The implementation of Australian Youth Mentoring Programmes: An examination of strengths and limitations through stakeholder engagement

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, youth mentoring programmes (YMPs) have received significant attention as an intervention tool delivered to young people with the aim of fostering positive psychosocial development. The aim of the current study was to conduct a needs assessment that examined the current trends in YMPs across Australia to inform their implementation. Utilizing the COM-B model, a mixed-method design that consisted of an exploratory survey administered to young people and semi-structured interviews conducted with key YMP stakeholders was adopted. The findings of this study provided several compelling insights regarding the need for YMPs and the barriers and enablers to their implementation, while also highlighting several positive outcomes that are commonly experienced by young people who engage in mentoring. Based on these promising findings, several recommendations for the implementation of YMPs are provided herein in order to maximize their effectiveness in fostering positive psychological and behavioural outcomes among young people.

Introduction

Background

Youth mentoring has been commonly conceptualized as a matched relationship between a young person and a non-parental adult who acts as a positive role model and provides interpersonal support and guidance throughout childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood (DuBois & Karcher, 2013). Over the last few decades, youth mentoring has gained increasing popularity as an intervention tool to promote positive psychological, social, and behavioural outcomes among young people, particularly among those who are considered to be placed at a high risk of developing ongoing behavioural problems and experiencing negative outcomes (Rhodes & DuBois, 2005). Across the broader youth mentoring literature, formal youth mentoring programmes (YMPs) through which mentoring relationships are established have been considered (Christensen et al., 2020; DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019; Tolan et al., 2014).

Several types of YMPs have been developed and implemented internationally. These include school-based programmes that occur on school property during the school year (McMorris et al.,...
2018), and community-based programmes wherein mentors and young people engage in activities within the broader community (Keller & Dubois, 2019). One notable example of a YMP that has been widely implemented and evaluated internationally is the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) programme which has been delivered in both school and community-based settings across several countries including the United States, Canada, Ireland, and Australia (Brady & Curtin, 2012; Keller & Dubois, 2019; McMorris et al., 2018; Moodie & Fisher, 2009; Park et al., 2017; De Wit et al., 2016). The BBBS programme pairs disadvantaged children (e.g. economic disadvantage, exposure to discrimination, academic disengagement, mental illness) with adult volunteers who act as a positive role model and provide social support and guidance throughout adolescence in order to foster a sense of belonging, confidence, self-worth, and resilience (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Australia, 2020).

A significant body of international research has been dedicated to the evaluation of such YMPs. In particular, several systematic reviews and meta-analyses have yielded promising results that have provided a thorough understanding of the impact that YMPs have on the wellbeing of young people (Christensen et al., 2020; Dubois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019; Tolan et al., 2014). Overall, these reviews have reported small, yet positive and significant effects of YMPs on several individual outcomes. For example, one recent meta-analysis conducted by Raposa et al. (2019) synthesized the results of 70 evaluations of formal YMPs and found significant improvements across academic, cognitive, physical health, psychological, and social outcomes. Similarly, another meta-analysis of 73 U.S. studies found significant improvements across achievement motivation and prosocial attitudes, social skills and peer relationships, psychological and emotional outcomes (e.g. mental health, self-esteem), behavioural conduct problems (e.g. substance use, juvenile offending, bullying), and academic outcomes (e.g. education attainment, school attendance, academic performance) (Dubois et al., 2011). Taken together, the plethora of research that is currently available in this field heavily advocates for the effectiveness of YMPs in fostering positive outcomes for young people. However, research regarding the implementation of current YMPs through stakeholder engagement, particularly within an Australian context, has been scarce to the authors’ knowledge. Conducting such research to identify the characteristics of YMPs that act as enablers and barriers to implementation will inform the development and refinement of future and existing programmes. This will subsequently assist youth mentoring organizations in maximizing the effectiveness of their programmes in order to foster positive psychosocial development for young people.

The current study

In Australia, Crossway LifeCare, for whom this research was undertaken, has implemented the Youth Creating Opportunities and Casting Hope (Youth COACH) programme. Youth COACH is a community-based YMP wherein volunteer mentors work closely with young people (aged 12 to 16 years) to help them achieve personal life goals that they have identified (e.g. academic goals, emotional wellbeing, community participation). The aim of this study was to conduct a needs assessment that explored the current trends in YMPs, assessed the acceptability of mentoring programmes, and identified barriers and enablers to the implementation of mentoring programmes in Victoria and Tasmania. The findings from this study will inform the implementation of YouthCOACH and other similar YMPs, across Australia.

Method

Study design and setting

This needs assessment adopted a triangulation mixed-methods study design that consisted of both quantitative and qualitative components that were conducted concurrently. Quantitative data were collated from an exploratory survey completed by young people from the general population in order to explore their need and preferences for YMPs, while qualitative data were gathered through
interviews with YMP staff to assess the implementation of current programmes. The rationale for adopting this mixed-methods approach was to capture multiple perspectives of different stakeholders (young people and YMP staff) to allow for a greater depth of analysis of the quantitative and qualitative results reported in this paper.

