“She holds my hand”: The experiences of foster youth with their natural mentors

Johanna K.P. Greeson, University of Pennsylvania
Natasha K. Bowen, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

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Johanna K.P. Greeson *, Natasha K. Bowen
School of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States

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ABSTRACT

The vulnerability and adversity that youth frequently experience following aging out of foster care are well-documented. However, much less is known about the positive experiences and healthy relationships that may buffer these youth from the negative outcomes following emancipation. Utilizing a strengths perspective, this exploratory study gathered qualitative data about the experiences of older foster youth with their natural mentors. Although other at-risk and marginalized groups are represented in the natural mentoring literature, representation of female foster youth of color is scarce. Seven female foster youth of color were individually interviewed using a semi-structured protocol. Data were analyzed using the grounded theory approach. Key themes identified included: (1) relationship characteristics that matter, (2) support I receive, (3) how I've changed, (4) thoughts on my future, and (5) what I think about foster care. Implications for practice are discussed.

1. Introduction

“She holds my hand. It’s not the fact that I need somebody to hold my hand, but she’s a person that I can rely on when I’ve had a long day.” – 18-year-old foster youth

National data indicate that of the 513,000 children in out-of-home care on September 30, 2005, 20% (n = 104,710) were between the ages of 16 and 20 years-old (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005). Of these youth, about 20,000 (19%) emancipate every year (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001). They are sent into the world at age 18 to find jobs, secure housing, and to become independent adults. Yet, empirical studies indicate that persons of this age are not fully prepared to live independently without some level of support from family. As such, former foster youth are at high-risk of failing to meet minimal levels of self-sufficiency and acceptable behaviors (McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1993).

Research emphasizes that the transition to independence is frequently an adverse experience for youth leaving the foster care system. A bleak portrait has been revealed for many of them. Specifically, former foster youth often lack a high school education, suffer difficulty with employment, rely on public assistance, endure spells of homelessness, engage in delinquency (at times resulting in incarceration), experience problems obtaining health care, and face young parenthood (e.g., Barth, 1990; Cook, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Courtney et al., 2001; Dworsky, 2005; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Pecora et al., 2005; Reilly, 2003).
addition, a striking finding across several studies is the low level of earnings for this group of vulnerable young people. Former foster youth were frequently found to be living well-below the poverty threshold (Courtney & Dworsky, 2005; Dworsky, 2005; Pecora et al., 2005). In sum, it is not typical for youth to leave foster care and function effectively on their own.

The presence of at least one caring adult who offers social support and connectedness has been identified as a protective factor for youth across a variety of risk conditions (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001). Mentoring has been identified as one mechanism for cultivating caring relationships between at-risk youth and non-parental adults. Mentoring is a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2004).

Mentors may be natural or programmatic. Natural mentors are naturally occurring important adults in a youth’s environment. Natural mentors can include teachers, extended family members, neighbors, coaches, and religious leaders. In contrast, programmatic mentors are assigned to mentees by a youth-serving agency. The implication is that some external entity (e.g., Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America) has created the conditions and guided the relationship (Hamilton et al., 2006).

Studies evaluating the benefits of mentoring for youth are accumulating, and have demonstrated positive effects on emotional/psychological, problem/high-risk behavior, social competence, academic/educational, and career/employment outcomes (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) — i.e., on many of the outcomes on which former foster youth fare poorly. Yet, minimal research has examined the efficacy of mentoring programs for foster youth in particular (Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1998). To date, only two studies have specifically examined the impact of natural mentors on the lives of foster youth (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Munson & McMillen, 2007), and only one study known to the authors has examined the impact of programmatic mentors (Rhodes et al., 1998).

Both Munson and McMillen (2007) and Ahrens et al. (2008) showed that the presence of a natural mentor was significantly associated with foster youth’s positive psychological outcomes. Ahrens and colleagues also showed that foster youth with natural mentors reported significantly better overall health, were less likely to have been diagnosed with a STD, and were less likely to report having hurt someone in a fight in the past year. In an evaluation of Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, Rhodes et al. (1998) found that foster youth with programmatic mentors showed significant improvements in their peer social support.

