



Understanding the Transformation of YIM Professionals in Youth Care

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Abstract

The Youth-Initiated Mentor (YIM) approach, an intervention in which elements of both natural mentoring and professional youth care are combined, shows promise in Dutch youth care. However, adopting this approach is challenging for professionals, as it requires a more network-oriented way of working. A YIM professional is a publicly financed youth care practitioner who facilitates the establishment of a mentoring relationship between a young person and YIM mentor. Yet, little is known about how professionals experience this shift in roles and identity and which conditions facilitate successful adoption. This study examined how YIM professionals perceive their own roles and those of non-YIM colleagues, and which conditions support their transformation into YIM professionals, addressing how this shift translates into everyday practice. Using a Social Identity Approach-based topic guide, five focus groups were conducted with 29 participants (23 women, 6 men; ages 31–62, $M=41.0$, $SD=9.9$). Analysis involved open and axial coding in ATLAS.ti, followed by iterative refinement and member checking. The transformation involves shifts in roles, performance, and professional identity, supported by room for individual development, team collaboration, organizational backing, and clear communication with referrers. Becoming a YIM professional requires a fundamental shift from expert to coach, grounded in trust and shared responsibility with families. Sustainable implementation depends not only on individual transformation but also on leadership that supports identity development and organizational learning. Such support is critical for achieving the impact of the YIM approach for young people and their families.

Keywords Youth care professionals · Natural mentoring · Role · Identity · Performance · Transformation

Introduction

Children have the right to receive adequate and high-quality care (Council of Europe, 1950; Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). However, this right is not always fully realized in practice. In the Netherlands, efforts have been made to improve youth care through policies that encourage families to make better use of their social networks and require youth care professionals to collaborate more actively and equitably with these networks (Koper et al., 2024; Nootboom et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2024). Strengthening these networks is considered a key lever for improving youth care, as it is expected to enhance continuity of support, increase responsiveness to the needs of young people and their families, and reduce reliance on formal youth care services (Algemene Rekenkamer, 2023; De Boer & Bruning, 2024; Friele et al., 2018; Rijksoverheid, 2023). These ambitions are embedded in broader policy reforms, including the Youth Act (Jeugdwet, 2015) and the Youth Reform Agenda (Rijksoverheid, 2023), which promote among other

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things, closer collaboration between formal youth care and informal support systems, and a shift at the professional level, in which youth care practitioners move from a primarily expert-driven role toward facilitating and working alongside these networks.

These reforms also position local governments as key actors in organizing collaboration between formal care and families' social networks. However, the transformation required by the Youth Act has not been sufficiently realized (Friele et al., 2018), which is also reflected in the elevated proportion of families receiving youth care (CBS, 2024). One intervention that aligns with the required transformation is the Youth-Initiated Mentor (YIM) approach which is viewed as an inspiring innovation and may stimulate a family or young person to make greater use of their own social network (Friele et al., 2018).

The YIM-approach

The YIM approach is a network-oriented intervention in which elements of both natural mentoring and professional youth care are combined (Van Dam et al., 2017). Since 2013, the concept of natural mentoring, alongside professional youth care (Schwartz et al., 2013), has increasingly gained prominence in the Dutch youth care field. Unlike formal mentoring programs, natural mentors are individuals from a young person's existing social network who provide informal, trust-based support, whereas professional youth care practitioners typically offer time-limited, formal, and goal-oriented support within organizational frameworks (Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2016). Natural mentoring relationships in youth care have been associated with positive youth development and can provide support during adolescence, a developmental period characterized by significant social, emotional, and cognitive changes (Bowers et al., 2015; Van Dam et al., 2018). By integrating natural mentoring into a formal care context, the YIM approach challenges traditional youth care practices that rely primarily on professionally assigned support.

Within the YIM approach, the young person selects and invites a trusted mentor as a spokesperson, advocate, adviser, and confidant from their own social network (the YIM mentor) —who collaborates with the young person, with a publicly funded youth care profession (the YIM professional) and the young person's parents. The aim of this collaboration is to strengthen the young person's social network, align support with their needs and everyday context, and ensure that their voice is consistently heard and represented. In practice, this involves joint decision-making, shared responsibility, and ongoing communication between the YIM mentor and the YIM professional.

The approach is structured around four phases of shared decision-making—who, what, how, and adaptivity—which guide the process from identifying a mentor to gradually transferring responsibility to the young person and their network (see Fig. 1; Van Dam et al., 2017). In the “who” phase, the professional supports the young person and their parents in identifying and inviting a trusted person from their social network as a YIM mentor. In the “what” phase, the young person, parents, YIM mentor, and professional jointly define the main concerns and formulate a plan. In the “how” phase, this plan is implemented: the YIM mentor provides ongoing, relationship-based support in the young person's everyday life, while the YIM professional adopts a facilitating and coordinating role, supporting collaboration, monitoring progress, and intervening when necessary. In the final “adaptivity” phase, the young person and their network become increasingly self-reliant, and the youth care professional gradually withdraws, so that support is sustained primarily within the informal network.

Although the YIM approach has received positive attention in the Netherlands, professionals still face challenges when adopting it in their daily work and implementation varies among organizations. Collaboration with a YIM mentor and embedding this approach in practice have proven challenging for youth care professionals in terms of their role, professional practice, and professional identity (Koper et al., 2023; Sekreve et al., 2020; Van Dam et al., 2019). Yet, little is known about how professionals experience this shift in roles and identity and which conditions facilitate a successful adoption.

Becoming a YIM Professional

Typically, professionals have a background in statutory or voluntary youth care, where their roles traditionally involve an expert-driven role, focusing on assessment, decision-making, and coordinating formal services to young people and their families within organizational and regulatory frameworks. To support the transition to the YIM approach, professionals undergo a three-day initial training program designed to provide the foundational knowledge and skills required. Following this training, the team begins implementing the YIM approach directly in practice, allowing for experiential learning and application within their professional setting (JIMwerkt, 2024).

When professionals begin working as YIM professionals, their role and actions immediately change compared with their prior practice (De Ruig & Van Dam, 2020; Sekreve et al., 2020). This can be understood as a transformation. This transformation entails a shift from a primarily expert-driven role toward facilitating and working alongside the young person, their family, and their social network. Asking the