In order to thoroughly examine the implementation of YMPs, this needs assessment was guided by the Capability, Opportunity, Motivation, and Behaviour (COM-B) model (Michie et al., 2011). This model aims to examine and describe the capabilities, opportunities and motivations to engaging in behaviour (i.e. participation in YMPs) and has been used extensively in research to identify barriers and enablers in programme implementation (Flannery et al., 2018; L. M. Thompson et al., 2018).

Ethics approval was obtained from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (Project number: 2018–12,481–24,789).

Participants

Quantitative component
Young people aged between the ages of 11 and 18 years \(^1\) were recruited to complete an exploratory survey regarding their mentoring preferences. Members of the research team recruited young people via social media and in-person through church youth group events across Victoria. Any young person between 11 and 18 years of age inclusive were eligible to participate; they did not need prior experience with mentoring, nor did they need to be currently engaged in a YMP.

Qualitative component
A total of 13 YMP stakeholders across four organizations in Victoria and Tasmania were invited to participate in this study via email and provided their informed consent. Throughout this paper, the four organizations will be referred to as YMP1, YMP2, YMP3, and YMP4 to retain their anonymity. Stakeholders were eligible if they held a coordination or leadership role within a YMP that involved 1:1 matched mentoring between an adult and an 11–18 year-old in Australia. The distribution of stakeholders across the four organizations is presented in Table 1.

Data collection

Quantitative data collection
Young people completed a 5–10 minute survey that was distributed, completed, and collected in person at a church youth group event in Victoria. An online version of the survey was delivered through Qualtrics and distributed via online social media. The survey included eight multiple choice questions, including demographic questions (e.g. age, gender, enrolled in school) and questions that assessed the young person’s mentoring preferences, including their desire for a mentor, the ideal age of a mentor, and meeting location and time if they were to engage with a mentor. These questions were derived based on a review of the literature and the survey was pilot tested. Names and other identifying information were not collected and thus, surveys were kept anonymous. A template of the full survey has been provided in Supplemental File 1.

| Organization | Number of Stakeholders |
|--------------|------------------------|
| YMP1         | 5                      |
| YMP2         | 4                      |
| YMP3         | 3                      |
| YMP4         | 1                      |

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1. young people aged between the ages of 11 and 18 years.
Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data collection consisted of seven interviews with individual stakeholders and two focus groups with three stakeholders each. The interviews and focus groups sought to explore YMP stakeholders’ perspectives of the need, strengths, limitations, enablers, and barriers to youth mentoring. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face, while six interviews were completed over the phone, with an average duration of 48.39 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ consent to be later transcribed. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to guide the interview and has been provided in Supplemental File 1. All stakeholders were asked the same key questions, but the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed the researcher to provide prompts and ask for clarification or elaboration when necessary. Participants were not provided with reimbursement for their participation.

Data analysis

The quantitative data from the youth survey were collated in an Excel spreadsheet and descriptive statistics were calculated to examine the distribution of responses. The qualitative data from the stakeholder interviews were thematically analysed, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection in order to adequately assess data saturation. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and systematically double-coded independently by two researchers. Open and axial coding was conducted using the qualitative software program, Nvivo. Both coders then engaged in a cooperative discussion to identify independent themes that represented the most pertinent and recurrent aspects of the coded data. An iterative process of refining and reviewing themes was applied until coders agreed that all themes were representative of the data. If consensus could not be achieved, an additional researcher resolved the issue. Quantitative (i.e. survey) and qualitative (i.e. interview) data were analysed separately with a process of triangulation applied at the interpretation stage of the analysis (O’Cathain et al., 2010). This involved determining whether the findings from the surveys of young people and interviews with YMP staff were convergent, complementary, or contradictory.

Results

Quantitative findings

A total of 117 young people completed the survey, and their demographics are presented in Table 2. Of these, 17 young people completed the survey online and 100 completed the survey in person. A participation rate could not be calculated as the total number of young people who attended the church youth group events could not be determined.

Young people’s mentoring preferences that were collected from the survey are presented in Table 3. The majority of young people (n = 55, 47%) reported that they would like to have a mentor. A quarter of young people did not desire a mentor (n = 29, 25%) and another quarter did not know what a mentor was (n = 31, 27%). The most common type of mentoring support that young people

| Table 2. Demographic data of young people (n = 117). |
|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Gender                         | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
| Male                           | 54        | 46        |
| Female                        | 60        | 51        |
| Other                         | 3         | 2         |
| Age                           | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
| 11–13 years old               | 33        | 28        |
| 14–16 years old               | 70        | 60        |
| 17–18 years old               | 14        | 12        |
| Enrolled in school            | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
| Yes                           | 114       | 97        |
| No                            | 3         | 2         |
Table 3. Mentoring preferences of young people.