In addition to the dearth of outcome studies on foster youth and mentoring, little attention has been paid to the processes involved in the mentor–foster youth relationship that bring about better outcomes. How do foster youth define their mentor relationships, and how do they perceive themselves to benefit from the relationships? Two studies have explored foster youth’s perceptions of the behaviors of caring adults. One focused on natural mentors, the other on programmatic mentors. In the former, Laursen and Birmingham (2003) used in-depth, semi-structured ethnographic interviewing to learn how foster youth (n=23) conceive of their world and how they make sense of the behaviors of caring adults in helping them face adversity. Participants confirmed that caring relationships, high expectations, and participation in activities that afford opportunities for success can serve as protective factors. Furthermore, seven important characteristics of caring adults came to light: trust, attention, empathy, availability, affirmation, respect, and virtue.

Osterling and Hines (2006) similarly used interviews and focus groups with seven youth to investigate foster youth’s experiences with programmatic mentors in “Advocates to Successful Transitions to Independence,” a mentoring program designed to assist older foster youth in acquiring the skills and resources needed for the successful transition to adulthood. Their goal was to reveal how programmatic mentoring programs might buffer foster youth from the negative outcomes frequently experienced upon exit from the child welfare system.

Several themes emerged from the content analysis of the interview and focus group data in the Osterling and Hines (2006) study. These included: nature of relationship with mentor, types of changes experienced by youth since being mentored, and preparation for independent living. Youth described their mentors as helpful and supportive. The support and encouragement provided, as well as the consistency of the relationship were reported as the most beneficial aspects of the relationship. When asked about the changes they have experienced since working with their mentors, youth described changes related to emotional gains, such as being more open with feelings, understanding their own emotions better, and being less angry. Youth also reported an increase in their independent living skills since being mentored. These included: (1) obtaining a job, (2) opening a bank account, (3) saving money, (4) completing tax forms, and (5) completing their education.

Although foster youth were not a specific focus, Spencer (2006) also identified characteristics of successful at-risk youth–mentor relationships. Twenty-four pairs of adults and adolescents from the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America program were interviewed about the nature of their relationships and their experiences with one another. Four relational processes were identified as characterizing the close ties between the youth and their mentors. Similar to the findings of Laursen and Birmingham (2003), these were authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship.

1.1. A focus on natural mentoring

Despite the positive findings of Osterling and Hines (2006), some doubt has been cast regarding the efficacy of programmatic mentoring for youth with special needs, including those in foster care (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2004). Theoretically and developmentally, natural mentoring may provide a better fit than programmatic mentoring for foster youth. For example, natural mentoring relationships form gradually and are therefore likely to be less pressured. The natural mentor is not a stranger to the youth, and as a result, the youth is less likely to have difficulty trusting the adult (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006). Similarly, both youth and natural mentor are already in each other’s environments and are likely to remain there. Consequently, the
chances that the relationship will endure over time are better, and the likelihood of positive outcomes increases (Hamilton et al., 2006). Recognizing the unique characteristics of natural mentoring, formal mentoring programs are attempting to reproduce the types of benefits that have been documented to develop from natural mentoring relationships between youth and adults (DuBois et al., 2002). Because of the emerging interest in natural mentoring, we focus on natural mentoring in this investigation.

### 1.2. Female foster youth of color

Although other at-risk and marginalized groups are represented in the natural mentoring literature (e.g., pregnant and parenting African American teenagers (Klaw & Rhodes, 1995; Klaw, Rhodes, & Fitzgerald, 2003; Rhodes, Ebert, & Fischer, 1992), Latina adolescent mothers (Rhodes, Contreras, & Mangelsdorf, 1994), gay and lesbian youth (Alexander, 1999)), representation of female foster youth of color is scarce. In fact, no studies are known to the authors that concentrate solely on female foster youth of color. The percentage of females or youth of color has been as high as 50% to 60% in some studies (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2008; Munson & McMillen, 2007), however the percentage of youth who are both is much smaller. Additionally, even when they are represented in study samples, the perceptions of female youth of color has not been the focus of these studies – their views have been combined with those of youth with other characteristics.

