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The MySocialworker app system – a pilot interview study

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Abstract

An app system was developed in Denmark by caseworkers and clients from three municipalities, a software company and a University College. The app system enabled young clients to track their wellbeing, positive behaviours, disturbances in their lives, and their experiences of interventions on smartphones. Statutory caseworkers could follow change in their client’s situation and have an overview of all their clients on a web interface. This article describes the system and the results of a pilot qualitative interview study with six young clients. Clients used the app to reflect about their lives, to set personal specific goals and to remember their goals. The young clients also used the app to monitor changes in how they had been doing overall and as a reminder to keep up specific behaviours that were counterintuitive. The app became an integral part of the young clients’ relationship with their caseworker. The app was a lens that the client and the caseworker used to explore specific aspects of the client’s life. The app itself also became a joint venture, a shared point of interest. The app strengthened the young persons’ relationship with their caseworker, but there was also concern about whether they might become too close.
The MySocialworker app system – a pilot interview study

The article reports the findings of a pilot study of a new Danish e-communication system that aims to enhance communication between young clients aged fifteen to twenty-three and their statutory caseworkers. Del Fresno García and López Paláez (2014) have highlighted the importance of researching the impact of new technologies on social work. There is evidence that children, and young adults are likely to be a particularly receptive population in terms of their willingness and ability to engage with electronic and mobile technologies (see for example, Hebden, Cook, van der Ploeg, & Allmann-Farinelli, 2012). At the same time, arguments have been made in social work that new technology can ostracize client groups who do not have access to the technology (Goldkind and Wolf, 2014, Hudson, 2003) exacerbating inequality and creating a digital divide. Counter arguments have also been put forward, saying not incorporating technology in statutory casework can disenfranchise young people whose lives are immersed in digital media (Mackrill and Ebsen, 2017). In a study of 136 homeless adolescents in Los Angeles, Rice, Millburn and Monro (2011) found that almost half had a caseworker or other social service agency staff member in their online network. Digital communication technologies such as email, text messaging and social media have gradually become an intrinsic part social work and as Mishna and colleagues (2012) found the use of such technologies are often client driven and open up a Pandora’s box of challenges, regarding ethical grey zones and boundary issues. Rather than just letting digital technological methods creep into social work practice, the system presented in this paper is digital vehicle for communication between client and statutory social workers and offers a way of framing this digital communication.

Mackrill and Ebsen (2017) found that e-technologies were primarily directed towards four realms of social work: case management, interventions, outcome measurement and communication and that these realms differed significantly. Case management systems were used to document and regulate case management practices. Examples of this were systems that support the Integrated Children’s System and the Assessment
Framework (Cleaver et al., 2008). Intervention technologies aimed to contribute directly to client change. Many technologies offered e-treatment or e-support for problems and disorders. Some such technologies were independent interventions and some are offered in conjunction with more traditional face-to-face interventions. Outcome measurement technology systems were designed to monitor the effects of routine intervention practice and are often used to generate feedback that can be used in the treatment process (e.g. Lambert, 2010). Communication technologies aimed to enhance social work communication. Examples of this were texting messages in social work or the use of social media. The MySocialworker app in this study combined elements of all these realms, combining case management with outcome measurement, intervention and communication. The present paper explores six young client perspectives on the use of this system. It is thus in line with other pilot feasibility studies such as Rice et al. (2012), who found that a youth led hybrid face-to-face and online HIV prevention program was highly acceptable to homeless youth. Reflections on issues of power and ethical dilemmas in relation to this new technology can be found in Mackrill and Ebsen (2017).