|                              | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|------------------------------|---------------|----------------|
| **Desire for a mentor**      |               |                |
| I'd like to have a mentor    | 55            | 47             |
| I’m not sure what a mentor is| 31            | 27             |
| I don't think I want one    | 29            | 25             |
| I already have one           | 1             | 1              |
| Total                        | 117           | 100            |
| **Preferred type of support from mentor** |               |                |
| Give advice                  | 71            | 61             |
| Hang out/be friends          | 55            | 47             |
| Help with schoolwork         | 52            | 44             |
| Assist in achieving goals    | 50            | 43             |
| Listen                       | 49            | 42             |
| **Preferred age of mentor**  |               |                |
| 15–20 years old              | 3             | 3              |
| 20–29 years old              | 79            | 87             |
| 30–39 years old              | 7             | 8              |
| 40–49 years old              | 0             | 0              |
| 50+ years old                | 2             | 2              |
| Age doesn’t matter           | 27            | 23             |
| Not specified                | 3             | 3              |
| **Preferred place to see mentor** |           |                |
| Not on school grounds        | 91            | 78             |
| At school                    | 19            | 16             |
| Either/Both                  | 4             | 3              |
| Not Specified                | 3             | 3              |
| Total                        | 117           | 100            |
| **Preferred time to see mentor** |           |                |
| Weekends                     | 57            | 49             |
| After school                  | 54            | 46             |
| Lunchtimes                   | 16            | 14             |
| Before school                | 8             | 7              |
| Not specified                | 4             | 3              |

*These questions allowed young people to respond to more than one option. As such, frequencies and percentages add up to greater than 117 and 100 respectively.

felt they would find most useful was someone who could provide them with advice (n = 71, 61%). The other support options, including friendship, help with schoolwork, assistance in achieving goals, and listening, were all equally endorsed. The preferred age of a mentor was between 20–29 years (n = 79, 87%). Finally, the majority of young people reported that they would rather see a mentor outside of school grounds (n = 91, 78%), either on weekends (n = 57, 49%) or after school (n = 54, 46%).

**Qualitative findings**

Four major themes emerged from the interviews with YMP staff: (1) Varying types of YMPs; (2) Characteristics of successful YMPs; (3) Limitations and barriers to implementation of YMPs; and (4) Impacts and benefits of YMPs. Within these major themes, a total of 14 subthemes with supporting quotes were identified. Quotes have been provided verbatim from participants’ comments.

**Theme 1: Varying types of youth mentoring programmes**

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was an emphasis on the varying approaches adopted by mentoring programmes. Three different types of YMPs were identified: (1) community-based programmes, (2) school-based programmes, and (3) stream-based programmes. A brief description and summary of the strengths and limitations of each approach is provided in Supplemental File 2. In addition, the mentor recruitment and mentee referral processes varied across programmes which was identified as a fourth sub-theme.

**Community-based mentoring**

Community-based programmes refer to mentoring that occurs in a mutually agreed upon location in the community such as a beach or café. Stakeholders from community-based programmes
commented on the flexibility of this design in allowing mentors and mentees to engage in activities within the community:

The beauty of the community-based mentoring is that you’ve just got a bit more… scope to really engage with the young person, scope and flexibility to do activities. (YMP1)

Stakeholders consistently highlighted the significant advantages that could be attributed to the flexibility of community based programmes, such as fostering a deeper and more meaningful relationship between mentors and their mentees:

When you take a child out of the schoolyard something changes. Because it’s out of their normal environment, they open up, they seem a lot more forthcoming. (YMP2)

In addition, the flexibility of community-based interventions allows the specific needs of the young person (e.g. presence of social anxiety) to be taken into account:

If there’s someone that’s had a lot of social anxiety they might meet at the home for a few times and then they might slowly work on going out into society. (YMP4)

**School-based mentoring**

Several programmes incorporated a school-based mentoring approach, wherein programmes predominantly take place on school property during the school year. Stakeholders from YMP1’s and YMP3’s programme highlighted the advantages of mentoring in an environment that is familiar to the young person and fosters a sense of safety, having access to school resources, and incorporating the wider school community:

You feel safe, and you know the young person feels safe because they’re used to that environment. (YMP3)

School-based, the advantage of that is you’ve got ready access to resources for that young person. (YMP1)

You can align the mentoring to the broader educational curriculum. (YMP1)

However, a key limitation was identified as the limited longevity of the mentoring relationship which typically ceases upon the young person’s completion of their schooling:

I’m not saying you can’t develop a great relationship in a school-based… context, of course you can. But once it’s over it’s over. (YMP1)

**Stream-based mentoring**

Several programmes allowed for flexibility within their programmes, running school-based and community-based programmes, along with other types of mentoring:

Our mentoring is quite broad in that we have a number of streams. (YMP2)

These approaches were typically tailored to the needs of the young person and included activities ranging from driving, tutoring, men’s sheds, and a work ready programme to equip young people for employment:

It may take on the form of tutoring. It may take on the form of tinkering or the men’s shed concept. It may be driving, helping a young person to get their driver’s licence. It may be supporting them into the workplace. (YMP2)

**Varying recruitment and referral methods**

Methods of recruiting mentors also varied considerably between organizations. Larger mentoring programmes ran blanket marketing campaigns on several types of media including radio, email campaigns, and social media:
We just run drives, recruiting drives, for our mentors. Every couple of months we’ll put a blanket marketing campaign out there on social media. (YMP4)

I usually get on the radio and have a little bit of a chat to broaden the net as far as we possibly can to touch as many people, and usually from that you get a certain amount of people who are interested and then from that we will run an information session. (YMP4)

Other organizations had significant diversity in their recruitment methods. Individuals who were recruited to complete a set number of hours of voluntary work were referred to the programme and recruited as mentors who commenced the training process:

Sometimes if they have been unemployed for some time, they need to do 15 voluntary hours a week with Centrelink. That is beginning to be a way that people come in and how we source people. (YMP2)

They are doing a community services certificate at TAFE and they are told they have to go and volunteer in the community and they see us as being a good option. (YMP2)

Across all four organizations, stakeholders recognized that referrals of young people into their respective programmes also came from varying external sources. A list of organizations from which referrals come from for each programme, as mentioned by stakeholders, are listed in Supplemental File 2. The focus of the programme appeared to determine where their referral base came from. For example, the community-based organization YMP4 took a large number of referrals from Child Protection:

Probably 80% of our referrals will come through Child Protection. (YMP4)

In contrast, stakeholders from YMP1, who were shifting towards school-based mentoring, had narrowed their referral base to focus on one school as part of an effort to make more efficient use of their limited resources:

We are just trying to focus on [location] as our main referral source and any other referrals are an exception to that rule. (YMP1)

Theme 2: Characteristics of successful youth mentoring programmes

Throughout the interview process, stakeholders discussed several characteristics of mentoring programmes that contribute to their success. These characteristics have been separated into four sub-themes: (1) mentor screening, training, and matching, (2) mentor supervision, (3) relationships with families, and (4) relationships with schools.

Mentor screening, training, and matching

A key strength of mentoring programmes that stakeholders consistently highlighted was the rigorous screening and training processes that were adopted by YMP organizations. Extensive screening processes were discussed by all stakeholders and described as a key part of risk management. For all organizations it involved having a Working With Children’s Check (or state equivalent), referee checks, application forms, and interviews. For example, YMP4 stakeholders discussed a thorough panel interview that potential mentors were required to attend to determine whether they would be suitable for the role:

We get them to do an actual interview with our Mentoring Panel, usually goes for an hour and that’s more throwing different scenarios at them and seeing a bit more about their personality and how they’d respond to certain situations. (YMP4)

The mentor training processes that organizations undertake were commonly identified by stakeholders as a key strength that serves multiple functions. Stakeholders across all organizations
reported that a significant focus of the training process is to equip mentors with the knowledge and skills that are necessary to working and engaging with young people effectively:

In our training programme, we go through how to communicate with people, how to build relationships, how to listen, how to actively listen, how to listen to what they are saying, and try to read signs from people and how they are feeling. (YMP2)

Stakeholders also highlighted that the other key role of training was to act as a tool that supplemented the screening process and allows organizations to continue to observe mentor trainees to determine if they are a suitable match for their organization:

We are upfront with the potential mentors. We say to them “Look this is training. We are delivering skills and knowledge to you hopefully. But, we are also observing you to see if you are suitable or not for being matched with a young person”. (YMP1)

Furthermore, most stakeholders discussed how running step-by-step training allows for potential mentors to opt out as they learn more about the programme:

There’s a step-by-step process because usually you find that a few will drop off as you go through the process and that’s why we do it this way because we don’t want to just throw them straight into it and have it not work… so if it’s not for them, at least we know sooner rather than later. (YMP4)

Stakeholders highlighted that screening and training are essential processes in ensuring that young people are matched with an appropriate mentor, a process that typically occurs through a meeting between the organization and young person:

After the training and all of our checks have been completed, we send the profile of that person that has their interests and their training into schools. Our contact in the school will have a look at that and look at the students on their list who they believe need mentors and they are the people who do the matching. (YMP2)

**Mentor supervision**

Supervision of mentors throughout the programme was viewed as a key aspect and strength of risk management. Overall, supervisors felt that their extensive screening and training processes allowed them to trust their mentors and let them work independently, rather than constantly monitoring them:

I’m very wary that I’m not here to Big Brother and look over their shoulder. (YMP2)

However, stakeholders provided verification that they are still available as a key source of support and encouragement for their mentors, which was echoed by several supervisors:

I suppose you would call it [supervisory role] pastoral care. It’s support if they have issues, if they’re not sure what they’re doing, if they want to talk about things, if they just want to touch base. (YMP2)

Stakeholders from YMP1 provided insight into their supervision processes which comprised monthly supervision, as well as regular reviews every three months with mentors and their assigned young person:

There’s a three-month review, six month review, nine-month review where I check in with the mentor and the participant. (YMP1)

Mentors were also required to fill in contact sheets after each meeting with their young person that the supervisors would read and then contact the mentor if there were any concerns:

They [mentors] do a contact sheet after every catch up in the community. (YMP1)
**Relationship with families**

YMP staff recognized that a key opportunity enabler was the cultivation of a relationship with the young person’s family. Several stakeholders noted the importance of this relationship over the span of the mentoring relationship:

> For consistency’s sake and for the young person to be in the mentoring relationship, feeling like they’ve got their parents’ support is a good thing. (YMP1)

In several cases it was paid staff members who would make initial contact and establish the relationship with the family. Sometimes, this was an employee of an organization as in the case of YMP4, while at other times, the school’s chaplain was responsible for family engagement:

> My first meeting with the young person, I usually meet them at home, and I want to meet their other support people as well and actually explain to them what our programme is and what it does. (YMP4)

> So, we would have myself [chaplain] contacting the parent of the young person and the [programme coordinator] speaking with them later. (YMP1)