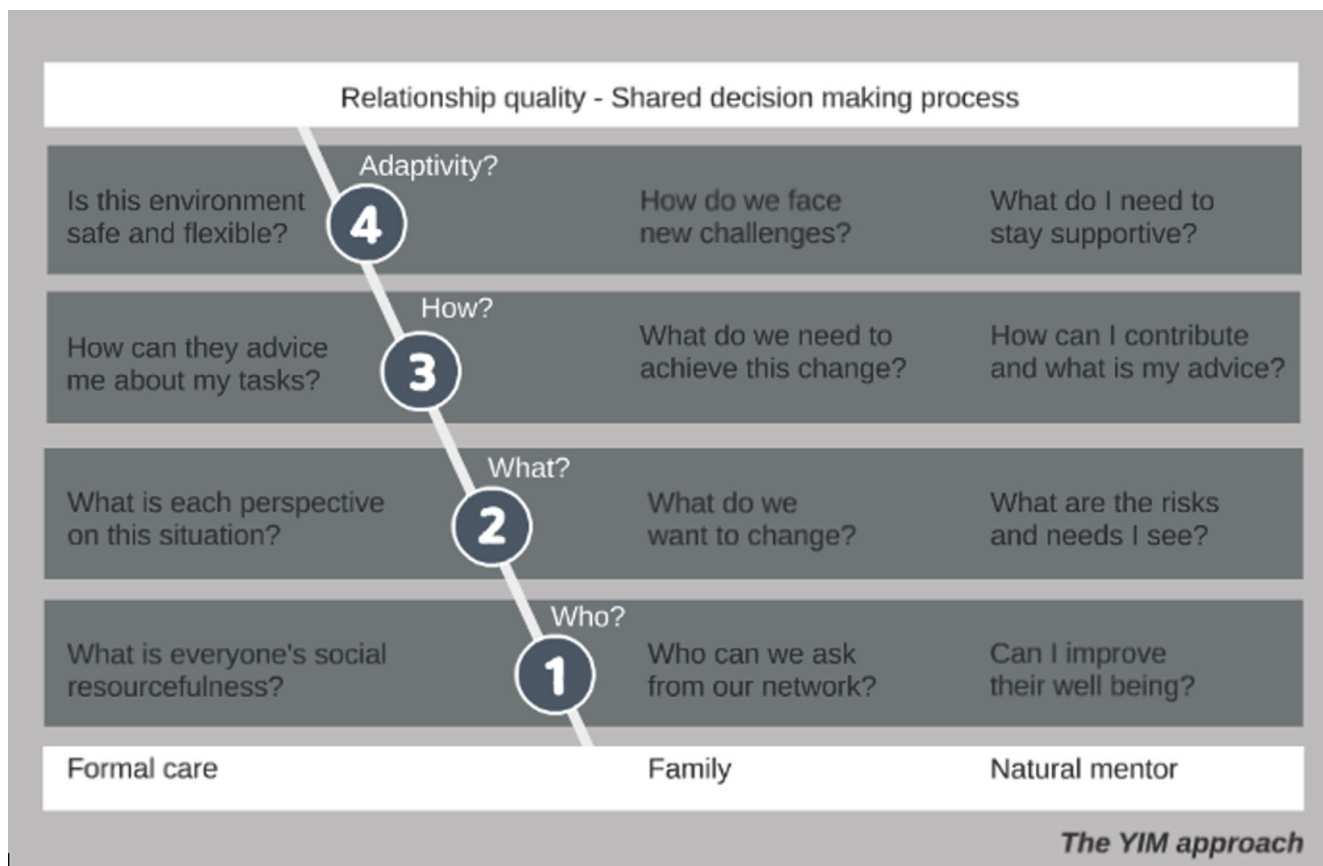


Fig. 1 The Four Phases of the YIM Approach. Adapted from Van Dam et al. (2017, p. 1770)

young person whom they trust and who should be involved in the process introduces a different way of working.

We presume that the transformation of becoming a YIM professional not only reshapes professionals' roles and actions but also challenges their identity, raising questions about self-perception and external perceptions. To examine and understand this identity shift, we draw on the Social Identity Approach, as a theoretical framework.

Social Identity Approach

The Social Identity Approach (Hornsey, 2008), a synthesis of the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1978) and the Self-Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1987), posits that individuals derive part of their identity from the social groups to which they belong. Individuals approach social situations with two distinct identities: personal and social identity (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Personal identity comprises the unique characteristics and attributes that differentiate an individual, whereas social identity refers to the part of the self-concept derived from group membership and its associated emotional significance. Individuals can hold multiple social identities, with the most salient identity varying across contexts (Oliver, 2013). The predominant

social identity at any given moment strongly influences behavior (Haslam et al., 2014).

These identity processes together help explain how group memberships guide behavior. They involve social categorization, in which individuals classify themselves and others into in-groups and out-groups; social comparison, where individuals evaluate their own status relative to others; and identification, where individuals internalize the values and behaviors of their group, thereby shaping their social identity by prescribing how they ought to think, act, and feel in certain contexts.

Applied to YIM professionals, social categorization might mean that they begin to perceive themselves and other YIM professionals as part of an in-group, while other youth care professionals may be positioned as an out-group. Rather than reflecting a fixed boundary, this distinction can be understood as dynamic and context dependent, with professionals continuously positioning themselves in relation to others as identities shift across situations. This process may contribute to the emergence of a distinct professional identity (Hornsey, 2008).

Social comparison involves individuals striving to maintain positive social identity by favorably comparing their in-group to relevant out-groups (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019;

Trepte & Loy, 2017). This positive differentiation occurs when individuals perceive their in-group as superior in meaningful ways. For YIM professionals, this might manifest as viewing their network-centered approach as more effective than traditional individual-focused interventions.

Social identification occurs when individuals internalize their group membership, adopting the group's values, norms, and behaviors as part of their identity. This process prescribes how members should think, act, and feel in specific contexts, creating a sense of belonging and shared purpose. For YIM professionals, this might mean they "are" a YIM professional instead of a professional working with a YIM mentor. Such identification reinforces professional identity and enhances self-esteem by fulfilling fundamental needs for security and self-worth (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

While the Social Identity Approach provides a conceptual lens to understand how identification shapes behavior and self-concept, professional identity change is shown in empirical studies to be an active and socially situated process. Professionals must actively (re)shape their identity when new practices conflict with their existing professional identity (Pratt et al., 2006). Identity change occurs through collective reinterpretation via social interactions (Reay et al., 2017), while professional identity requires continuous development to remain effective (Wiles, 2017). Together, these studies indicate that personal and social identities interact to influence practice adoption, yet research on identity transformation in youth care contexts remains limited.

Moreover, there is a gap between understanding social identity processes and how these translate into actual practice change. Difficulties in navigating this shift may not only hinder professional transformation but also increase the burden experienced by professionals and complicate collaboration between professionals (De Ruig et al., 2025). When professional transformation and collaboration between professionals is hindered, care may become fragmented, with professionals working alongside rather than with each other. This fragmentation has been shown to jeopardize treatment outcomes, reduce client satisfaction, and limit the effectiveness of support for families (van Eck et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, this study examines how youth care professionals implementing the YIM approach shift from a primarily expert-driven, problem-focused model of practice toward a facilitating and network-oriented role, and what support structures are required to enable this transformation. As these professionals are central to embedding the approach in practice, difficulties in navigating this shift may limit the effectiveness of the YIM approach and its potential to achieve broader policy goals in youth care.

Method

Design

This qualitative study was embedded within the larger research project *The Power of Supportive Change*, which examines processes of transformation in youth care in the Netherlands. The present study specifically focuses on the experiences of professionals working with the YIM approach, using five focus groups. In the focus groups, professionals questioned each other and articulated their thoughts aloud, which fostered reflection and enabled participants to learn from each other's experiences. Such interactive dynamics are considered a key advantage of focus group research (Krueger & Casey, 2014). The Journal Article Reporting Standards (Levitt et al., 2018) of the APA and the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (Tong et al., 2007) were used to guide the reporting of study design, data collection, analysis, and reflexivity.

Ethical Statement

The study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of the University of Amsterdam (FMG-6696) and conducted in accordance with the Dutch Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (KNAW et al., 2018). All participants received an information letter and provided written informed consent prior to participation in the study. The consent form included details about the purpose of the research, procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and contact information of the research team. To protect privacy, all personal data were de-identified during analysis and reporting.

Participant Selection

We selected typical case sampling to gain deeper insights into the essential characteristics that define a YIM professional and how they became one. Typical case sampling, as a strategy within purposeful sampling, involves selecting cases that are considered average or representative of a phenomenon, providing insight into what is typical rather than extreme or unusual (Patton, 1990). Participants were recruited from InConnection Teams (ICT), where professionals predominantly work according to the YIM approach, in contrast to other settings where the approach is applied more sporadically. ICT teams provide a multidisciplinary treatment program for youth from multi-problem families, integrating formal and informal care to enhance resilience and prevent out-of-home placements (Koper et al., 2024).

Participants were recruited and approached in two ways. First, during a national ICT Day on March 13th, 2024, an event during which YIM professionals from ten different

ICT teams across the country come together. During the opening of the meeting, the attending professionals were asked by SdR whether they wanted to participate in a focus group and share their experience of becoming a YIM professional with master student JB. Professionals could then choose whether they joined a focus group or not. During that day, two focus groups were held with respectively eight and six professionals. Second, other members of the ICT teams who were interested in participating in a focus group at a different time left their email addresses. Later, they were contacted via email by JB to arrange a session in their own office that suited their availability. Fifteen professionals participated in three additional focus groups, with six, five, and four members in each group, respectively. There were no dropouts during the focus groups. The first two focus groups comprised diverse members from various teams and were conducted on the same day. The remaining three focus groups were organized with individual complete teams.