The authors know only one study that focuses on Hispanic and African American foster youth following emancipation (i.e., Iglehart & Becerra, 2002). Yet, the racial disparities in out-of-home care are well-documented (Chibnall et al., 2003). African American and Hispanic children and youth comprise 50% of the total number of children and youth in out-of-home care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2005), well beyond their combined percentage of the national population (National Survey of Child & Adolescent Wellbeing, 2005). Given the disproportionate racial representation and the adversities stemming from racism, sexism, and poverty, we focus on the positive experiences and caring relationships that may buffer female foster youth of color. Therefore, this study fills an important gap in our current understanding of the role of natural mentors in the lives of this especially at-risk sub-population.

#### 1.3. Strengths perspective

Typically, a deficit model is used to describe the experiences of older foster youth up to and upon transition into adulthood. Under this model, the lack of preparation for adulthood and connectedness to caring adults is well-documented (e.g., Courtney et al., 2001; Georgiades, 2005; Mann-Feder & White, 2003; McMillen, Rideout, Fisher, & Tucker, 1997). For example, in a study on the experiences of foster youth during the transition to adulthood, one foster parent reflected on the abruptness of this transition (Geenen & Powers, 2007, p. 1096). She stated,

> Children who are in foster care already have some things that are going to be very difficult to overcome just by the nature of it. And to assume that they can go out at 18 and take care of themselves is a real mistake.

Much less is known, however, about the constructive experiences and healthy relationships of this population and their potential to improve foster care youth outcomes. We utilize a strengths perspective in the present investigation to examine the contribution of natural mentors to the lives of female foster youth of color. We address the following research questions:

1. How do foster youth describe their relationships with their natural mentors?
2. What do foster youth consider to be the essential components of this relationship?
3. How do foster youth benefit from these types of relationships?
4. How do these relationships come to be?

### 2. Method

#### 2.1. Design and sample

Data in the present investigation are from seven female adolescents with foster care experience who indicated that they had a natural mentor relationship. We defined natural mentor as an important adult, other than a parent, someone at least 21 years-old who has had a significant influence or could be counted on in a time of need. Youth with this particular type of relationship were selected as possible participants, and whoever was willing participated in the study. The sample was drawn from a New England public high school (n = 3) and a Southeastern Department of Social Services (DSS, n = 4). Sites were identified through pre-existing contacts available to the first author, and participants were recruited with the assistance of site staff. All procedures were approved by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board.

Youths ranged from 13 to 20 years-old (M = 16.3, SD = 2.7). All youth identified themselves as females of color, including Hispanic, Multi-racial, and African American. Grade in school ranged from 7th to entering the second year of community college. Foster care status for Southeastern DSS youth was identified as living either in a licensed foster care facility or living with a relative. Foster care status for the New England high school youth included independent living and emancipation. Two of the seven participants were mothers of children under the age of two. Natural mentors nominated by the youth included foster mothers (n = 2), teachers (n = 2), an extended family member (n = 1), a school professional (n = 1), and a former programmatic mentor (n = 1). The young women had known their natural mentors for an average of 36.9 months (SD = 26.0).
2.2. Recruitment and data collection

Recruitment of participants was executed in two ways. For the DSS youth, an initial recruitment session was conducted in February 2007 at one of the monthly DSS independent living meetings. After this initial recruitment session, at subsequent meetings where new youth were in attendance, the project was described to youth in small groups as needed. All recruitment sessions consisted of providing youth information about the project, including defining what a natural mentor is: An important adult, other than a parent, someone at least 21 years-old who has had a significant influence or could be counted on in a time of need. Those who self-identified themselves as having this type of relationship were then eligible for study participation. Because the DSS youth were minors and in the custody of the state, informed consent was obtained from each youth’s legal guardian (i.e., DSS social worker). Informed assent was also obtained from the participants themselves. Interviews were conducted at independent living meetings between April and August 2007, and lasted approximately 45 min each. As an incentive to participate, all youth were offered a $20 gift card. The independent living program received a $50 gift card for participation.