The MySocialworker system has two interfaces, an IOS and Android smartphone application interface for young clients and a web interface for caseworkers. The system enables young clients to monitor and track their wellbeing, positive behaviours, disturbances in their lives, their experiences of interventions and other aspects of their life. The web interface offers municipal caseworkers a way of tracking change in their client’s situation and have an overview of all their clients. The system could also be categorised as a feedback system. In a review of feedback tools used in health settings, Musiat, Hoffman and Schmidt (2012, p.346) defined feedback as, ‘the provision of verbal, written or graphically displayed information to a person about aspects of their behaviour, health or risk of developing ill health.’ The app system is a platform for the generation of personalised ipsative feedback (DiClemente, Marinilli, Singh, M., & Bellino, 2001) to clients and their statutory caseworkers, where clients monitor change over time by comparing with their prior responses. The system thus aims to function as part of the client’s self-
regulation. In psychology, self-regulation has been researched since the late 1950’s and a wide range of concepts have been employed. Summarizing some of this research, MacKenzie, Mezo and Francis (2012) defined self-regulation as ‘a deliberate and purposeful shift in attention specifically towards one’s own behavior’ and have reviewed the many theories of self-regulation to find common ground. While the app system presented in this study involves elements of self-regulation, the app system also comprises an element of regulation by the statutory caseworkers, who can use the app to monitor and intervene if they assess the young person is at risk. Thus, the system combines elements of self and statutory regulation. Statutory casework with young adults commonly works in the nexus of self and statutory regulation and developing technology that can combine these elements is a key challenge to the field. Social Work technologies typically focus on enhancing either statutory regulation or self-regulation. Case management systems support statutory regulation where self-help applications typically aim to support self-regulation. Outcome measurement systems used in routine practice by clients and caseworkers encompass both forms of regulation.

**The MySocial Worker App system**

The system has been developed as a joint venture between three municipalities in the Copenhagen area, a software company and the Institute for Social Work at Metropolitan University College in Copenhagen. The project was funded by the Tryg Foundation, a Danish non-profit foundation. The initial development process involved caseworkers and their young clients from the municipalities and has been described in Mackrill, Ebsen and Antczak (2015).

The system was designed for use by statutory caseworkers and their young clients aged fifteen to twenty-three. All cases in Denmark where a certain risk threshold has been traversed in relation to a child or young person are assessed by statutory caseworkers who are employed in municipalities.
Statutory caseworkers also assess children and young persons with special needs, who are not necessarily at risk. Statutory caseworkers refer clients on to interventions which they follow-up on. Increasingly, Danish statutory caseworkers carry out psychosocial interventions themselves. Most statutory caseworkers working in child and youth statutory settings have bachelor degrees in social work. The app system has two user interfaces: an app interface that can be uploaded from App store or Google play for the young client, and an online web interface where caseworkers can log in, have an overview of all their clients, and see individual client profiles. A local administrator gives clients and caseworkers codes and links them together.

The app interface for young clients has a range of functions that relate to tracking the client’s life. All young clients are automatically reminded weekly to respond to the app. There are two standard questions that all clients respond to: how have you been doing overall during the past week? And when do you need to talk to your social worker? There are standard responses; badly, not so good, ok, and well; and very soon, earlier than agreed, and as agreed, respectively. All responses are colour-coded, so badly and very soon are red, not so good and earlier than agreed are amber and the other responses are green. Thus, colours indicate levels of risk. There are four other weekly ideographic scales. Good habits, where the question is: how would you rate your good habit “x” during the past week? The response categories are: It’s not happening, it’s happening a bit, it’s going on, it’s going well. The caseworker and the client write a text together in the app instead of the x. For example, they might choose to write, “go for a run when I’m angry”. The second open category is disturbances and the question is: how much has “x” disturbed you during the past week? The response categories are: a lot of the time, some of the time, a bit of the time, and it hasn’t disturbed me. The caseworker and the client might for example decide to write “my dad’s drinking”, “my depression”, or “arguing with Mum” in place of the “x”. The third category is interventions, and the question is “how would you rate “x” for the past week? The category has response categories; badly, not so good, ok, and well. The caseworker and young client might choose to write “your relationship with your mentor”, “home life with my foster parents”. The final weekly scale option is called agreements,
and the question is “have you stuck to the agreement “x” during the past week? The caseworker and young client might for example, choose to write, “do all the homework my teacher gives me”. The response options to this question are: not at all, partially and as agreed. As remembering behaviour and feelings for whole week was considered too challenging for some clients, a daily monitoring was added. Daily monitoring does not involve a question, but an open space for text and a series of circles that represent each day of the week. The circles can be left blank, or they can be turned green and red by touch. For example, a caseworker and client might choose to write “take my medicine”, and the client can click the circle green on the days when she has taken her medicine. The caseworker and the client have to agree on what blank, green or red circles mean. When the client responds, there is a two-hour time lapse before data are sent on to the caseworker, in which time the client can change responses. The client and the caseworker can then follow how things are going. There is a profile system where the titles of the weekly ratings are listed on the left, and there are dates on the top with the latest date to right and coloured squares give the viewer an image of change over time. The client and caseworker can also generate graphs to view change over time. Daily monitoring is viewed on another page. The system aims to offer flexibility so monitoring is tailored to the client and the social work that is ongoing. Monitoring change is the main function of the system, however there are other functions.