Participants

In total, 29 participants joined a focus group: 23 women and six men. The professionals were aged between 31 and 62 years ($M=41.0$ years, $SD=9.9$ years). All were Dutch-speaking professionals in youth care who worked with the YIM approach within an ICT. The professionals had diverse lengths of experience with the YIM approach ranging from 1 month to 8 years ($M=4.0$ years, $SD=2.3$ years). Most held a higher professional education degree (76%), while the remaining professionals had completed a university bachelor's degree (4%) or a master's degree (20%). Half of the participants (52%) specifically chose to work with the YIM approach. Most professionals worked in community-based youth care, providing support in home settings (69%). The majority (55%) of the participants placed themselves at an 8.25 or higher on a scale of YIM identification (the extent to which one identifies as a YIM professional). The median score on this scale was 8.5. In Table 1, we introduce the participants per focus group. Notably, all professionals in focus

group 3 started simultaneously and have the least experience compared to the other groups. Focus groups 2, 3, and 5 exhibit a significant age range (more than the other two teams). In terms of identification with the YIM approach, focus group 4 stands out, as the professionals in this group differ the most concerning their YIM identification: participants rated themselves between a 4—the lowest—and a 10—the highest—on this scale.

Procedure and Instruments

All sessions took place in a private room where the researcher and participants sat around a table. Due to the first researchers' prior involvement with the YIM approach, focus groups were conducted by an independent researcher to minimize potential bias. During the first focus group, a second interviewer was present to assist with time management and to ask follow-up questions; however, this proved unnecessary. For the remaining focus groups, no second interviewer was present. Each focus group lasted between 57 and 77 min and was recorded using MS Teams. After the sessions, participants completed a socio-demographic questionnaire on paper. The recordings were transcribed and archived following the focus groups.

Efforts were made to adhere to Boeije and Bleijenbergh's (2019) recommendation to maintain a group size of six to ten participants. In practice, this minimum was not met on two occasions: one focus group consisted of five professionals, and another consisted of four. We conducted five focus groups. Given the limited methodological guidance on factors influencing saturation (Bryman, 2012; Carlsen & Glenton, 2011; Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2019; Kerr et al., 2010; Morse, 1995), this was considered an appropriate choice. For instance, Hennink et al. (2019) achieved saturation with four focus groups, Coenen et al. (2012) with five, and Guest et al. (2006) with three to six.

Using the previously described Social Identity Approach (Hornsey, 2008; Oliver, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1978; Trepte & Loy, 2017; Turner et al., 1987), a semi-structured topic

Table 1 Participant Characteristics of Focus Groups

| Focus Group | Date | Duration (min) | Team | Gender (♀/♂) | Age in years M (SD) | YIM experience in years M (SD) | YIM Identification in 0–10 points M (SD) |
|-------------|-----------|----------------|------|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1 | March '24 | 57 | no | 7 / 1 | 35.10 (4.94) | 4.63 (1.94) | 8.78 (0.96) |
| 2 | March '24 | 60 | no | 5 / 1 | 41.30 (10.89) | 3.25 (2.82) | 8.57 (0.92) |
| 3 | April '24 | 76 | yes | 4 / 2 | 51.00 (9.01) | 2.50 (0.00) | 8.18 (0.90) |
| 4 | May '24 | 75 | yes | 3 / 2 | 37.40 (6.15) | 4.18 (3.43) | 7.20 (2.19) |
| 5 | May '24 | 77 | yes | 4 / 0 | 42.00 (13.93) | 5.75 (1.66) | 8.13 (0.75) |

guide was developed for the focus groups. The guide comprised five categories: introduction; characteristics of a YIM professional; characteristics of a non-YIM professional, the transformation from one role to the other; and support that could be beneficial for this process (see Appendix A for the full guide). The session began with a brief explanation of the researcher's background and her role in this focus group, the purpose and duration of the focus group, whether everyone agreed to the recording of the session, and the group rules, such as allowing each other to speak and acknowledging that there were no right or wrong answers.

The topics were introduced by using a flip-chart activity in which participants, after discussion in groups of two, wrote characteristics of both the non-YIM professional and the YIM professional on separate post-it notes. These post-its were then placed on the flip chart, and professionals discussed how their role as YIM professionals currently appeared, guided by the researcher. Another flip-chart activity followed, where participants were asked to write characteristics of the transformation from a non-YIM professional to a YIM professional. Finally, questions were posed to assess participants' potential support needs regarding their transformation to YIM professionals.

The socio-demographic questionnaire, individually filled out on paper, was administered at the end of each focus group and requested information about age (in years), gender (female, male, other), highest level of education (blank), role within the ICT (blank), how long they had been working with the YIM approach (in years) and choice for working with YIM (choice was made by the professionals themselves, their employer, or others). In the last question, participants were asked to indicate where they placed themselves on a continuum between a non-YIM professional and a YIM professional. They marked this on a 10-centimeter line, where placement closer to the YIM professional (right side, a '10') indicated greater identification with the characteristics of a YIM professional, and placement closer to the non-YIM professional (left side, a '0') indicated stronger identification with the attributes of a non-YIM professional.

Data Analysis

All focus groups were audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed, and the transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti (version 7) for analysis. We initially conducted inductive open coding of the data, following established qualitative analysis procedures (Boeije & Bleijenbergh, 2019). This was followed by axial coding, where codes were compared and grouped into clusters. This iterative, reflexive process was repeated three times within the research group. This led to the development of four initial code trees for all four guiding topics: characteristics of a YIM professional,

characteristics of a non-YIM professional, core concepts of the transformation, and the necessary conditions. The research team subsequently reviewed and refined the code tree. During this collaborative review, a linguistic analysis was conducted: for each code, we reflected on the associated verb, the intended purpose, and the target audience. In doing so, we aimed to gain a deeper understanding of both the code itself, and the language used. This process ultimately led to a refinement of the four coding trees. These coding structures were subsequently compared with the focus group transcripts to evaluate whether they adequately captured participants' statements and intended meanings. After deliberation within the full research team, this resulted in the final set of four coding trees, which were also used as the basis for the member check.

We employed member checking to enhance the auditability and confirmability of our findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). On March 27th, 2025, during the ICT Day, feedback on the findings was collected among 15 professionals who had previously participated in the focus groups. Findings were also validated within a group of 15 national YIM trainers who teach professionals the YIM approach through a three-day training program. They are familiar with the typical responses and challenges encountered by emerging YIM professionals. During the member check, the researcher briefly reiterated the study's purpose and summarized the main findings. Participants were invited to reflect on what they recognized, what they felt was missing, and how they evaluated the terms and language used. Their feedback was documented and, where necessary, further explored through probing questions.

The member check with the two groups confirmed that our initial analysis largely aligned with participants' experiences. However, they emphasized a crucial aspect we had overlooked: the YIM approach provides immediate personal benefits for professionals, offering a sense of relief and reducing the perceived burden of their work. In response, we revisited the transcripts of the five focus groups. As both groups had pointed out, we had indeed missed the subcategory of Relief within the category of Identity, under the third guiding topic, Transformation.

