide support for the development of the relationship. Programs also may provide varied levels of screening, training, and monitoring of the mentoring relationship. This level of intervention would typically be directed at populations that may be identified as above-average risk (e.g., youth in the foster care system).

Examples: One example of YIM as selective prevention is the National Guard Youth Challenge Program (NGYCP), which targets youth aged 16-18 who are not in school nor in the workforce. NGYCP includes both a 5-month residential phase and a subsequent year-long post-residential phase. At the start of the program, the youth recruits a mentor who both provides some support throughout the residential phase, and then works closely with the youth throughout the post-residential phase to support the process of reintegrating into the community and maintaining positive changes made within the residential program (Millenky, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2013). Research indicates that youth who maintained YIM relationships demonstrated better academic, vocational, and behavioral outcomes, including higher educational levels, more time employed and higher earnings, and fewer arrests (Schwartz *et al.*, 2013).

Another example of the application of YIM as selective prevention is with youth who were first-time offenders in the juvenile justice system and youth involved in the child welfare system who were transitioning to independent living. Qualitative research indicated that the YIM selection process contributed positively to mentor, youth, and parent/guardian investment in the mentoring relationship and to the youth's rapid development of feelings of closeness and trust in the mentor (Spencer *et al.*, 2018). Knowing that mentors would be nonjudgmental, trustworthy, and dedicated appeared to facilitate positive relationship development, which is important given the difficulty of engaging and serving system-involved youth in mentoring programs.

In a similar context, the C.A.R.E. model (Caring Adults 'R' Everywhere) for youth aging out of foster care is designed to help older youth in foster care identify caring, non-parental adults in their lives and then facilitate and nurture those relationships over a course of 12 weeks

(Greeson & Thompson, 2017). In their feasibility study, Greeson and Thompson (2017) found that two thirds of the intervention youth were able to identify caring adults in their lives whom they felt could be their natural mentors.

### **Indicated prevention**

Within this context, YIM is introduced alongside professional care for youth and families facing significant challenges. A professional works closely with the youth and family to identify possible mentors, with an emphasis on the youth's preferences. Once a potential mentor is identified, the professional discusses how the youth can reach out to this person. After the initial invitation from youth to the natural mentor, the professional works closely with the natural mentor to explain more about the nature of this request and the therapeutic treatment the adolescent receives. By means of shared decision making with parents, youth and a potential natural mentor, the professional discusses the treatment plan and each participant's unique contribution of during this process. The professional offers weekly guidance and support (face-to-face, telephone, online, etc.) to the natural mentor throughout the whole treatment period.

Example: In the Netherlands, a YIM approach has been developed as alternative for residential care (Van Dam *et al.*, 2017). The approach is characterized by four phases occurring between approximately six and nine months. Phase 1 is focused on 'who': which member of the social network can become the YIM. After nomination, the potential mentor is informed about the YIM position, and agreements are made about privacy, termination, and the type of support he or she would provide as YIM. Phase 2 is focused on 'what': what is everyone's perspective on the current and desired situation. Phase 3 is focused on 'how' each participant can contribute to the desired situation. All participants provide advice about how to collaborate, and a plan is made in which the learning goals and efforts to reach those goals are described and acted upon. Phase 4 is focused on 'adaptivity': the degree to which the current informal pedagogical alliance can meet new challenges. It is expected that the natural mentoring relationship will continue after termination of the professional involvement.

A preliminary study on this application showed that a total of 83% of youth in the YIM group were able to nominate a mentor after an average of thirty-three days. Ninety percent of youth in the YIM group received ambulatory treatment as an alternative for indicated out-of-home-placement, therefore, results suggest that the involvement of important non-parental adults may help to prevent out-of-home placement of adolescents with complex needs (Van Dam *et al.*,

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2017). A 360°-degree qualitative study with this population indicated that attitudes towards asking someone or being asked to become YIM varied from enthusiastic to cautious (Van Dam *et al.*, 2019). Most participants reported increased contact intensity and relationship quality. During treatment, youth experienced YIM as an ally and most of the participants thought the YIM-relationship would last after ending professional care. However, results indicated that this approach also has the potential to elicit relational conflicts between family and social network members.