Recruitment of youth from the New England high school was conducted in two phases. First, the Director of the Learning through Interest Program contacted via phone and email eligible youth whom she thought may be interested in participating in the study. Eligible youth were primarily defined as having a natural mentor relationship, the definition of which was provided to the Director prior to contact with the youth. Based on the Director’s long-standing relationship with the students at this particular high school, she was able to identify youth whom she thought would likely have a natural mentor relationship. Next, she contacted each of them individually regarding their interest in participating in the study after confirming the presence of a natural mentor relationship, as defined by the PI. Data collection took place during July 2007. Separate interview sessions were arranged with each of the three youth identified by the Director. Because these youth were between the ages of 18 and 20, they were able to provide their own informed consent. Each interview was approximately 60 min; one interview took place at the high school and the two took place at the youth’s places of residence. Interviews were conducted over a three day period. As with the DSS youth, all youth were offered a $20 gift card for their participation. The high school also received a $50 gift card.

2.3. Interview procedure

Participants were individually interviewed using a semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule to learn how they each defined and described their natural mentor relationship. All interviews were digitally-recorded. The interview schedule was developed by the first author and evolved from a review of the pertinent literature on risk and protection, mentoring, and the nature of adolescents’ relationships with their “very important” non-parental adults (see Appendix A for the interview schedule).

2.4. Data analysis approach

Interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions were checked for accuracy by comparing them to the digital recordings. Analysis was guided by the grounded theory approach, an inductive strategy whereby concepts and hypotheses are discovered through constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). ATLAS/ti, a qualitative data management program (Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2006), was used to facilitate this process. The first stage of analysis entailed “open coding” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) or the naming and locating of “data bits” line by line while noting ideas, potential themes, and generating possible concepts. This process was carried out with the data until “saturation” was achieved, i.e., no new codes emerged from the data (Padgett, 1998). The second stage of analysis entailed “axial coding” (Padgett, 1998) in which the “open codes” were categorized and grouped around conceptual commonalities or specific “axes.” The third stage of analysis, “selective/thematic coding,” (Padgett, 1998) involved determining how code clusters related to each other and discovering what stories the codes told. Finally, the themes from the selective coding were examined for how they interrelated in an effort to generate theory related to the notion that a youth’s natural mentor relationship can serve as a protective mechanism in the face of adversity.

3. Results

Five themes related to foster youth’s relationships with their natural mentors and their experiences in foster care emerged from the analysis. Our first research question concerning how youth describe their relationships with their natural mentors yielded the theme “relationship characteristics that matter.” Our second research question about youth’s views of the essential relationship components generated the theme “support I receive.” Our third research question regarding how youth benefit from natural mentor relationships produced the themes “how I’ve changed” and “thoughts on my future.” Finally, although not a specific focus of this study, the theme of “what I think about foster care” also emerged from the youth’s interviews.

3.1. “Relationship characteristics that matter”

Several key relationship characteristics were consistently identified by the youth. These included: (a) trust, (b) love and caring, and (c) like parent and child.
3.1. Trust

Trust was discussed by the foster youth as emerging over time and as laying the foundation for positive relationship development. For example, in describing how her foster mother had been informed that she was a “bad girl” before she was placed with her, but remained open to getting to know her herself, one youth stated,

She started looking at what I was doing, what I was telling her, and then she knew who I was, who I really was. That’s when she started gaining my trust to tell her my problems. We started talking about how my life was in [country of origin] and what I was like with my real mom.

The importance of a trusting relationship is confirmed by Geenen and Powers (2007). In this study, one foster parent also described being able to trust a caring adult as laying an important foundation for foster youth’s future relationship development, “Everything evolves out of the relationship. And not only with you, but then once that relationship can happen with someone, you can help them build on others” (p. 1093).

Another youth discussed the trust in her relationship with her natural mentor as being bi-directional, that is, how she and her natural mentor came to trust one another. She stated, “... the way she is open towards me and not afraid to tell me how she feels, I guess, because I trust her and she trusts me. I just have that feeling, like I can open up to you, tell you stuff and not worry about it.”