Results

Based on the analysis of the transcripts, we developed four coding trees corresponding to the guiding topics: characteristics of YIM professionals, characteristics of non-YIM professionals, transformation, and necessary conditions. For the first three topics, the analysis was structured around three analytical categories: role, performance, and identity. These categories capture respectively how professionals defined

Table 2 Overview of Categories and Characteristics of YIM and Non-YIM Professionals and the Transformation Process

| | YIM professional | Non-YIM professionals | Transformation |
|-------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Role | Coaching | Expert position | Being a conscious passerby |
| Performance | Modest | Rescuer | Against the tide |
| | Equal footing | | |
| | Focused on working relationship | Focused on personal bond | Explaining (language) |
| | Enabling | Goal & performance oriented | Persevere |
| Identity | Process oriented | | Searching & becoming aware |
| | Steadfastness | | Experiencing |
| | Own language | | Daring to let go |
| | Values | Values | Realize |
| | Reflexive | Beliefs | Loss & pain |
| | Beliefs | Taking control | Ripen |
| | | Short term & protocol oriented | Tolerate |
| | | | Relief |

Table 3 Necessary Conditions for Individual, Team, Organization & Referrers

| | Individual | Team | Organization | Referrers |
|----------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Necessary conditions | Experimentation time & space | Systemic approach | Support & courage | Language & knowledge |
| | Experience & observation | Apprenticeship | Initiators | Expectations |
| | Trust | Inspiration & support | Regional embedding | |
| | Acknowledgment | | Mandate | |

their responsibilities (role), how they acted in practice (performance), and how these roles and practices became internalized as part of their professional self-understanding (identity). The transformation described what YIM professionals have undergone—or are still undergoing—and outlined what this process entailed from their perspective.

Notably, several professionals expressed that the extent to which they identified with the YIM professional role influenced their ability to reflect on both the transformation process and their needs within it. Those with a stronger sense of identification reported being better able to reflect on their role, the obstacles they encountered, and the support they still required.

Table 2 presents the integrated coding tree for YIM professionals, non-YIM professionals, and transformation. The fourth coding tree, concerning necessary conditions, is presented separately in Table 3. All findings are supported by quotations from the focus groups.

Role

YIM Professionals

Professionals primarily discussed the need to adopt a different role towards families and their networks. The findings suggested that YIM professionals position themselves as coaches, emphasizing modesty in their professional role, particularly in how they relate to young people and their families. This was reflected in a deliberate downplaying of their expert status and a focus on temporary involvement (e.g., positioning the YIM mentor as the primary and enduring source of support), while fostering relationships on equal footing. In contrast to the traditional ‘know-it-all expert,’ the new role demanded, according to the professionals, the development of coaching skills and critical self-reflection, particularly regarding the professional’s own ‘rescuer instinct’. While the impulse to help and intervene remained strong, YIM professionals described how true effort lies in resisting that urge. It was precisely this deliberate restraint—doing less rather than more—that requires the most energy.

And if the YIM mentor has not yet established a position, or if things are not going well, and something happens within the family that makes you think, ‘Oh, I need to address this,’ then I sometimes tend to quickly step into the role of the rescuer, rather than taking a step back and thinking: ‘Wait, the YIM mentor is there, let’s see...’ (Respondent, Focus Group 5).

In addition to the inner, intense work, professionals found it also challenging because others believed that they were doing nothing. One respondent stated: “I often hear from young people, ‘Well, you’re not doing anything’, are you going to work there? ‘Yeah, they don’t do anything’” (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

The modesty expressed by YIM professionals centered around making themselves less important. There was a heightened awareness of their own temporarily role: it was not about the professional’s input, but about the YIM mentor, who had always been there and would remain as this respondent explained: “You have to make yourself a little less important and take a step back. In a way, you really must hold yourself back.” (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

The equal footing, the final subcategory identified in the narratives of YIM professionals, referred to how they engaged both with family members and the (future) YIM mentor. Like modesty, it reflected the way the YIM professional role is enacted. Professionals described equality not only as a guiding principle but also as a source of relief and job satisfaction. By approaching families and

YIM mentors as equal partners, participants explained they no longer feel solely responsible for carrying the weight of care. They delineated that this shared responsibility fostered a more sustainable practice and contributed to increased job satisfaction.

Non-YIM Professionals

According to the YIM professionals in the focus groups, who had previously worked in non-YIM roles themselves, non-YIM professionals often, consciously or unconsciously, adopt an expert role. Drawing on their own prior practice, participants described how they used to—and still see others—present themselves as experts in a particular field or issue, acting as though they possess all the necessary knowledge. This role was often accompanied by the belief that one knew what was best for the family. The respondents also recognized a tendency—both in their past selves and in colleagues—to respond quickly with direct actions or ready-made solutions, reinforcing the image of the expert who resolved problems independently.

What I notice is that the conventional professional tends to see themselves as the expert. And I still believe that a YIM professional is an expert in their field. But when it comes to the family, you know nothing at all! That's where I think the YIM professional is more modest—more aware of what they do and do not know. (Respondent, Focus Group 4)

The respondents explained that a common pitfall of the expert role was slipping into the rescuer role. Several YIM professionals indicated that, before working with the YIM approach, they often found themselves taking on this role, and sometimes still did. The YIM professionals discussed the drawbacks of the rescuer role and described how collaborating with YIM mentors helped them to slow down and reflect before automatically taking on all responsibilities again.

Yes, I recognize this as well, especially when it comes to taking responsibility. For example, if the YIM mentor is not in position, or if things aren't going smoothly yet and something happens where I feel like I need to act, I tend to quickly step into the rescuer role instead of stepping back and thinking, 'Wait, the YIM is here, how can we activate the YIM mentor?' (Respondent, Focus Group 5).

Transformation

The first subcategory in this transformation was a growing awareness among professionals of the position they had to adopt to successfully introduce and support a YIM mentor. Professionals discussed that they became aware of the fact that a professional was merely a passerby, present only temporarily in the family's life. This insight prompted a shift in positioning, encouraged professionals to step back and created space for others within the family's network, but that created tension. One respondent explained: *"Support services are still very much organized around the idea of predetermined interventions — this is what needs to be deployed, this is what needs to be done. As a result, such an approach is often expected from you as well"* (Respondent, Focus Group 4). YIM professionals often described how this shift required them to adopt a different role and to act differently. YIM professionals described this transformation as going against established practices and expectations within the youth care system, which is shaped by long-standing roles, traditions, and institutional structures. One respondent referred to it as *"knocking over sacred cows"* (Respondent, Focus Group 1), illustrating how making space for the YIM mentor required redefining their professional role. This shift could lead to friction, as others—such as parents or colleagues—did not expect this change in behavior.

So, I think, and this is probably also what we encounter when working with other professionals, you must dare to speak up sometimes, or challenge certain things that you feel, 'No, sorry, we need to discuss this if we want to do something differently.' [...] And yes, indeed, sometimes you must poke at those sacred cows, because if you want to make a change, it doesn't happen without resistance. (Respondent, Focus Group 1)

Performance

YIM Professionals

YIM professionals indicated that the specific actions of a YIM professional involved building a collaborative working relationship with all family members. They emphasized connecting with the lived experience and burdens of the family, attuning to and accommodating family dynamics, and exploring the dilemmas experienced by individual family members. From this working relationship, the goal is to enable a position for the forthcoming YIM mentor, as families are not always receptive to this idea. Parents might have different expectations regarding youth care services. One respondent explained the delicate balance between

maintaining relationships with parents while simultaneously ensuring that space remains available for the forthcoming YIM mentor. By focusing on the care process and enabling a position for the future YIM mentor, the YIM professional sometimes must tread carefully.

Also, by explaining. That the YIM mentor is precisely so important for the long term. And sometimes it is necessary, for example, to engage with parents who may still want to have conversations or ask for something they need in the moment. The idea is to help them reflect and encourage them to hold on a little longer until the YIM mentor is in place. (Respondent, Focus Group 4)

According to the respondents, this work also demanded steadfastness. One respondent, who had experience working in both a YIM team and a non-YIM team, emphasized that steadfastness was not only required in consistently asking the same YIM-related questions, but also in remaining engaged when families initially responded with reluctance or showed little enthusiasm for involving relatives or neighbors.

While engaging in their work, YIM professionals were also acutely aware of the language they used. How they explained what they did—and why—was considered a vital skill, especially when communicating with families and with other, non-YIM professionals surrounding the family. Respondents referred to a specific ‘YIM language’, which signaled a distinct role conception and professional attitude. One respondent illustrated the importance of this language by contrasting it with more traditional terminology:

Whereas conventional professionals tend to speak of *‘involving the network’*—a phrase that implies a top-down approach in which the professional remains in control—YIM professionals describe their practice as *‘moving forward together’*. This reflects a more collaborative and co-creative process, in which families and their networks are engaged as equal partners. (Respondent, Focus Group 1)

Non-YIM Professionals

According to the YIM professionals, one of the defining features of non-YIM professional practice was the emphasis on building a personal bond with the youth or the family. The respondents contrasted this with the YIM approach, which started not by creating new bonds, but by identifying and strengthening existing ones—people who already had a trusting relationship with the youth or family.