**Relationship with schools**

Across all programme designs, stakeholders emphasized the importance of the school relationship as a key opportunity enabler for the success of the programme. Their presence within schools goes beyond simply running a basic one-on-one mentoring programme. For example, several stakeholders discussed running a breakfast club within schools where students are provided with a basic breakfast before the school day begins. These programmes were often described as an opportunity for students and mentors to develop a private mentoring relationship:

> Basically, how we’ve tried to get mentors to go into the school is through the breakfast club. (YMP1)

> If a relationship with a young person was to develop [through the breakfast club] then they could move into an individual one-to-one mentoring space. (YMP1)

However, there was some debate among stakeholders as to whether these types of school programmes (i.e. breakfast club) constituted mentoring, and were rather seen as a simple way for organizations to engage with schools and young people more generally:

> They [volunteers] just turn up, make all the food and serve all the children. At the end of it they clean up what they’re doing and wander off home. There is interaction with the children, but it is not … mentoring per se. (YMP2)

Several stakeholders also commented on the presence and importance of school chaplains, who were responsible as enablers in the success of mentoring programmes through their contact and collaboration with schools, welfare staff, and parents:

> We have a Chaplain in each of our schools that we work with … they are certainly a key part of our approach to mentoring in the that they are there all the time. (YMP2)

**Theme 3: Limitations and barriers to implementation of youth mentoring programmes**

Several limitations of YMPs and barriers to their implementation were discussed by stakeholders and identified under four sub-themes: (1) adherence to risk management strategies, (2) volunteer availability, and (3) time constraints.

**Poor adherence to risk management strategies**

Stakeholders discussed that the risk management strategies employed by their organizations were a vital enabler of the success of their mentoring programmes. The specific risk management strategies differed across organizations and are outlined in Supplemental File 2. However, several stakeholders recognized that a lack of adherence to these strategies was not uncommon, which
impacted the implementation of YMPs. For example, YMP1 staff members recognized that a lack of or limited submission of mentor activity reports was common:

I’ve got one mentor who was on board prior to my commencement in the role who struggles to maintain the guidelines, as in, I don’t get contact sheets from her. (YMP1)

Stakeholders highlighted that instances of poor adherence to these strategies had subsequent negative implications for supervisors by unnecessarily adding to their workload:

We are actually running blind. We, as coordinators, look forward to the contacts to come through to understand what’s happening in this relationship. (YMP1)

Supervisors compensated for this by allowing for multiple methods of reporting from mentors and highlighted the importance of receiving information:

We need to have not one method, but two or three methods of sending information back to us in such a way that we can capture it. Some people want to send text messages, that’s okay. As long as you send us the information. (YMP1)

**Volunteer availability**

Several stakeholders identified the limited mentor availability as a significant barrier to the success of their programmes. This was particularly true of school-based programmes that were limited to operating within business hours:

We’ve got full-time professionals coming in to mentor, they’ve obviously got out of hours capacity ... we’ve recruited all these mentors but they [don’t] have the capacity to do school-based. (YMP1)

Stakeholders from YMP3 also identified this as a ‘barrier’ as it limits the specific cohorts of individuals they can recruit as mentors who can also commit to the role based on their availability:

People do work during the day, and so, you’re really got to look at mums, stay-at-home mums, young people who are in universities, who have a little more flexibility. Also, staff workers where their organisation can give them flexibility to take a little bit of an extended lunch break. (YMP3)

**Time constraints**

Several stakeholders reported that the lengthy process that mentors are required to undertake before being accepted into the programme is a significant barrier to mentor recruitment:

We have people train in February and I’ve only just matched them in July. (YMP1)

I can have everything else done within a week but the Police Checks generally takes three or four weeks to come through. (YMP4)

Several stakeholders expressed their frustration at the length of time the recruitment and screening process takes and indicated that this was a significant limitation of their programmes. Stakeholders discussed the time-consuming nature of these processes as a threat to their programmes, in part because potential mentors become overwhelmed:

Just a case in point: we have a 19–20 year old potential youth mentor, but she’s become overwhelmed by the process a little bit. I think it’s got a bit too much and she’s not lodged her application form. (YMP1)

However, several stakeholders commented on the importance of the rigorous and therefore time-consuming nature of the screening process:

Because you are dealing with vulnerable people, it has to be this way. (YMP1)
Theme 4: Impacts and benefits of youth mentoring programmes

The final major theme identified concerned the impacts and benefits of YMPs. Three subordinate themes were identified: (1) attitudes towards having a mentor, (2) wellbeing of the young person, and (3) mentee characteristics.

