



“A positive guiding hand”: A qualitative examination of youth-initiated mentoring and the promotion of interdependence among foster care youth



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative interview study examined experiences of youth-initiated mentoring relationships (YIM) among youth transitioning out of the foster care system. YIM is an innovative approach wherein programs work with youth to identify adults within their existing social networks to serve as their mentors in the formal program. Participants were 13 mentor-youth dyads involved in a pilot trial of YIM in a mid-western city. Youth and mentors completed one-time, in-depth individual interviews. Narrative thematic analysis of the interview data yielded the following major findings: (a) youth overwhelmingly reported having a strong or very strong relationship with their mentor, (b) these relationships offered a number of forms of social support to the youth (i.e., appraisal, companionship, emotional, informational, and instrumental), and (c) the mentor was perceived to have positively impacted the youth during the course of the relationship in multiple ways, including the youth's psychological well-being, relationships with others, and beliefs about and orientation toward the future. These findings suggest that YIM is a promising approach for establishing meaningful and impactful connections that may promote interdependence for older foster care youth as they make the transition to adulthood.

Youth initiated mentoring (YIM) is a new approach wherein mentoring programs work with youth to identify adults within their existing social networks to become their mentors in the formal program. Few programs have implemented this approach, but it has generated significant interest, particularly in light of its promise for older youth and youth transitioning out of the foster care system. YIM has the potential to offer greater youth voice and choice in the mentor selection process, which aligns well with both the developmental needs of older adolescents (Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006) and empowerment approaches to working with foster care youth (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). It could also play a role in the promotion of interdependent living among youth transitioning out of foster care, to facilitate youth having the support of an adult on whom they can rely for “advice, information and connection” rather than trying to go it alone (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009, p. 309). The present study takes a close look at YIM relationships among youth transitioning out of the foster care system, focusing specifically on the nature and quality of the relationships formed, the support provided by the mentor and the perceived impact of the mentoring relationship from the perspectives of both youth and the mentors they selected.

1. Youth initiated mentoring (YIM)

The first formal documentation of the YIM approach is of its implementation in the Youth ChalleNGe program, which is a 5-month residential treatment program designed to re-engage youth 16–18 years of age who have dropped out of school and thus are at high risk for a host of negative occupational and psychosocial outcomes later in life (Millenky, Bloom, Muller-Ravett, & Broadus, 2011). The intent of the YIM component in this program is to help youth sustain the benefits achieved in the initial residential program through the transition back home and beyond by having them select a mentor from their community to support them for a full year and formalizing this relationship through the program. An evaluation of the program found that YIM did indeed appear to help, as youth in the longest-lasting mentoring relationships showed the greatest improvements in the outcomes examined (i.e. GED/HS diploma, college credit, months employed, earnings, months idle, and convictions) at the 38-month follow-up (Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013). The success of this approach in the Youth ChalleNGe program has led to other applications. YIM is being used in the child welfare system in Denmark to recruit adults nominated by the youth to serve as mentors and join family members and a team of professionals to work in a time-limited way toward achieving jointly determined goals as an alternative to out-

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of-home care (van Dam et al., 2017). The concept has also been expanded beyond formal mentoring to training youth to cultivate an array of natural mentoring relationships in programs designed for first-generation and under-represented college-bound (Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Cutler, & Cunningham, 2016) and first-year college students (Schwartz et al., 2018).

2. YIM and foster youth aging out of care

Research indicates that mentoring can make a positive difference in the lives of foster youth (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Taussig & Culhane, 2010; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016), who are at risk for a variety of negative outcomes by the time they reach age 26, including lower rates of educational attainment, higher rates of incarceration, lower rates of employment and less earnings, higher rates of economic hardships, and lower rates of civic engagement than their non-foster youth peers (Courtney et al., 2011). Many foster youth report having informal connections with supportive adults (Collins, Clay, & Ward, 2007; Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006) and such relationships are associated with improved outcomes, chiefly in psychological and educational domains (Thompson et al., 2016). In one study, 68% of youth in foster care reported having a mentor-type relationship with an adult, but only 2% indicated that this was a formalized mentoring relationship with a volunteer from a mentoring organization (Courtney et al., 2011). While these rates of natural mentorship are encouraging, insights from in-depth qualitative interviews with young adults aging out of care indicate that the mere presence of supportive adults does not mean that foster youth will be open to availing themselves of that support, as doing so can be perceived to be a threat to their independence and success (Samuels & Pryce, 2008).