YIM professionals also noted that non-YIM colleagues tended to be more goal- and performance-oriented. They referred to this as a ‘what-focused’ approach, emphasizing results and predefined objectives. In contrast, the YIM approach is described as ‘who-focused’, where the primary task was to discover who was already trusted or influential in the young person’s life. According to the respondents, this different focus—from what to who—marked a fundamental difference in how support was structured and delivered.

Non-YIM professionals tended to take the lead, which they often referred to as taking control, according to the participants. Non-YIM professionals were typically in charge of identifying problems, devising solutions, and initiating action. As one participant reflected on their previous role: *“I used to work as a professional in another organization. There, I needed to initiate activities with the youth, and I was the one sitting on that couch with them”* (Respondent, Focus Group 1).

However, the notion of taking control was also discussed in a broader sense, concerning safety, well-being, and developmental progress. In such contexts, taking control often meant assuming responsibility for ensuring that the home environment was safe or that the youth was progressing adequately. Respondents observed that in these high-stakes situations, non-YIM professionals tended to take over from the family or the broader network. When something was perceived as critical, non-YIM professionals were less likely to entrust that responsibility to those closest to the youth.

And handing over control is exactly what youth care professionals often find difficult. They usually hold the lead. Especially in those settings, we notice that this is very challenging, because who is then accountable, and who holds responsibility? (Respondent, Focus Group 3)

A final distinction in performance, as described by the YIM professionals, concerns the focus on short-term goals and adherence to protocols. They observed that non-YIM professionals often work in response to externally defined assignments—typically set by municipalities, referrers, or internal organizational goals. This task-oriented mindset can lead to a more procedural approach, where actions follow pre-established protocols or methodologies. As a result, practice may be experienced as operating on autopilot. The YIM approach is perceived as more open-ended and adaptive. Several respondents noted that this lack of a predefined pathway—of knowing in advance what is right or which steps to take—can be both liberating and challenging.

And when you look around, one person is using method X, another is using method Y—it’s all very

protocol-driven, a clear structure. First this, then that. And I've sometimes thought, 'Oh, how wonderful it must be to have that kind of certainty'. (Respondent, Focus Group 5)

Transformation

To become more effective in the performance of a YIM professional, YIM professionals emphasized that it was important to become more skilled in explaining what a YIM mentor is, why it fits, and why you are doing what you are doing. This helped them to get families and colleagues on board and, very practically, it ultimately led to less hassle. However, all YIM professionals recognized the initial confusion in language with colleagues, even with their fellow novice YIM colleagues. As one respondent explained:

So, your background—your core profession—really plays a significant role, I think. I remember that in the beginning, we sometimes had discussions about vision or working methods. At that point, we weren't yet speaking the same language, which occasionally led to confusion. (Respondent, Focus Group 3)

Perseverance was also an important subcategory, according to YIM professionals. It involved gaining experience through practice, while recognizing that it could clash with other tasks and might provoke resistance. The continuous search and becoming increasingly aware of how to behave as a professional in a way that created space for an emerging YIM mentor. This was also referred to as a difficult journey, as it involved experiencing and experimenting, making mistakes along the way. According to the YIM professionals, experiences contributed to growing confidence, although self-doubt could still arise during moments of uncertainty.

But sometimes I also feel like, what am I doing? Then I can feel quite different. Because I experience, when questions are asked like: 'Have you already done this? Have you already used this? Have you tried that?' And then I think, 'Oh, that's not how I work,' and then I might start doubting myself at that moment. Am I missing something? (Respondent, Focus Group 4)

Participants discussed the changing realization among professionals regarding ownership of problems and solutions — that they could not sustainably be the foundation for these — paved the way for gradually letting go of certain aspects and reduced their blind spots. As this respondent put it: *"It's very much about ownership of the problem, isn't it? Yes, about realizing that we are not the ones carrying it, and therefore we are not responsible for the solution or the pathway towards it"* (Respondent, Focus Group 1). According to the participants, it was about becoming aware that their

previous actions had been more focused on short-term solutions. However, in this phase participants explained, they still struggled with letting go, as some professionals mentioned the norms they imposed on the YIM mentor or were a bit too keen on getting a YIM mentor, as this respondent captured it: *"In the beginning, we were indeed very focused on that specific task — finding the YIM mentor. To the point that we almost, or perhaps completely, set aside our professional expertise"* (Respondent, Focus Group 3).

Identity

YIM Professionals

Seeing the value of the YIM approach is a subcategory of identity as it reflects a shift in how professionals make sense of their role and begin to identify with the YIM approach. This value is recognized in several ways, such as the increased autonomy among youth: *"I see it as the young people making more of their own choices, thinking more about what is important to them. Then they are also more driven and motivated to work on it themselves"* (Respondent, Focus Group 3). It also had beneficial aspects for the YIM professional: *"I find it a breath of fresh air. [...] It's easier to persevere, so to speak"* (Respondent, Focus Group 4).

Professionals emphasized the importance of continuously and critically engaging with one's professional positioning, known as reflexivity. This included understanding their own values, how power works and the relational dynamics inherent in caregiving. Focus group respondents noted that the YIM approach placed greater emphasis on recognizing the professional as a whole person, and they expressed that it closely aligned with their values and identity. Moreover, they described the YIM approach as a mindset — a particular way of conceptualizing and engaging with care. This respondent encapsulated the necessary reflexivity required to reflect on oneself and one's intentions as a professional.

It's really about the experience that young people are much more receptive to support from a self-chosen, selected YIM mentor than from someone like me. If I were to say the same thing, they might think, 'What a strange caregiver.' But when a YIM mentor says it, it resonates much more deeply. [...] And that's an important realization. To me, that's what real helping looks like. As professional caregivers, we're often driven by the desire to help others, but that can sometimes be more about fulfilling our own need to do good. With the YIM approach, the focus shifts: you're doing something because it truly benefits the other person, not because it makes *you* feel good, and that

is what makes it genuinely rewarding. (Respondent, Focus Group 3)

YIM professionals demonstrated a strong belief in the YIM approach, grounded in what they perceived as trustworthy and meaningful in their professional practice. This belief is further reinforced when they experienced that it worked. As one respondent put it: *“That comes from experience, and trusting myself, and seeing that the YIM approach truly works. I was already convinced, but like you said—I’ve felt it”* (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

Non-YIM Professionals

According to the YIM professionals, non-YIM professionals tended to operate from a value orientation that emphasized individual professional responsibility and professional control. The participants explained that there was a difference in what you valued as effective support. One respondent explained: *“Conventional professionals tend to look for solutions in external systems, while YIM professionals primarily seek solutions within the family system and its existing network”* (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

According to YIM professionals, non-YIM professionals often relied heavily on their own standards and professional logic, emphasizing being correct and following established procedures. This respondent reflected on her practice before becoming a YIM professional: *“You have to set goals and work towards them in small steps, with the risk that your norms become embedded in the process and ultimately shape the end goal”* (Respondent, Focus Group 4). According to YIM professionals, they themselves valued shared responsibility and trust in existing relationships. As one respondent reflected:

As a regular professional, for example, you tend to work with the client to find a solution to their problem. But as a YIM professional, you actively involve the YIM mentor and frame it as a shared issue: How can we solve this together? [...] You carry it together—on more shoulders, with more people. (Respondent, Focus Group 5)

Transformation

Considerations about role and positioning played a significant role in this transformation process, as they shaped and challenged the professionals’ identity. Realization referred to how YIM professionals reflected on their position within a family, considering the impact of that position, and collectively identifying blind spots. One respondent explained that this was not an easy phase: *“Who am I now that I’m*

working with the YIM approach? And does what I do still matter? It went so far that I started to feel quite insecure about what I had to offer” (Respondent, Focus Group 3). This process encompassed feelings of frustration, discomfort, and stress, according to the participants.