3.1.2. Love and caring

Going hand in hand with trust, love and caring also emerged as salient relationship characteristics. Additionally, the foster youth discussed love and caring as having developed as a direct result of being able to trust their natural mentors. Reflecting on her relationship with her natural mentor and the uncommon experience of feeling loved by an adult, one youth commented, “It makes me feel good because I haven’t had a lot of adults show me love since I was about 3. It’s like out of all the things I’ve been through, she’s there to support me.” A second youth also described how the love of her natural mentor makes her feel. She related, “I feel the love, and I'm happy. She makes me happy, and I’m excited when I'm with her.” Other youth described the behaviors their natural mentors exhibit towards them that lets them know they care. For example, one youth described how her mentor listens and responds to her. She stated, “The way she listens to me, and the way she responds to what I say lets me know she cares, and the way she focuses on what I’m saying lets me know she cares.” Another youth talked about her natural mentor always being available to her as demonstrating that she cares. She stated, “I know she cares about just by the way she acts around me. If I need something, I can always ask her. Sometimes she’ll come pick me up, and we’ll ride around and talk, just to get away.” A fourth foster youth summarized the ability of her natural mentor to care for her in this way, “She’s great at supporting and caring for me. It’s like somebody trained her or something.”

3.1.3. Like parent and child

Most of the foster youth also described the relationship with their natural mentor as like a parent–child relationship. Moreover, like love and caring were described as having emerged as a result of trust, feeling like parent and child emerged as a result of all three characteristics: trust, love, and caring. One youth simply stated, “He treats me like I’m his child.” Another youth gave examples of how her natural mentor is like a “motherly figure” in ways that her biological mother is not. She described,

She steps in as my motherly figure. She’ll give me good advice every day, and not get all mad and upset about what I tell her. Like, I’m sort of failing math right now, and she’ll be like, “Tanya!”,1 but my mom would totally flip the switch, so it’s much better.

This youth went on to describe the difference between her natural mentor and a biological mother as,

She’ll do the part that a mom should do, but she doesn’t have like all that control that a mom has. She gives me advice like a mom should give about girly stuff and guys. But, she doesn’t get all uptight like a mom would about some stuff.

Another youth also compared her natural mentor to her biological mother. She reflected, “The thing she gave me is to share my problems. She takes care of me, and really loves me. I didn’t have that with my real mom. We talk like mom and daughter. She’s like my real mom.” A third youth reflected on how the receipt of an iPod from her natural mentor made her feel like they have a parent–child relationship. Simultaneously, she also acknowledged the role that she thinks she fills for her natural mentor. She stated,

It made me feel special. I know those cost a lot of money. I guess I’m a gem in her eye; I would say she spoils me. She can’t have children, so she treats me like her own child, and sometimes she refers to me as the daughter that she never had.

In sum, the relationship characteristics that matter to these youth are trust, loving and caring, and the sense of having a parent–child relationship. This sequence of qualities suggests a hierarchy or “ladder” of development. That is, before being able to achieve the feeling of parent–child, trust, and loving and caring must first be in place.

1 Names have been changed here and throughout to protect the privacy of the participants.
3.2. “Support I receive”

In addition to identifying key characteristics of their relationships with their natural mentors, youth consistently discussed the importance of the social support that they received from their mentors. For the purposes of this study, we define social support as encompassing psychological and informational resources available to individuals through their relationships with family, friends, communities, and professionals (House, 1981). The youth’s descriptions of social support were consistent with the literature on forms of social support. They identified examples of emotional (trust and esteem), informational (facts and knowledge), instrumental (material provisions), and appraisal (affirmation and feedback) support (House, 1981).

3.2.1. Emotional support

Several youth described the type of support that they receive from their natural mentors as emotional support. Specifically, they expressed that the emotional support they receive from their natural mentors is their availability to talk when a problem or issue arises. For example, one youth stated,

I can go to her and talk to her at anytime and talk about most things. I'm not afraid to go and talk to her whenever I have a problem or something, or an issue that I would like to discuss. I would say she's the adult in my life.