Supportive relationships with adults are vital to healthy development for all youth but have been identified as being of particular importance to both current and former foster care youth (e.g., Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Taussig & Culhane, 2010; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016), who by definition lack some stability in their family lives. As youth age-out of care, the need heightens for what have been called “bridge relationships” to provide support for navigating the transition to adulthood (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009) and fostering the normative process of interdependence (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003). Indeed, there is growing recognition that the emphasis on self-sufficiency is out of sync with the developmental needs of young people as they make their way into adulthood and may be especially unhealthy for youth transitioning out of the foster care system (Propp et al., 2003).

As all youth move toward greater independence in early adulthood, they continue to rely on the advisement and support of capable trusted adults and often derive significant support from their parents (Laursen & Collins, 2009). Social support is critical for positive development in adolescence and early adulthood (Yeung & Leadbeater, 2010) and is one of the ways that mentoring is thought to promote positive outcomes for youth more generally (Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011) as well as for foster youth in particular (Greeson, 2013; Osterling & Hines, 2006). YIM may offer foster youth much needed adult support during this critical time without threatening a young person's sense of success by providing a relationship that can foster interdependence (Propp et al., 2003). Propp et al. (2003) define interdependence as being able to “count on others” and emphasize the importance of connection, social support and community for the health and well-being of transitioning foster care youth (p. 263). They contrast this with the more traditional emphasis on independence and self-sufficiency. As youth become more skilled at solving the complex problems that come with adulthood (e.g., moving into college, going on the job market, navigating romantic relationships), they may rely on these adults less and less, but still know they could rely on them for support in times of need (Propp et al., 2003).

Given that older youth in foster care might not be open to forming a relationship with a new adult due to past disruptions and inconsistencies in important relationships as a result of the insecure nature of foster care (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Kools, 1999; Samuels & Pryce, 2008), they may be more apt to engage in YIM relationships than in traditional formal mentoring relationships. Qualitative research demonstrates that youth in foster care strongly value relationships with persons and professionals who demonstrate commitment, caring, and positive modeling for them (Geenen & Powers, 2007; Greeson, Thompson, Ali, & Wenger, 2015); youth-initiated mentoring provides an opportunity for these youth to identify pre-existing relationships with adults they trust in order to further capitalize on these already strong relationships.

Being invited to serve as a mentor by a specific young person could also contribute to the adult mentor entering into these formal mentoring relationships with a higher level of commitment to the youth than adults recruited by programs, who typically volunteer out of a more general desire to “make a difference” in the life of a young person (Spencer, 2007). The youth-selected adults are also likely to be aware of important aspects of the youth's life circumstances and needs, and therefore, may be better able to evaluate the level of interdependence needed and desired right from the start of the relationship than could a mentor who was just meeting and getting to know the youth. This may lead to a longer and more impactful relationship and may also reduce the likelihood of mentor abandonment that has been observed in mentoring with more traditional matching practices (Spencer, 2007; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, Walsh, & Drew, 2017), which could be especially detrimental to foster youth.

Some research has identified qualities of mentors that foster youth have found to be supportive. Such mentors have been described as warm and accepting (Farruggia et al., 2006), reliable and encouraging (Collins et al., 2010), patient (Ahrens et al., 2011), empathetic and caring (Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014), and trusting and authentic (Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott Jr., & Tracy, 2010). Also important to foster youth is that the support offered be tailored to fit their needs, timely and offered without judgment (Thompson et al., 2016). Mentors, whose roles are more fluid than that of adults in other formal roles with youth, such as counselor, teacher or case worker, may be able to offer an array of supports and even more involved assistance given their less restrictive role and the potential for them to become more integrated into the fabric of the youth's everyday life.

3. Current study

Although there have been some examinations of both formal and informal mentoring relationships among youth in and transitioning out of foster care, there has been no close study of the nature of YIM relationships among these youth and their potential to promote interdependence. This study examines the experiences of youth and adults in YIM relationships established and supported by a formal mentoring program. Our specific research questions were as follows: What were the youth and mentors' perceptions of the strength and quality of the mentoring relationship? What supports were provided by the mentors and how were these supports received by the youth? What impact, if any, did these supports have on the youth, from the perspective of both youth and mentor?

4. Methods

4.1. YIM program

The current analysis includes matches from a larger study of YIM relationships with programs participating in a pilot initiative of YIM in a mid-western city (Spencer, Gowdy, Drew, & Rhodes, in press). The participants included in the present analysis were recruited from a program serving youth who were involved in, or recently aged out of,

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