Additionally, according to the participants, professionals became more aware of their pain, desires, and unmet needs—emotions that were previously fulfilled before they began to transform towards a YIM professional role. What was also associated with this, according to the YIM professionals, was the feeling of losing something, which could be painful. Participants spoke about losing the expert role and feeling uncertain about the skills they had not yet mastered. The clarity and certainty they once had about their job and profession were now gone. Some YIM professionals experienced this on a deeply personal level, as illustrated by this respondent: *“I almost dare to say that I believe a personal crisis is needed to shift from one to the other and undergo that transformation”* (Respondent, Focus Group 1). And, as discussed in the same focus group, it seemed that some colleagues also went through the transformation phase but did not follow through. As this quote illustrates:

When I look at the past four years, we’ve had three colleagues who went through this shift, but they didn’t continue with it. Eventually, they chose a different path. [...] But what I see is that in our team, when people go through it together with us, that’s when it happens. Yes, so even these very unpleasant feelings. But I think that this friction is necessary for transformation into something else. (Respondent, Focus Group 1)

After the realization, pain, and loss, YIM professionals explained that a period of maturation followed, where the new role and performance slowly began to ripen into the new norm. The concept gradually settled both within oneself and in the surrounding environment; it takes time, but something begins to take shape. YIM professionals spoke about learning to tolerate what followed—tolerating that you were no longer the expert, tolerating the fact that you needed time to explain what you did and why to families and non-YIM professionals, and recognizing that they had different expectations. According to the YIM professionals, this was something that became more manageable with experience, although not without continued challenges for some.

Interviewer: Okay, and does it become easier the longer you do this, or does it remain difficult?

R1: Easier.

R2: It remains difficult.

R1: Yes, but it's easier than your first case, after you've gained more experience.

R2: For me, I don't experience it like that. For me, it's still difficult, even as recently as yesterday. (Respondents, Focus Group 3)

As part of this transformation process, YIM professionals also described a sense of relief that emerged when they no longer carried sole responsibility for care. This feeling was so strong that some expressed they would not want to return to working without a YIM mentor. As one participant put it: *"Well, yes, it's farewell in the sense that I no longer want to return to working without a YIM mentor"* (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

Necessary Conditions for Becoming a YIM Professional

This section describes the conditions that YIM professionals identified as necessary for becoming a YIM professional. These findings were organized into four main categories: individual, team, organization, and referrers, see Table 3.

Individual

YIM professionals emphasized that having sufficient space and time to experiment is essential for their development. They described the transformation to becoming a YIM professional as a complex process that required support in the form of time and space to gain more knowledge. One respondent articulated this need clearly: *"Yes, knowledge of circular care, training, and more peer consultation — these things need to be facilitated, but that is not happening at the moment"* (Respondent, Focus Group 5).

According to the YIM professionals, individual needs included the opportunity to observe a colleague and experience what it was like to work according to the YIM approach. This was also stated by this respondent: *"I think you need 100% support to be able to rely on a colleague, however that is organized"* (Respondent, Focus Group 4). Experiencing, understood as both feeling the process personally and observing an experienced colleague, alongside learning through trial and error, played a vital role. As one respondent expressed:

I notice that once you've seen it a few times, it starts to come alive, and you begin to see what it brings. At the start, I had a book and attended a training. Then you know what it is, but you don't have a clear picture yet. (Respondent, Focus Group 4)

Respondents emphasized the importance of an internal sense of trust—both in themselves and the YIM approach—as a fundamental condition for engaging in this work. One respondent reflected on the emotional toll of responding to a family's needs and emphasized that trust was essential to persevere.

You need to embrace discomfort, as the stress may initially increase. The pressure and demands may intensify, which makes it essential to stay grounded. It requires a mindset where you can say, 'This is what we need to do, and these are the steps we need to take' while maintaining the trust that you project. However, this is especially challenging in the beginning. (Respondent, Focus Group 2)

Besides trust, external validation played a vital role. According to the participants, recognition and acknowledgment from both colleagues and managers strengthened YIM professionals' confidence that they were on the right track. The approach and mindset of YIM professionals often differed significantly from those of non-YIM professionals, highlighting the importance of feeling seen and supported in this distinct way of working. Such validation was most meaningful when it came from others who didn't only understand what YIM professionals did, but also why they did it. As one respondent shared: *"It's just nice that everyone is YIM-minded. I don't have to convince anyone or explain why again, or must meet with child protection, or with the manager, or again..."* (Respondent, Focus Group 1).

Team

Respondents emphasized that working with the YIM approach inherently aligned with systemic thinking. They pointed out that the effectiveness of the approach was not limited to identifying a YIM mentor but rather depended on the team's broader vision and understanding of a systemic perspective rooted in family systems theory. Without this foundation, there was a risk — as several YIM professionals noted — that the approach was reduced to a tool, rather than being seen as part of a deeper shift in the professional's mindset and how they engaged with a family's system. One respondent reflected on how this systemic perspective was initially lacking, but how over time its importance became increasingly evident within the team: *"Yes, from the early years, there was no focus on the systemic approach at all. I started learning that over the years in practice. And I think it's gradually spreading, like a ripple effect, how important that is"* (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

Several respondents described the development of YIM professionalism as an apprenticeship process, requiring

time, repetition, and experiential learning, as well as the space to revisit and refine one's practice.

One respondent stated: *"That's why it's also important to carry out this work in teams, where you work closely together. It's crucial to discuss cases frequently, as it's essential to keep each other sharp throughout that process"* (Participant, Focus Group 2).

Equally essential was the presence of inspiration and support—being nourished through collegial exchange, engaging with others who modelled the YIM mindset, and had the opportunity to feel and embody the approach in interaction with others.

Sometimes it's refreshing to collaborate with another ICT team, somewhere else in the country. You know you're doing good work yourself, but now and then, it's helpful to connect with others and be reminded of the bigger picture. It reinvigorates and inspires you, and as a team, we need that. It's important to stay inspired and motivated. (Respondent, Focus Group 1)

Organization

Respondents emphasized that the sustainable implementation of the YIM approach required explicit support from the organization, particularly from management. This included recognition of the vision, visible commitment, and the courage to back transformative change.

Is it being recognized? Is it supported by the organization? It's only in the last six months or so that I've felt that it is being more widely supported and that we're making real progress. It's hard work to go through the entire transformation, of course, but because of that, you also want to have this part, and yes, then you really must make your voice heard. (Respondent, Focus Group 3)

Support alone, however, was not enough. According to the respondents, internal momentum must be fostered through 'initiators'—enthusiastic individuals who drove the vision forward—and by embedding the approach in the broader regional context.

It depends on whether the organization supports it. In our organization, for instance, there are a few enthusiastic individuals—true initiators—while some in management and among the behavioral scientists remain more hesitant. That creates a risk of the initiative gradually losing momentum. It's not just a method; it's also about shaping a culture. (Respondent, Focus Group 1)

Regional embedding by managers and interdisciplinary collaboration within the organization were also identified as essential conditions for success, helping to broaden support and ensure long-term integration. According to the YIM professionals, viewing the YIM approach as a delineated method reserved for a specialized team misses the point. Instead, they emphasized the need for a more integrative perspective, in which the YIM vision informed and influenced all areas of practice within the organization and the region. This required ongoing dialogue among managers and behavioral specialists to ensure that the approach was embedded across the broader context.