Another youth described the emotional support that she receives from her natural mentor as something that her mother was unable to provide her. She reflected,

I have someone that I can look up to now; she encourages me to do my best and to try new things. She's just there for me. She's someone that's there for me now. I didn't really have anybody in the past. I mean my mom was there, but she's doing more than my mom could do because she's there to just pay attention to me.

A third youth shared a story about the emotional support provided by her natural mentor when she left foster care and entered independent living. She described,

When I was leaving foster care and going into independent living, he was always asking me what was going on, if he could do anything for me. When I left my foster home, it ended really badly. I got kicked out of my foster home and my foster mother gave us 10 days to get out. I was stressed. He didn't know what was going on, but could tell that I was upset. He was the first person to ask me, I broke down and told him what was happening. I was so nervous. I didn't know if I was going to have to go to like a shelter home, or something. He called me that same night asking what was going on, what was happening, and what we were going to do.

This same youth also described how her natural mentor checked up on her when she did not come to school. She stated,

If I missed one day of school, or if I was late, he'd call me like three times, saying, 'Gabriella, I don't know where you are, but call me, tell me where you are. I just want to make sure you're OK.'

In addition to these examples of emotional support, the data presented about love and caring as relationship characteristics corroborate the presence and importance of emotional support in the lives of these youth.

3.2.2. Informational support

Several youth also described the informational support that their natural mentors provide them. On the topic of her becoming a doctor, one youth stated,

We talk about it; we talk about the classes that I need to take in high school, and the classes that I need to take in college, and the schools that I need to go to after that because that's going to be a lot.

One of the youth with a baby described the informational support that her natural mentor provided her when she was pregnant. She related, “Now that I have the baby, we usually talk about the baby. When I was pregnant, she told me some things that I could expect.”

Our findings regarding the importance of natural mentors providing informational support for foster youth corroborate findings previously reported by Geenen and Powers (2007). When asked about the importance of relationships for foster youth who are transitioning to adulthood, a caseworker in the Geenen and Powers study related,

I've had the rare and wonderful pleasure of being able to have a lot of kids come back after they've left our system, and have a dialogue about what was important for them. What mattered? And what they all say to me is it's all about relationships. That whether you know how to balance a checkbook when you leave this place is less important than whom you have you can call to say “I've got a checkbook, and I can't figure out how to get it to add up (p. 1093).”

3.2.3. Appraisal support

Another way for people to help is to offer their opinion about how they view a particular situation, or how they would choose to handle it. By sharing points of view, youth develop a better understanding of situations and how to handle them. The foster youth
in this study gave examples of times when their natural mentors shared their points of view on problems or troubling issues. For example, one youth stated, “When I got problems with the girls at school, when they want to fight me, she starts telling me how to help myself without acting up or going out in gangs.” Both of the youth with babies discussed how their natural mentors shared their points of view with them when they told them that they wanted to drop out of high school. One youth shared,

I wanted to drop out of school, so we sat and talked. She was like, ‘Do you really want to do this? Are you sure?’ She just kept talking with me about it and after awhile I decided to stay. She called my house every day asking me how I was dealing with school, if anything was going on.

For the second youth who is a senior in high school this year, dropping out is something she contemplates frequently. She said,

There are times now that I just want to give up and leave school. She [her mentor] says, ‘You got to listen. What would you do if your son came to you and was like, Ma, I want to drop out of school, and then I’m like, yeah, I wouldn’t allow it to happen.

3.2.4. Instrumental support

Instrumental support is also known as tangible support. This type of social support can take the form of either material items or assistance with tasks (e.g., cooking, child care, moving). Completion of the basic tasks of day-to-day life is typically the goal of instrumental support. Instrumental support identified by the foster youth included the provision of clothes, rides home from school, money for lunch, and school supplies. For example, “She buys me clothes, any stuff that I need around the house, and sometimes things I just want.” Another example is,

She’s offered to give me so many rides home; she just does a lot. There was this one time that we went to a dance concert, and I totally forgot that we had to pay for it, and she totally paid my way because I didn’t have any money.

The same youth also described,

There was this one time in 8th grade, I didn’t have any money for lunch, and she paid for my lunch. If I’m hungry, she’ll find something in her drawer or cabinet to give me. If I need something, like I didn’t have a notebook, she was willing to go buy me a notebook for school.