There is a function called goals, where the caseworker and the client can write down goals that are significant for the client. There is a journaling function called thoughts where the client can write text, which can also be easily accessed as the client does their weekly rating. There is a function called contacts where the client and caseworker can write down contact details for the caseworker and other people in the client’s support network. This function is connected to the phone’s telephone and email so the client can text, call or mail directly from the app. Hidden under the contacts section is another function where the client can write a crisis plan, if there is a situation the client fears. In the settings function, the client can choose a colour for the app’s background, add a profile picture and decide what time of day the
reminders to respond to the app will appear. The app also includes a section that informs the client about the project that the app system is a part of, and information about data protection is presented. The caseworker does not have access to the functions thoughts or the crisis plan on their interface. However, thoughts can easily be shared with the caseworker or others via email.

Method

This study was conducted as part of the development process. In an earlier paper (Mackrill, Ebsen and Antczak, 2015), we described how a series workshops were held with statutory caseworkers and their young clients, where designs of the system were presented and participants responses informed the design process. Following on from this, the software company spent five months developing the first system. A preliminary test was run using the young clients in the design group prior to the release of the app on App store and Google Play. The app still faced many technological problems at this stage. The app was then released in January 2015 and introductory two-day courses were held in the municipalities with the caseworkers. At this stage, we found the app still encompassed a range of technological problems that demotivated caseworkers and clients. There were also problems relating to implementation. One clear problem was that some caseworkers used the app solely for control purposes asking clients to monitor whether they had been to school and done their homework and the like, despite being warned against this, with an ensuing and unsurprising lack of compliance from clients. However, some caseworkers and young clients persevered with app despite technological setbacks and used the app to monitor shared goals. Six of these young clients agreed to participate in this pilot interview study. The sample was thus recruited to help us explore the app system’s potential seen from a client perspective. We could have interviewed the young clients who had been asked to monitor whether they had been to school and done their homework and the like but we did not think such a study would help us develop the system, as we could see from the data that client who were asked to monitor such factors soon stopped using the system. Clients who only viewed the app as form of state regulation and not also as a personally motivated self-regulation quickly
stopped using the system.

Six young adults who had used the app extensively were interviewed about their experiences of using the app, one young man and five young women aged between 14 and 18. We did not ask them specifically about why they were in touch with social services as we did not want the interviews to focus on their problems but instead they were interviewed as experienced users of the app. They were informed that we wanted to learn about their use of app so we could develop it and do research. Prior to their using their app, all young clients gave their written consent to us, so we could use their anonymised data. Parental consent was also given for young persons under eighteen. They were all informed that they could withdraw this consent at a later stage and how to do so. All data were stored according to the standards of the Danish Data Protection Agency. There are no ethics committees that approve social science studies of this type in Denmark, they only exist in the field of medicine.

The interviews were semi-structured around four primary areas of interest: the experience of the functionality of the technology; the client’s experience of the impact of the use of the technology on the clients’ life generally; the client’s experience of the impact of the use of the technology on the relationship to their caseworker and municipality, and their experience of the app in relation to their daily life. Initial open questions about each young person’s experience of using the app were asked and then more specific questions were asked for example concerning the functions they used and did not use, and what they liked and did not like about the app, aspects they found challenging, and questions on what they thought could be developed. Specific questions were asked about focus areas they had not mentioned. The interviewer voiced interpretations of what the young clients said during the interview, giving the client the opportunity of validating findings (Kvale, 1996).

The interviews were transcribed. All details that could identify clients and caseworkers were removed and pseudonyms were assigned. The interviews were then analysed using NVIVO based on a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). This approach was chosen as we wanted to capture the range
of client experiences and we hoped a theoretical grounded construction could contribute to our reflections about the app’s potential and by establishing a theory of client use contribute to its development. Coding was carried out by the first and second authors together. Categories were negotiated and developed together and main and subcategories were identified.