Attitudes towards having a mentor
Stakeholders frequently stated that young people were excited about having a mentor with little or no stigma attached:

*His [mentee’s] mum came to the meeting and she was telling me how excited he was.* (YMP2)

However, some stakeholders acknowledged that there may be initial hesitation to having a mentor because of a potential stigma of thinking that something is wrong with them:

*I said to the young man [mentee], “Tell me about your mentoring experience”, and he said, “I was grossly offended when I was asked by the school if I would like to have a mentor because I thought it meant that there was something wrong with me”.* (YMP2)

Nonetheless, stakeholders recognized that some young people who were initially hesitant later looked upon the programme fondly:

*If they then really enjoy the company of the person and realise that, “This is not as bad as I thought”, then I think that’s left behind, that negative feeling.* (YMP1)

Stakeholders perceived that the quality of the mentoring relationship and the way it was framed could have helped overcome these initial hesitations and shape a young person’s attitude:

*I think it’s the way we framed it. We very much made sure they didn’t feel like there was anything wrong with them.* (YMP3)

Wellbeing of the young person
The supported wellbeing of a young person was one of the key impacts of mentoring programmes that were discussed by stakeholders, which was also an underlying motivation for running the programme. Providing ongoing social support through a role model with whom young people could connect with and a safe environment for them to talk about was repeatedly mentioned as a factor that benefits the young person:

*To have someone turn up and actually listen to them and value them and treat them as an individual and treat them with respect I think that is really powerful.* (YMP2)

Specifically, stakeholders recognized that young people are instilled with a sense of value and worth that was described as strengthening their confidence, motivation, and self-esteem, and encouraging them to address goals that contribute to their wellbeing:

*I think to have that positive steady person in your life, someone that you can confide in . . . is an amazing thing to be able to build confidence.* (YMP1)

*I think it [mentoring] builds confidence, which then engenders an environment to take a risk of growth.* (YMP1)

Mentee characteristics
Across the different organizations, a mentee profile emerged that highlighted the characteristics of a young person who would be most likely to engage and benefit from a mentoring relationship. Across organizations, stakeholders consistently highlighted that mentoring programmes are typically targeted at young people who can be classified as ‘low risk’ rather than ‘high risk’:
We are targeting the lower risk . . . because mentoring with higher risk adolescents is not necessarily very effective at all. (YMP1)

Although they work with young people who have some degree of risk, stakeholders recognized that mentoring programmes are not well equipped to work with young people who present with highly complex issues such as abuse and homelessness. In situations where these individuals are encountered, organizations refer them to services that have the resources to provide appropriate support:

We deal with “at-risk”, but we make sure that if there are current issues that are being addressed, that we’re not the ones who are dealing with those because we are not equipped to deal with that. (YMP3)

We actually have a screening process, so if they are experiencing high risk issues which is current sexual, physical abuse at home, homelessness, like very high risk factors, then we refer them. (YMP3)

Stakeholders also identified that children who transition from primary school to high school experience dramatic changes in their social environments and as such may be more vulnerable and likely to benefit from a mentoring relationship. In particular, stakeholders recognized the benefit of receiving consistent social support that begins prior to the transition and continues throughout high school:

The transitional period going from primary school to high school is a really difficult time for students, and if a student that has difficulties is thrown into a whole different environment . . . they tend to react really badly. (YMP2)

We will connect people at a primary school in say grade 5 and 6, so that’s two years of relationship and then they will go with them into high school. (YMP2)

Discussion

A mixed-methods needs assessment was conducted to explore the current need for YMPs among young people, examine the trends of YMPs, assess the acceptability of mentoring programmes, and identify the barriers and enablers to the implementation of mentoring programmes in Australia. The findings of this study have provided several compelling insights regarding the need for mentoring programmes among young people and considerations for the implementation of mentoring programmes across Australia, while also highlighting several positive outcomes that YMPs may have for young people. Following a process of triangulation, the findings generated from the surveys delivered to young people were considered to complement the qualitative findings that emerged from the interviews with YMP staff. These findings provide a significant contribution to the broader youth mentoring literature, particularly within an Australian context.

Mentoring preferences

A key aim of this study was to examine the mentoring preferences of young people. The findings reported herein highlighted a great need for mentoring among young people who completed the survey which, following triangulation, complemented the conclusions that were drawn from the interviews with key YMP stakeholders regarding the barriers and enablers of successful YMPs by adding voice to young people’s needs for mentoring. Indeed, approximately half of the young people who participated expressed their desire to have a mentor. In regards to the specific types of support young people had hoped to receive, the majority of young people expressed that they would prefer to be matched with someone who could provide advice and guidance, although a large number of young people also expressed their desire to be matched with a mentor with whom they could develop a social relationship, and who could provide assistance with school work, support towards achieving goals, and act as an outlet who could listen to them. These types of support, particularly the provision of guidance, are also consistent with the characteristics of
YMPs that have been evaluated throughout the broader youth mentoring literature and have been found to be effective in fostering positive development and wellbeing across academic, cognitive, physical health, psychological, and social outcome domains (Dubois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that there may have been a significant need for additional support targeting these domains among the young people who were engaged through this study. These findings suggest that the provision of opportunities to engage with YMPs as a means of support would be welcomed among young people and may promote opportunities for positive development.