A third youth talked about the instrumental support she received that was in the form of helping her transition out of high school after graduation. She described,

She helped me with trying to get into programs, for like school or work opportunities. I wanted to go to Gibbs College, and had to write essays, so she helped me with that. Then, I didn’t make it, so I ended up going to Community College of Rhode Island; she helped me with the work, like the essays and stuff.

One of the most poignant comments shared concerned the instrumental support that one of the young women’s natural mentor provides in the form of them sharing meals together,

Every day we sit down at dinner. I don’t think many families do that anymore, but we sit down at dinner every night, and we have breakfast together in the morning. When I wake up for school, she is there.

3.3. “How I’ve changed”

Several of the foster youth credited their natural mentors with helping them to achieve positive personal changes. One youth described an improvement in her attitude toward school, her school performance, as well as an improved relationship with her sister. She stated,

Now it’s different. I go to school. My grades are good. I don’t skip. I don’t get into trouble. I don’t go looking for trouble anymore. And, I got a good relationship with my sister now; I didn’t have a relationship with her before.

A second youth also described her improved school performance, as well as emotional growth that she has experienced. She shared,

I’ve been doing better in school since I’ve been living with her. I’ve been acting better too. I was always shy and not able to open up to people when I was with my mom, and I was always quiet. I used to be all quiet, shy and bashful, and didn’t want to talk to anybody; I’d be in my own little space. But now, I’m like out there. I guess she helped me do that.

Another youth discussed the change in her outlook regarding her relationship with her son. She shared,

The [natural mentor] relationship has changed me. Like for instance, my son, everybody needs a person to talk to, so she shows me that just because of what happened between me and my mom doesn’t mean that I can’t support my son.
3.4. “Thoughts on my future”

Several of the foster youth described the role that they see their natural mentor having in their lives in the future. When contemplating returning to her country of origin, one youth stated, “If I’m in [country of origin], I know I’m still going to be contacting her. If I want to come back, she will help me.” Another youth described how she thinks her natural mentor will remain a part of her life in more general terms. She related,

I see her as moral support. I think that she will always be there to give me advice on certain things that I encounter in the real world, and I think she’ll just be someone that I can go to, like now when I have a problem or something, and hopefully she’ll be able to help me.

A third foster youth described how she thinks her natural mentor will make sure that he remains a part of her future. She said, “I don’t even have to call him; I already know that he will call me just to see if I’m doing OK. He will be calling.”

3.5. “What I think about foster care”

The last theme that emerged from the foster youth’s narratives was their perspectives on foster care. Insights about their experiences in the system are a contrast to the experiences and perspectives shared about their natural mentors. When communicating these perspectives, a previously unspoken sense of hopelessness and cynicism was evident in their narratives. Their comments highlight the powerlessness that many youth in foster care experience. One youth expressed her feelings about her last foster home, in the following way,

That’s why I always knew it’s not a home. You always know that. You always have to know that. It’s like you’re a visitor. When we first got there, it was all good, like you know; she tried to make us feel a part of the family. But then a line was drawn and things changed.

When reflecting on her status in independent living and speculating about the future, this same youth stated, “It’s always going to be like I’m not going to have a stable home, you know? That’s the way it feels.” These feelings of instability and loss corroborate the experiences described in Geenen and Powers (2007). In this study, a caseworker described the multiple losses that foster youth experience before and after foster care and the subsequent ramifications,

They [foster youth] go through a constant state of loss. They lose their families first. Then they often lose one foster family after another for lots of times, things that have nothing to do with them. And they lose their friends. They lose their school. They lose their neighborhood, their sense of who they are and where they belong. And it’s just a series of losses until finally, I think a lot of kids just feel empty (p. 1094).

Racism also emerged as part of the foster care experience. One youth shared about her experience with racism in her last foster home. She described,

The worst part was then I was living with my last foster parents. There were like other kids there, and I was the only black person, and so they blamed me for everything, like stealing and stuff like that, and I got in trouble.