Results

Table one offers a view of the categories that were generated.

Table 1 near here.

1) Reflecting about one’s own life

The young adults used the app to reflect about their own life. Jill, who was eighteen, said for example, ‘It was like super good for thinking things through for myself (...) about my school or something else. Not beat myself up, if I hadn’t been to school or something.’ Using the app gave an added and different view of life. Maia who was 15 said, ‘knowing it is one thing, but reading it like, and facing it one more time, is different and something more.’ The app helped the young clients establish a perspective on their life and helped them view themselves from the outside. Lulu who was sixteen noted, ‘It’s strange seeing how you have been doing and why you felt like that.’ Lulu used the app to monitor the extent to which she helped her friends. She had tended to help her friends so much that she ignored her own priorities and her life continuously came off track. Using the category ‘good habits’, Lulu monitored whether she could disassociate from always helping her friends. Lulu said ‘there was that time when there was a conflict here [at the care placement] and I noticed what I had done and looked back at it and thought I was strange. Seeing what I had done not to help my friends, letting others do it (...) I thought about what I had done, because six
months ago, I would just have helped and said the grown-ups should just *p*** off. (...) I found it strange but still good. Sure, if there is stuff I can’t help them with, then I don’t, but if it’s small stuff, I still do (...) But if it is big stuff, where you can’t really help, then I let the grown-ups help (...). Previously I just wanted the grown-ups to go away, and I would take care of everything (...) and I ended up feeling really bad afterwards. But now I can see when the grown-ups need to be there, and when I should be there.” Gaining this new perspective on her life was a new experience for Lulu.

The analysis generated four ways in which the young adults used the app to reflect about their lives.

a) **Setting goals for myself and remembering them**

The young adults use the app to set personal specific goals and to remember the goals. Jane said, for example, ‘I used it to set goals for myself. I also use it to go back a bit and for example look at some goals that I don’t use any more. But just go back a bit and remind myself that I still have to go for them. In a way to remind myself.’ Jane noted about setting goals for herself, ‘It’s been really good for me, because it sort of makes me feel that I have to prove it to myself rather than to others’. Jane uses the app to take ownership over her goals. ‘It’s your own idea. You feel you’ve got a better chance of proving it. It’s something you can do, because you set the goal yourself.’

Several of the young adults mentioned that they tended to forget their own goals and the app helped them remember them. Morten, who was sixteen reflected about setting goals with his caseworker, ‘and I made some goals for the future with my caseworker, for example about getting good grades and getting ready to live on my own. They are goals for the future, and I wrote them in and I think back about them, remember them. About the job. I think it’s good it’s in there. As I sometimes forget what I want.’ Maia also tended to forget what was important to her. Meeting with her mentor was important to her, but she did not always prioritize it. Maia said, ‘sometimes I just sort of forget about her, and then she
is sort of reawakened [when I see the app], and I get to think about her and miss her, and then it’s easier to remember her and just write to her and say “hi, how’s it going?” The app was used to remember important goals. Nichola became so used to remembering the goals after using the app that she said ‘they’re in my head, now’. The app had helped her remember her goals.

b) Assessing my general state

The young adults also used the app to assess how they had been doing overall during the last week. In connection with this Lulu reported, ‘It helps me see that everything isn’t as bad as I thought.’ Jane who was seventeen mentioned she used the app to assess ‘when things went well, and when things went really badly. Sort of think back, what went wrong there? And that kind of thing. It’s like you take a look at yourself from your head to your feet.’ When asked about the question regarding how she has been doing overall during the past week, Jill said ‘I think it’s really good (..) because you don’t often sit yourself down and think, “Ok, how have you been doing, and stuff like that”. But when I get that question I think about it.’ Jill went on to say, ‘I often did it on Thursdays. And then I sat down and thought about how the last week had been and, and had to find out what I meant, you know (...) I probably wouldn’t have done it otherwise. I would probably have watched some series instead, you know. And thought about other things. So it’s good to get back and like spend time on it, spend time thinking about what I could have done differently or...yes... think. So it’s helped me a lot. I’ve thought a lot about it (....) It doesn’t take more than ten minutes at most, so anyone has the time.’ The app supported Jill in assessing her general state once a week, which she would not otherwise have done, and she reflected about whether there was something she could change. The young clients experienced making a general assessment of how they were doing as something positive. It gave them an enhanced sense of how their lives are going.
c) **Remember to act**