**Types of youth mentoring programmes**

In exploring the current trends among YMPs, variability in the specific mentoring approaches that are adopted across YMP organizations was identified (see Supplemental File 2). School and community-based programmes were identified which have both been evaluated internationally by past research (Keller & Dubois, 2019; McMorris et al., 2018; Raposa et al., 2019). A third streams-based approach was identified that offers a wider variety of flexible mentoring options that may integrate school and community-based approaches, alongside other types of mentoring support (e.g. tutoring, driving lessons, work readiness programmes). To the authors’ knowledge, the implementation and effectiveness of similar YMPs that integrate both community- and school-based support have been underrepresented across the broader literature, highlighting implications for both a local and international youth mentoring context. Although school and community-based programmes have both been found to be effective in fostering positive outcomes for young people and no significant differences have been reported between the two in terms of observed outcomes (Raposa et al., 2019), stakeholders highlighted that adopting a streams-based approach to mentoring provides several advantages such as greater flexibility in adapting to the needs of the young person, while also overcoming the barriers of volunteer availability. Although the majority of young people indicated that they would prefer a community-based mentoring relationship (i.e. not on school grounds and outside of school hours), several young people also indicated their preference for a school-based programme. Adopting a flexible streams-based approach would mean that the preferences of both groups of young people can be acknowledged. However, the authors recognize that adopting a streams-based approach would likely call for greater complexity in programme design and implementation, and greater flexibility of staff to work across programme streams would be required to account for the unique needs and preferences of each young person.

**Strengths and limitations of mentoring programmes**

Another key focus of this needs assessment was to uncover the barriers and enablers to the implementation of effective mentoring programmes. Although stakeholders expressed their frustration with the time consuming nature of the screening and training processes that potential mentors undergo, they also recognized that this process is essential to ensure mentors are suitable and equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively engage with young people. The importance of adhering to rigorous screening and training processes in order to ensure that staff adhere to the core principles of YMPs and that young people who may be considered vulnerable are effectively engaged with has also been highlighted by Dubois et al. (2011) synthesis of YMPs that have been implemented across the U.S.

Stakeholders across all four organizations also acknowledged the existence of risk management procedures such as frequent supervision meetings, mentor screening processes, family permission and consent procedures, and submitting contact sheets following mentor meetings as key enablers of successful mentoring programmes. Despite this, stakeholders reported poor adherence to risk management strategies (e.g. lack of mentors submitting contact sheets) which places a burden on supervisors and the broader organization. This is concerning given that the Child Safe Standards
(Commission for Children and Young People, 2020) were introduced in Victoria in November 2015 as an amendment to the Child Safety and Wellbeing Act 2005. These standards required higher levels of risk management procedures for services provided to children and young people across Australia, including mentoring programmes such as Youth COACH. The findings presented in this paper highlight that despite the implementation of these standards, adherence to risk management procedures can, in some instances, be problematic and additional efforts are required to ensure that mentors and YMP organizations remain accountable and adhere to these strategies.

A third component to consider for the implementation of YMPs refers to the organization’s relationship with a young person’s family. Given that a young person’s primary carer is an important stakeholder in their life, it is unsurprising that the findings of the current study suggested that increased family involvement in YMPs may be beneficial. However, although previous studies have advocated that family engagement in YMPs may improve the relationship between a young person and their families, research has also suggested that the increased involvement of parents in mentoring programmes may interfere with or disrupt the mentor-mentee relationship (Basualdo-Delmonico & Spencer, 2016). Spencer and Basualdo-Delmonico (2014) sought the perspectives of YMP staff regarding the appropriateness of parental involvement in mentoring relationships, through which staff expressed the importance of involving the young person’s family while also establishing strict boundaries so that the focus of the mentoring relationship is kept on supporting the young person and their wellbeing. Considering this, if parents are to have some involvement in the mentoring programme, it is important to find a balance where the young person and the mentor are still able to cultivate their own relationship without interference.

These findings have acknowledged the key barriers that organizations face in implementing YMPs across Australia, which closely reflect the characteristics of YMPs highlighted by a recent examination of the contextual factors that impact their success and sustainability across the UK, including the importance of comprehensive mentor training processes, adequate risk management protocols to protect staff and clients, and the importance of collaborating with external partners such as schools and parents (Busse et al., 2018). Although the youth mentoring literature has been largely limited to evaluations of the psychosocial benefits for the young people who receive mentoring support, international research examining the implementation of YMPs through stakeholder engagement is slowly emerging. To illustrate, several studies published over the last decade have scrutinized specific aspects of the mentoring relationship such as the degree of family involvement (Basualdo-Delmonico & Spencer, 2016; Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014), factors contributing to the termination of the mentoring relationship (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014), and the types of social support that are provided through mentoring relationships (Brady et al., 2015), yet research evaluating the implementation of YMPs through a holistic examination of their strengths and limitations (e.g. Busse et al., 2018) has been scarce. While the findings of the current study work towards addressing this gap by providing compelling insights into the strengths and limitations of YMPs within an Australian context, future research that aims to verify these findings internationally is needed.

**Benefits of Youth Mentoring**

In conducting this needs assessment, several positive outcomes for young people who receive mentoring support were also highlighted. Stakeholders consistently emphasized four main outcomes through which the wellbeing of young people is enhanced: (1) reduction in social isolation; (2) creating a sense of value, worth, and self-respect; (3) strengthening confidence and self-esteem; and (4) creating an environment that fosters motivation towards achieving their goals. These outcomes were also largely reflected by the survey responses where young people indicated that their preferred types of support from mentoring programmes included developing a social relationship, listening and providing advice, and assistance in achieving goals. The perceived outcomes identified herein are consistent with past research that identified the positive effects of youth mentoring on
psychological outcomes, social outcomes, and increasing achievement motivation and attainment (Dubois et al., 2011; Raposa et al., 2019). Although the findings of the current study provide support for the value of YMPs, an important future step for further inquiry is to conduct a thorough and robust evaluation of Youth COACH to verify its effectiveness in fostering the positive outcomes.