Finally, respondents highlighted the importance of authorization. Training in the YIM approach served as a starting point, but without structural facilitation, organizational alignment, and cross-agency cooperation, implementation risked falling short as this respondent explained: *"That you are given the opportunities and are supported to truly breathe this vision—otherwise, you may hold the vision, but you can only partially put it into practice"* (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

Referrers

Respondents emphasized that being able to clearly articulate what the YIM approach entailed is a necessary condition for mutual understanding and alignment. As one respondent explained:

If you can clearly articulate what the YIM approach is and explain it well, people tend to find it quite self-evident. That clarity is essential to convey it effectively. And that applies not only within the family context, but also within the broader organization and towards referrers. I believe that if you can create a shared understanding around it, collaboration becomes much easier. It then becomes much less black and white. (Respondent, Focus Group 2)

Moreover, clear communication about the expectations placed on the YIM professional was essential in interactions between professionals and referrers. In the absence of such dialogue, misconceptions could emerge about the nature of the YIM approach and the professional role it entailed.

I do notice that referrers are still struggling a bit with the question of 'how exactly?' For example, they sometimes ask for a buddy coach or suggest starting with something else [i.e., suggesting an alternative to the YIM approach]. So, I think there's still room for growth in that process. (Respondent, Focus Group 4)

Respondents noted that their teams continued to actively address this by offering ongoing communication and training to external partners: *“And I think we’ve invested – and continue to invest – a great deal of time and energy into that. We still give a lot of workshops about what we do and what referrers can expect from us”* (Respondent, Focus Group 3).

Finally, personal experience with the YIM approach often prompted a shift in mindset among referrers. When they witnessed its effectiveness in practice, they tended to become more open and collaborative. As one respondent noted: *“And you can sometimes see a shift when referrers have had a positive experience—when they’ve seen that it works. That’s when they become more open to adopting the mindset. But it does take time”* (Respondent, Focus Group 2).

Discussion

How did YIM professionals perceive and enact the shift from an expert-driven, problem-focused model toward a facilitating and network-oriented role, and what conditions were required to support this transformation in everyday practice? This study suggests that the transformation entails changes in role, performance, and professional identity, and requires specific forms of support.

YIM professionals described a substantial shift in their role – from that of an expert to that of a coach – emphasizing modesty, equal footing, and deliberate restraint. Rather than intervening directly, the core challenge lied in resisting the impulse to “rescue” and instead creating space for the YIM, who could offer sustainable, long-term support in the lives of the young people and their families.

According to the YIM professionals, this approach required critical self-reflection, the development of coaching competencies, and the careful navigation of relationships with the families. Many professionals reported that this new way of working was both challenging and rewarding, as it aligned with their values and led to greater job satisfaction. At a more abstract level, our analysis suggested that YIM professionals were guided by values that emphasized the strengths and capacities present within families and their existing networks. These values fostered a greater tolerance and a readiness to engage with dilemmas collaboratively. Rather than aiming to resolve complexity through professional authority, YIM professionals intentionally engaged with the complexities within the family, on equal footing, embracing the idea that diverse perspectives—including those of families and their informal networks—were essential to meaningful and effective support. In doing so, they relied on a particular kind of language—relational, accessible, and congruent with the values of the

YIM approach—that helped to foster connection and shared understanding.

YIM professionals observed that non-YIM professionals maintained a more traditional expert role, which could lead to adopting a rescuer position. They frequently took control of the process, provided solutions, and adhered closely to established procedures and protocols. This led to a procedural and less flexible approach, with limited emphasis on mobilizing and empowering the family’s network. Underlying this approach, according to YIM professionals, was a value system that assumed professional expertise was central to resolving complex issues. Non-YIM professionals were seen as operating from a stance of individual professional responsibility and control, often believing they knew what was best for the family. YIM professionals also noted that they focused on building their relationship with the client and sought solutions primarily within external systems. In contrast, YIM professionals emphasized shared responsibility, trust in the youth’s network, and collective caregiving.

The shift to a YIM professional is described by YIM professionals as a fundamental transformation that required steadfastness, time, self-reflection, and the courage to experiment with new ways of working. Letting go of the need for control, developing enabling skills and new language, and learning to trust the capacity of families and their networks were central to this process. Although YIM professionals described this phase as demanding—requiring perseverance, maturation, and the ability to face loss and pain—they also reported that working with the YIM approach brought immediate relief and made their work feel less burdensome.

YIM professionals described transformation as a process requiring time, space, and experiential learning. Sustaining this process depended on trust—both in the YIM approach and in themselves—as well as ongoing reflection and support from colleagues. This transformation could not be achieved in isolation. At the team level, a shared systemic perspective and peer learning were seen as essential to prevent the approach from being reduced to a technique rather than embraced as a transformative mindset. At the organizational level, managers were identified as key factors, with YIM professionals emphasizing the need for courageous leadership and a culture that enables experimentation, reflection, and shared responsibility. Finally, sustaining transformation in practice required continuous alignment with referrers through dialogue and shared understanding.

Our analysis revealed a notable distinction: when describing YIM professionals, participants primarily focused on performance—concrete actions and practices—whereas reflections on the transformation process centered more often on identity. This suggests that while the YIM professional is defined through what they do, becoming a YIM

professional is experienced as a shift in self-perception and professional positioning. This distinction aligns with the dimensions act, feel, and think proposed by Hornsey (2008), a conceptualization within the Social Identity Approach, which became apparent during analysis and offered a useful lens to understand the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive aspects of professional identity development.

Building on this, the findings of this study can be further interpreted through the Social Identity Approach (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1978; Turner et al., 1987), particularly to what might be termed “YIM professional identification”, the extent to which professionals come to see themselves as YIM professionals. Participants described a significant shift in social identity as they moved from a non-YIM professional to a YIM professional role, extending beyond daily practice to their self-perception, group membership, and relationships with other youth care professionals.

This transformation into a YIM professional role is perceived as gradual and layered, developing over time through experience, reflection, and collegial support rather than being immediately achieved after training. The degree to which professionals identified with the YIM professional role influenced how they navigated this process and the types of support they required.

Emerging in-group identification appeared to foster professional pride, a sense of belonging, and self-efficacy, consistent with the Social Identity Approach’s expectation that social identity shapes both self-perception and behavior (Haslam et al., 2014; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). Taken together, these findings not only support but also extend the Social Identity Approach by illustrating how social identity develops in a concrete professional context, where sustained transformation depends on managerial support and strong regional embedding.

This research confirms previous findings on professional transformation. The conditions described by YIM professionals—such as the need to reflect on one’s identity when new ways of working challenge established beliefs, the importance of collective learning, and the need for ongoing development—align closely with existing literature. Our findings resonate with Pratt et al.’s (2006) work on identity processes, Reay et al.’s (2017) research on learning through social interaction, and Wiles’ (2017) findings that transformation is a continuous process. Beyond confirming earlier research, our study offers a more nuanced understanding of how transformation unfolds within the context of youth care.

In line with this, another study by Peelen et al. (2023) identified three necessary conditions for adopting a different way of working: willingness, becoming able, and being allowed. The findings of our study closely align with the set of conditions described by Peelen’s. YIM professionals

demonstrated willingness by embracing the approach as meaningful and effective both for youth and themselves. They became able by developing the characteristics of a YIM professional, such as adopting a coaching, modest, and equal-footing role. Finally, being allowed by one’s manager and organization depends on several necessary conditions. YIM professionals need supportive and courageous managers, regional embedding and referrers on one page (i.e., shared language, knowledge, and expectations), and organizations that foster a culture of experimentation, reflection, and shared responsibility.

While many professionals demonstrated a strong identification with the YIM approach, variation in identification and support indicates that this transformation remains uneven and, in some cases, incomplete. These findings help understand why earlier studies have reported challenges in implementing the YIM approach (Koper et al., 2023; Sekreve et al., 2020; Van Dam et al., 2019). Variation in the extent to which professionals internalize the YIM identity, alongside differences in available support, may contribute to ongoing role ambiguity and differences in implementation (Koper et al., 2024; Sekreve et al., 2020).

Taken together, these findings suggest that implementing and adhering to the YIM approach—and possibly also broader effort to reform and improve youth care—depend on professionals’ ability to transform their role, identity, and everyday practice, as well as on the conditions provided. Without this shift, the YIM approach risks being implemented superficially, with professionals reverting to established practices rather than realizing its intended relational and network-oriented principles (Koper et al., 2023; Sekreve et al., 2020; Van Dam et al., 2019). These findings therefore highlight that professional transformation is not solely an individual process, but requires sustained organizational support, shared understanding, and alignment across stakeholders.