The young clients also used the app to remember to do things in their everyday lives. Morten uses the app to remind him to put his hand up in lessons at school, rather than just start talking. The app reminded Jane that she had to try to talk nicely to her family, when she visited them and was not in residential care. Jane said ‘it’s changed the way I am with my family. It’s made me more conscious for example about how I speak to my family. How I behave when I’m near my family. I’m often with my family when I report in (...) so I think about how I talk to my family, and how I have behaved towards my family and the like? And it sort of makes me a little more stable when I am near them (...) I certainly think, for example, I’m more aware of my tone of voice, how much I withdraw, and stuff like that.’ Lulu also said she used the app to remember how to act in difficult situations, saying ‘yes, it has certainly helped me remember what you need to do. For example, that I should go for a walk, when I feel bad.’ The above examples all highlight how the clients train activities that are counterintuitive. Morten remembers not just to blurt out what he is thinking in class but learns to wait his turn. Jane remembers to maintain a calmer tone when she talks to her family, rather than just getting angry. Lulu remembers to get out and go for a walk when she feels bad rather than just withdrawing into herself.

**d) Assessing my own actions**

The young adults also used the app to assess their own actions. Lulu said for example, ‘I can see how much better I’ve got at many things (...) That’s what’s surprised me most. Jane said,’ I can see what I have done well (...) That’s what has surprised me most (...) In a way you are pretty good at things. It helps you (...) see a little more.’ Morten who used the app to remember to hold his hand up in class recalled, ‘you can use it to assess how good you’ve been at it during the past week (...) and I think it’s a good way to assess it.’ Morten liked the numbers on the scale, ‘it’s hard to use words to describe how good or bad you’ve been at
putting your hand up for example, so it’s much better with numbers.’ Morten also recorded how well he ‘lives within his budget’, not spending more than his allowance, and he said he ‘likes the weekly reminder, that pops up on the phone’ and that he can ‘quickly assess what and how he has been doing’.

Jill highlighted how assessing her actions motivated her, ‘it’s also great for me to be able to, if I’ve done everything, mark everything as green (...) So in a way this has been really good and made me want to do it even more (...) that’s been a strength in a way, like a drive in some way or other. Then I felt there was something to aim for, because on Thursdays, I had to write down how things had gone. Then I thought, ok, I might just as well go to school, or make dinner (...) So yes, it’s helped me in this way.’ Reflecting on and assessing her own actions increased Jill’s belief in what she could achieve. Jill noted, that she could ‘pat herself on the back, if things had gone well’. The app played a part in how Jill supported and encouraged herself. But as Jill said, things did not always go well, ‘If you one week haven’t done things very well and have to write it down and think about it. Then you think, “what could I have done differently? Why haven’t I had the energy to go to school? What can I do to get more energy, so things can improve and I can develop and this kind of thing?” (...) It’s good to return and spend a little time thinking about what I could have done differently (...) So it’s helped me a lot.’ Jill used negative assessments to find new ways of changing her situation.

2) **Cooperation with the caseworker**

The second main category related to the significance of the app for the young clients’ cooperation with their caseworkers. Four categories were identified.

a) *A joint venture*

The app became an integral part of the young clients’ relationship with their caseworker. They sat and looked at the app together and discussed what to write in it, what categories to choose, and talked about how using the app was going and how and whether it helped. The app became a joint venture, a shared point of interest. Jill recalled ‘my caseworker and I have sat and talked about what I need support with (...)
and we wrote them in [the app]’. Lulu said similarly, ‘Me and my caseworker made some questions that I should respond to, about things I should do so things gets better.’ Morten also recalled, ‘I have made some goals (...) for the future that I write in here.’