## **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Although this paper describes the current landscape of YIM, since it is a relatively new approach, there is a clear need for additional research. Future research should examine the proposed overall program theory for YIM and evaluate specific models and contexts, including potential differences in processes and outcomes, as well as the possibility of the development and study of additional models and adaptations. Evaluating the outcomes at the family and community or societal level can make a valuable contribution hereto. There is also a need for more rigorous evaluations, including randomized controlled trials to assess impacts.

At the same time, more research on relationship processes is also needed. From the perspective of the youth, it will be important to learn more about their experiences, particularly with respect to duration and ending or transitioning of the natural mentoring relationship: how long should the relationship last, and how does one end or transition out of the YIM relationship with someone who stays within your community? Qualitative research indicates the YIM intervention sometimes creates more uncertainties (E.g.: 'Does my uncle wants to become YIM?' and 'Can I fulfil the needs of my nephew?') and, in some families, conflict or problematic social interaction increases (Van Dam *et al.*, 2019). The impact of social networks is large, for example, happiness and depression are recognized as collective phenomena that spread through networks, similar to obesity and smoking behavior (Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Rosenquist, Fowler, & Christakis, 2011). This emphasizes the notion that social networks are contagious, potentially both in a positive and in a 'negative' manner. Therefore, more research is needed on potential negative impacts of conflicts within the relationship. Research on formal mentoring relationships indicate that prematurely terminating relationships can have negative impacts on youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012), and these effects may be even more pronounced in the context of YIM.

Additionally, there is a need for research on the experiences of those who are not able to identify or recruit a natural mentor, including better understanding of the barriers they face and how

these barriers may be overcome, as well as the experience of nominating a potential mentor who declines the role. Particularly in the context of increased isolation and loneliness among young people (Frieberg, 2019), it will be important to identify strategies to reach out to and connect the most disconnected among us. In doing so, we should not forget that one cannot easily escape his or her social network (McKnight, 2015), therefore, youth occasionally might choose wisely rejecting support from their contagious social network.

From the perspective of the parents, it would be beneficial to learn more about communication and collaboration with the mentor. In particular, how might differences in approaches to childrearing or conflicts with the mentor influence the relationship (including the parent-mentor relationship and youth-mentor relationship). Similarly, cultural differences and values may influence the extent to which families are open to the role of natural mentors within their family system. Further research on the perspectives of mentors and how they navigate the transitions in their role within different YIM models would also be beneficial, as well as learning from those who are nominated to be mentors, but do not agree to do so. Additionally, little is known about whether some types of mentors are more effective in the YIM role than others, for example, those with or without backgrounds in a helping profession, or extended family members versus those outside the family. Finally, the perspectives of the professionals supporting the relationships will be valuable for better understanding effective implementation: how do they experience this new approach, what does it mean for their professional role and how do they offer guidance and support? Such research could contribute to the development of best practices for various YIM models.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although more research is needed, current findings indicate that YIM provides an innovative approach to supporting youth, families, and communities. As John Dewey (1859-1952) stated: 'Democracy is more than a form of government, it is a way of living together, of jointly shared experiences.' Let us provide youth with positive and hopeful relational experiences, allowing them to become engaged and connected participants in society.

## **Disclosure of interest**

In the Netherlands, Levi Van Dam invented the YIM approach as a scientist practitioner. He wrote his dissertation on the YIM approach in December 2018 (University of Amsterdam). Two years earlier he was one of the founders of the YIM foundation, through which professionals in the

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Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland are trained in this new approach. To create a hybrid between science and practice, they were supported throughout this process by several scholars, for example prof. Geert Jan Stams (international expert in the field of forensic youth care) and prof. dr. Jean Rhodes (international expert in the field of mentoring).

Sarah Schwartz was the first scholar in the USA investigating this new approach and developing it into a curriculum for universities to promote natural mentoring connections.

### **Funding**

Both authors receive no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article nor do they financially benefit from it.

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