Strengths and Limitations

There is limited research on YIM professionals and the support they need to work in line with the expectations set out in the Dutch reform agenda. This study aimed to contribute to this emerging field by offering empirical insights into their experiences, needs, and identity development. Due to the qualitative design and the specific context of the focus groups, the findings cannot be straightforwardly generalized to all YIM professionals or youth care settings. Nevertheless, this exploratory study offers valuable insights into how professional transformation unfolds in practice, serving as a foundation for future research aimed at broader validation and application. While exploratory, the findings may also inform future research and policy discussions.

Focus groups were chosen as the primary method to elicit rich, in-depth responses (Krueger & Casey, 2014). In addition, a member check was conducted with two groups, which strengthened the study's credibility and trustworthiness. Their feedback revealed that an important element had been overlooked, prompting us to revisit the data. This led to an adjustment of the coding framework to incorporate this newly identified subcategory.

Another strength lies in the fact that the focus groups were moderated by a master's student with no prior involvement in the youth care field or the YIM approach. Her outsider position enabled a neutral facilitation style, allowing participants to speak freely and minimizing potential bias in the interaction (Khan & Abedin, 2022; Teufel-Shone & Williams, 2010). At the same time, the analysis was carried out by a research team, one of whom possessed in-depth knowledge of the YIM approach. This combination supported a nuanced interpretation of the data and contributed to the depth and relevance of the findings, while balancing conceptual understanding with attentiveness to potential bias from multiple perspectives (Thomas et al., 2000).

Recommendations

This study provides valuable guidance for organizations implementing the YIM approach. Our findings underscore that embedding the YIM approach requires structural and ongoing support across four levels: the individual professional, the team, the organization, and the referrers. Organizations play a crucial role in fostering a reflective culture, creating space for experimentation, and ensuring consistent guidance throughout the transformation process. This includes facilitating time for reflection, supporting peer learning within teams, providing active and courageous leadership, and aligning expectations with referrers through ongoing dialogue. Without sustained support across these levels, efforts to implement the YIM approach risk remaining superficial, as professionals may be unable to fully enact the required shift in role and identity.

At the same time, professionals themselves play an active role in this process by engaging in reflection, participating in collective learning, and actively seeking the support needed to navigate this transformation (Reay et al., 2017). Within this broader framework, training in the YIM approach should be understood as part of a continuous developmental process rather than a one-off intervention. Training should therefore extend beyond skill acquisition and support professionals in navigating uncertainty, redefining their role, and collaborating with others. Importantly, training efforts need to include not only youth care professionals but also managers and key stakeholders, equipping them to sustain an enabling environment (Aarons et al., 2015).

Current training in the YIM approach requires systematic evaluation to assess whether it adequately supports professionals in practice and to inform ongoing refinement aligned with their experiences and needs. In addition, implementing the YIM approach requires explicit attention to the identity work involved, for example by facilitating peer support through self-selected colleagues with whom professionals can reflect on uncertainties and dilemmas in everyday practice.

These findings suggest that transformation efforts in youth care should explicitly invest in supporting professional identity change and in aligning expectations, roles, and responsibilities across system levels. Without such coordinated support, policy ambitions are unlikely to translate into sustainable changes in everyday practice.

Conclusions

The transformation into a YIM professional involves a shift from expert to coach, grounded in trust, shared responsibility, and network-oriented values. This shift entails a reconfiguration of role, identity, and performance, and requires time, reflection, and collective support to take root, with supportive and courageous leadership playing a crucial role in enabling this process.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the effectiveness of the YIM approach, and its potential to strengthen the informal networks of young people and their families, depends on professionals' ability to transform their role, identity, and everyday practice, and on the organizational conditions that support this transformation. Crucially, this requires that professionals come to identify as YIM professionals, as this internalization helps reduce role ambiguity and supports consistent implementation.

Without this shift, the YIM approach risks remaining superficial, and sustainable innovation will remain out of reach. These findings also help understand why broader transformation efforts in youth care often fail to take hold, by showing how insufficient support for professional identity change and misalignment across system levels can hinder the translation of policy ambitions into everyday practice.

Appendix A

Focus Group Discussion Guide.

(5 min) Welcome everyone. My name is Jip, and I will be facilitating today's group discussion. I am currently conducting research for my master's thesis in Forensic Pedagogy, focusing on your role and experiences in working with the YIM approach.

I want to thank you all for participating. The discussion will last approximately 75 min.

The ground rules for this discussion:

- You are free to stop at any time; just let me know.
- I am interested in your experiences, and there are no right or wrong answers.
- Let others finish speaking before responding.
- Feel free to complement each other's points.

Finally, I would like to ask whether everyone agrees to an audio recording of this discussion. The reason for this is that it allows me to focus on the conversation and later use the recording to analyze our discussion.

Do you all agree with this?

Are there any questions before we begin?

Flipchart Exercise (15 min).

Flipchart Layout Regular Professional → YIM Professional.

We will make a clear distinction here.

- What characterizes you as a YIM professional within your field?
- And what characterizes a regular professional?

Take 5 min to brainstorm in pairs and write your thoughts on post-it notes. Use separate post-its for the regular professional and the YIM professional. The post-its can be placed in the corresponding columns on the flipchart.

Current Experience (15 min).

1. Now that we have listed characteristics of both the regular professional and the YIM professional, can you elaborate on these? What further defines you as a YIM professional? Are we missing anything for either category?
 2. In what ways is your role as a YIM professional different from that of a regular professional?
- Do you feel connected to regular professionals, or do you see yourselves as a separate group?
3. What is the role (position in the process) you take on as a professional when working with a YIM?
 4. What has changed in your role since you started working with the YIM approach?
- What are the positive changes in your role?
 - What are the negative changes in your role?

Flipchart Exercise (5 min).

There is one column on the flipchart we have not yet filled in: the transformation from regular professional to

YIM professional. What are the characteristics of this transformation? What words come to mind? Take 5 min to write these down on separate Post-it notes.

Transformation from Regular Professional to YIM Professional (20 min)

5. Now that we have completed the middle section of the flipchart on the transformation from regular professional to YIM professional, what challenges did you encounter within yourself during this transformation?
6. What have you had to let go of as a professional when working with a YIM? What do you still need to let go of? Follow-up: What does this mean to you?
7. What does working with a YIM add to your professional experience?

Required Support (10 min)

8. What do you think other professionals need to become YIM professionals? Follow-up: Are these things you felt were missing in your own experience?
9. If the answer is not specific enough: What type of support do you need to become a YIM professional?

Conclusion (5 min)

10. Returning to the flipchart: At the beginning of this discussion, we wrote down key characteristics. Are there any aspects we missed, or anything you would like to add?

Finally, I want to thank you all for your participation and distribute a short feedback form:

I will give you all a form with a few additional questions. It will take only a few minutes to complete. Please submit the completed form in the collection box near the exit by the end of the day. If you cannot find the box, you may also return the form to me.

If you would like to receive feedback on this study, please let us know.

Author contributions All authors contributed substantially to the conception and design of the study and to the discussion of the methodology. JB collected the data, and SdR was responsible for project administration. Formal analysis was conducted by SdR, FvR, MvH, and CK. SdR drafted the initial manuscript. All authors contributed to reviewing and revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. Supervision was provided by FvR, MvH, and CK. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests Suzanne de Ruig reports personal interest in YIM as she is co-founder of the YIM foundation. All other authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval The study was approved by the Ethics Review Board of the University of Amsterdam (FMG-6696). Focus group data are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality. Anonymized summaries (e.g., coding schemes) are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Informed consent All participants gave informed consent in accordance with the Dutch Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

AI use statement To improve clarity and consistency in academic English, AI-based language support (ChatGPT) was used during the writing process. All substantive content, analysis, and interpretation were conducted by the authors.

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