b) A medium for focusing in on the young person’s life

The app was also a tool the young person and the caseworker used as a medium or lens to focus in on the young person’s life in new way. The caseworker could follow how the young person’s life was going. Jane noted that her caseworker, ‘goes in and sees if I’m ok and things like that. If I need to talk to her.’ For Jane, this kind of cooperation meant, ‘it makes it easier for me (...) instead of for example calling up and booking an appointment with my caseworker, she can, when she has got time to go in and look at my results (...) get hold of me and agree a time. (...) I think it’s easy, if you find contacting people difficult.’ The app added to Jane’s cooperation with her caseworker as she could report how she was doing without disturbing her caseworker when her caseworker was busy. When Jill met up with her caseworker they used Jill’s responses on the app as the basis for their conversation about how things were going and what had occurred, ‘we used the app to talk about it, where I described in more depth what had happened, why I didn’t do those things and the like. (...) me and my social worker have sat and talked about the things where I need support and we wrote them into the app. Having them written into the app has been good for me. I use my phone a lot. (...) so she [the caseworker] knows I went to school on those days but not on those days and we can talk about it in more depth afterwards. That’s what I think it is good for (...) It’s a way of starting a conversation and some proof. (...) I know I’ve had a bad patch if you look at that week (...) and I can explain. So in this way we can talk together.’ The app was used as a lens to focus on particular aspects of the young person’s life and it added to their communication.

c) Strengthening the young persons’ relationship with their caseworker

The app strengthened the young persons’ relationship with their caseworker in a range of ways. Jill talked about how she could keep her caseworker informed without being in direct contact with her, ‘It’s really
nice, especially getting in touch with your caseworker is difficult, because you know you have done your bit. There is proof that you’ve done this and this. She can follow you at least a bit of the way.’ The young person’s access to their caseworker was improved as the young person could pass significant information about their life on regardless of whether the caseworker had time to talk and without the young person having to formulate how things were going in a written or verbal format. The young person just had to press a few buttons on an app. Jane said similarly, ‘you can report in without for example having to call the person up. Do it like when you’ve got time (...) you can choose your own little point in time.’ Jane highlighted how she could report in without direct contact with her caseworker outside office hours. Jane also said that there was ‘a better chance of saying the right thing with the app, for example if you find saying anything at all difficult’. Jane also emphasized how the app could supplement conversations with her caseworker, noting ‘it’s actually similar. It’s just that one is human being you talk to and the other is a machine, and you having a better chance of saying what you think with both of them, if for example you find talking to people difficult.’

Lulu found reporting her need to talk to her caseworker with green, amber and red increased her chances of getting in touch with her caseworker, noting ‘I really liked the bit when you need contact with your caseworker. I haven’t used it yet, but it’s very good because it’s often difficult to get hold of your caseworker (...) I just think it’s nice that she can also see that I now need her.’ Nichola also mentioned the access this gave her saying, ‘so she [the caseworker] is like clear about that I want to talk to her. When it’s been red, she calls me up.’


d) Closer to each other – perhaps too close?

The app system brought the caseworkers and their young clients closer to each other. Lulu noted when her and her caseworker worked on her goals, we sat down and agreed what to do, and why we made the goals we did, and we helped each other do it.’ Lulu went on to say that without the app, ‘we wouldn’t have got that close’. Nichola also experienced more contact with her caseworker saying, ‘my caseworker knows
more about what I’m doing (...) She’s called me a couple of times when she could see things were going really badly. I hadn’t been to school and hadn’t done any homework for two weeks (...) and she called me up and what had happened and the like. It’s great because you know, I not just sitting here doing this and she’s not looking at it. She really sits and looks through it (...) It’s nice to know that she sees how my life goes up and down.’

There were of course limits to how close the young clients wanted to get with their caseworkers. Jane said, ‘I actually think the caseworker sees a little more of me than I would like. Not in any kind of awful way (...) but I’m the kind of person who likes to keep to myself.’ Jane noted that there were goals that she avoided putting on the app, ‘that I don’t want my caseworker to look at. This has kept me from writing some goals, that I don’t feel safe about making her business.’ In becoming closer, they had to focus on whether goals were too personal or private. Jane suggested that the app should let the client have private goals that the caseworker could not see. Nichola also highlighted that there were things she did not want her caseworker to know, ‘a caseworker is there to help you, for example if you don’t want to live at home and the like, municipal stuff. Some of the stuff on the app can be too personal. Nichola did not want to give the caseworker access to all aspects of her life.