**Characteristics of Young people**

Finally, stakeholders provided their perspectives on the particular cohorts of young people who would benefit from a mentoring relationship. Identifying and specifically targeting the young people that would most benefit from mentoring provides organizations with an opportunity to maximize the effectiveness of their programmes. In particular, two specific groups of young people were recognized as cohorts that would experience the greatest benefits: (1) young people who are considered low-risk, and (2) children in late primary school who are approaching the transition to high school.

Although there was some practice disagreement among stakeholders, the majority suggested that young people who are classified as low risk would experience the greatest benefit, in comparison to young people who are considered high-risk. Despite this claim, past research has delivered youth mentoring to high-risk young people such as those residing in foster care, experiencing homelessness, presenting with substance abuse issues, and who are at risk of sexual exploitation, with positive outcomes observed (Bartle-Haring et al., 2012; Buck et al., 2017; A. E. Thompson et al., 2016). To explain this contrast, the stakeholders herein recognized that their specific organizations were not equipped to handle the complexity of young people who present with such high risk issues. As such, the effectiveness of mentoring for these young people would be minimal and support beyond one-on-one mentoring support, or the recruitment of volunteers with higher qualifications (e.g. social workers) may be required.

In addition, although the transition to high school is often met with feelings of excitement, this period may also be met with negative emotions such as feelings of uncertainty, a volatile sense of belonging where children may struggle to form and retain friendships, and heightened stress and anxiety (Hanewald, 2013; Mackenzie et al., 2012). According to stakeholders, providing children who are approaching this transition period with support through a consistent mentoring relationship that continues long into high school may alleviate some of the uncertainty that children experience, particularly around the stability of their social relationships, and subsequently make their transition smoother.

**Strengths and limitations of the current study**

A significant strength of this study was the adoption of the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011) as the theoretical basis that guided this needs assessment. This approach allowed us to thoroughly identify and examine the enablers and barriers of implementation for YMPs across Victoria and Tasmania. Although the findings that were uncovered through this study have been compelling, they must be considered alongside methodological limitations. One key limitation is that the qualitative component of this study only engaged staff and other key stakeholders involved in the delivery of YMPs. As such, the insights of young people were missed. Although young people were engaged through an exploratory survey, their perceptions regarding the characteristics of a successful mentoring relationship were not captured. Future research should aim to engage young people who participate in YMPs to highlight their insights into the enablers and limitations of successful programmes. In addition, our interpretation of the positive outcomes experienced by young people was also dependent on stakeholders’ perspectives. Conducting a comprehensive evaluation of YMPs across Australia will provide accurate insights into the outcomes young people experience. Further, caution must be given when interpreting the findings regarding the need for mentoring, as reported by
young people, within an international context. Given that the delivery of the survey was cross-sectional in nature, the generalizability of the quantitative findings reported herein is limited.

**Recommendations and conclusion**

The insights that we have gained through this needs assessment are promising and will inform the implementation of Youth COACH across Australia. In light of the findings of this study, several recommendations for the implementation of Youth COACH and other YMPs have been proposed based on the perspectives of stakeholders: (1) A streams-based approach will likely maximize engagement as the flexibility of these approaches will allow the programme to adapt to the changing needs of the young person; (2) Targeting ‘low-risk’ children and initiating the programme in late primary or elementary school may maximize the benefits that young people experience; (3) Ensure adherence to risk management strategies to facilitate implementation and reduce the burden on supervisors and the broader organization; (4) Involve the young person’s family where possible, while finding an appropriate balance so as to not interfere with the mentor-mentee relationship; and (5) Continue to adopt rigorous screening and training processes to ensure mentors are well-equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide effective support. Following the five recommendations that we have outlined may assist in maximizing the effectiveness of Youth COACH and other YMPs across both Australia and internationally.

**Note**

1. This age range was as it is the current age range of secondary school students in Australia and the intake age range for Youth COACH.

**Biographical Notes on Authors**

Mr Kostas Hatzikiriakidis is a research assistant at the Health and Social Care Unit (HSCU) within the School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine at Monash University. Mr Hatzikiriakidis has expertise in both qualitative and quantitative research. He completed his Honours in Psychology within the Cognitive Neuroscience Unit at Deakin University in 2019 and has since been involved in social care research through his role at MCHRI. His current research interests are embedded in examining social care interventions delivered to vulnerable youth, including young people residing in out-of-home care, and people with disability.

Mrs Cathie Hillman has a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Education and spent the first 7 years of her career teaching in Secondary Schools in Victoria. She then went on to complete her Masters in International and Community Development. Cathie taught Community Development and Public Health at an undergraduate level at Monash University. She is passionate about young people and has spent many years volunteering in mentor and leadership programmes, mostly through local Churches. Cathie has a particular interest in research focused on young people and has worked on projects with consulting agencies looking at foster care in Australia and youth mentoring programmes. She most recently worked for Monash University evaluating volunteer-based mentoring programmes.

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