No categories were developed regarding the interrelation between the use of the app and the young clients’ daily lives, as they all reported that the app did not disturb their daily routines in any problematic way. They felt it was a technology that they were used to using on a daily basis and that they felt in control of.

Discussion

The study shows that the app does have potential in the nexus between self-regulation and statutory casework. The young clients in this study experienced the app system as meaningful in the context of both statutory casework and in the context of their everyday lives. They used the system to regulate their lives by setting and remembering personal goals, assessing their general state continuously, remembering to
take action in counterintuitive ways, and by assessing their own actions. The young clients were also aware of limits to the kind of self-regulation they were willing to carry out in a statutory setting. This kind of practice required statutory caseworkers with the time and skills to work relationally and respond to changes in their young clients’ situation. The system did not work when statutory caseworkers merely used the system to monitor risk behaviour. Young clients exposed to this simply stopped using the system. As mentioned in the findings, the clients also used the app to generate proof that they had taken various forms of action and made decisions about what they did and did not monitor using the system. The study showed how the young clients used the app in relation to their statutory caseworker and experienced they controlled the information they passed on to their caseworkers. Thus following Rice et al. (2012), the study highlighted a potential approach to social work communication with young clients.

The study also showed how the app system supported the working alliance between the young client and their caseworker, as the client’s goals and negotiations about goals became central to the relation when the app was employed. Research has repeatedly found significant associations between the working alliance and outcomes (Norcross, 2010). The study also suggests that using technology to monitoring change (Lambert, 2010), has potential in a statutory setting, where monitoring risk is usually primarily emphasized.

This study has many limitations. The study focuses on the use of a technology by statutory caseworkers and a few clients who are motivated to use the technology, despite it being in its infancy and having teething problems. We would not expect all young clients in statutory settings to want to engage with their statutory caseworkers, as many are called to talk to their statutory caseworkers as a matter of law, and we do not therefore expect that this technology will somehow magically motivate all clients to want to engage with their statutory caseworkers. Many clients in statutory settings are simply not motivated for or ready for change (Norcross, Krebs & Prochaska, 2011) Most of the clients in this pilot were young women. It would however be interesting to study whether the app can increase the number of young clients who are
willing to engage with their statutory caseworkers and which clients experience the technology as beneficial and which do not. As this study shows, looking at an app together appears to take some of the pressure out of a face-to-face relationship, and adds to face to face meetings, which supports Mishna and colleagues’ (2012) findings regarding the complementary role of digital communication technology. Similarly, reporting how things are going via the app may improve the caseworkers’ data about their young clients’ ongoing lives and enhance the quality of relationships when they meet. Our experience with implementing the app revealed that some statutory caseworkers equated technology with distance and poorer relationships to clients. This study showed that this did not have to be the case. Young clients in this study clearly experienced technology as a way of improving their relationship with their caseworker. Our experiences with implementation tell us that if statutory caseworkers were not convinced of the potential of the new technology, they were not able to engage their clients in the use of the technology. The findings from this study have been used to offer statutory caseworkers examples of the potential uses of the app by young clients to support the development of a culture of use. Differentiating between the tool and the use of the tool is vital when developing and implementing digital technology in social work (Mackrill & Ebsen, 2017). Wastell and White (2014, p.215) pointed to this in their critique of the Integrated Children’s System when they note ‘the emphasis throughout has been on recording and form-filling rather than reading and comprehension.’ Similarly, whether the app system has a role to play in statutory youth settings and what that role might be, will depend on developing a culture of use and testing the system across a wide range of case types and contexts. This study contributes to the development of such a culture by exploring how young clients have used the app. A future study of how the statutory caseworkers use the app system is necessary.

References


Table 1. Main and subcategories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) Reflecting about one’s own life</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) Setting goals for myself and remembering them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Assessing my general state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Remember to act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Assessing my own actions</td>
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<th>2) Cooperation with the caseworker</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) A joint venture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) A medium for focusing in on the young person’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Strengthening the young persons’ relationship with their caseworker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Closer to each other – perhaps too close?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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