In reflection on the possibility that her support from the state was soon going to be terminated and on her place within the broader social service system, a third foster youth summed up her experience in foster care in this way,

You really feel like you’re just a file, you know? It’s like they do have a lot of kids to take care of and there’s other people with worse situations, that’s why I understand, I get it. But, you want more than that, you know?

The foster care narratives of these young women reflect feelings of disregard and disempowerment. They emulate feelings shared by the foster youth participants in Geenen and Powers (2007). The experience of feeling “like you’re just a file” appears to be universal. For example, a youth in the Geenen and Powers (2007) study shared, “They [caseworkers] treat you like paperwork. They don’t want no one-on-one” (p. 1093). These youth similarly expressed feelings of disempowerment. For example, when asked about the need to let youth have some say about choices that impact their lives, one youth shared,

She [my caseworker] came out of nowhere. She called me up and was like, I set you up an appointment for an independent living thing, and I was, okay, you could’ve asked me because how do you know I even wanted to attend that? I’m just sick and tired of people telling me what to do (p. 1091).

4. Discussion

This study gathered qualitative information from female youth of color with foster care experiences about their natural mentors. Natural mentoring has surfaced as one way to cultivate long-lasting, meaningful relationships for older youth at-risk.
for aging out of foster care. For example, an emerging line of thinking suggests that given their prior relationship experiences, foster youth may benefit more from natural mentor relationships than programmatic mentor relationships (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2004). Yet, little is known about these relationships, and even less is known about the processes involved that may be factors in buffering these youth from poor outcomes once they exit the system. Moreover, the human services field is slowly acknowledging that there is “no one size fits all approach” to mentoring, especially among at-risk and special populations. If the encouragement of natural mentor relationships is to meet the needs of the vulnerable population, learning from the youth who already have such relationships is imperative. This exploratory study represents a critical first step toward such an understanding.

Additionally, this study takes into account the over-representation of African American and Hispanic children and youth in the child welfare system by focusing on female youth of color. Emancipation from foster care places individuals at-risk. However, female youth of color also face the many barriers related to their sex and race encountered by their counterparts in the general population. The use of a convenience sample allowed us to focus on an under-studied subset of the foster care population.

4.1. Limitations and implications for future research

The small sample size is a limitation of the study. Experiences and perceptions revealed by the seven young women in the study should be viewed as potential topics for future, larger studies. In addition, the impact of diverse characteristics of sample members on their views of mentoring is worthy of further exploration. The age of sample members, for example, ranged from 13 to 20. Future research might explore the possibility of developmental differences in mentoring needs. In addition, given that, two of the participants were young mothers, future research might focus on the possible role of natural mentors with respect to reproduction and pregnancy issues for older youth in foster care. Although our sample was small and non-representative, making the nature of these findings preliminary and in need of replication and further exploration, our study offers new information that is consistent with and builds on previous research, and suggests several important strategies for how to better serve all foster youth.

4.2. Implications for practice

The results of this study suggest that child welfare practice with older foster youth can be enhanced vis-à-vis connecting youth to caring adults by incorporating natural mentor relationships into typical service provision processes. More specifically, among the significant themes that emerged, “relationship characteristics that matter” suggests that promoting certain qualities and characteristics in natural mentor relationships may counter some of the negative aspects of foster care discussed by the youth. For example, the many losses experienced in foster care (e.g., relationships, homes, schools, friends) can be offset by the trust, love and caring, and parent–child like relationships offered by natural mentors. Natural mentor interventions with foster youth should include supporting the natural mentors in their efforts to cultivate these specific qualities. Our results further suggest a potentially novel approach to relationship development, that is, that focusing on the relationship characteristics chronologically may be the best way to achieve the full “ladder” of them (trust, love and caring, and parent–child like relationships). Thus, natural mentors of older youth in foster care should be aware of the importance of thinking about relationship development in terms of a “ladder,” and focusing on the development of each important characteristic successively.

Social support also emerged as a way to potentially counter some of the negative aspects of foster care. The youth in this study consistently described the four types of support identified in the social support literature: emotional, informational, instrumental, and appraisal support. Provision of these types of support may likely promote the trust, love and caring, and sense of parent–child relationship that the foster youth recognized as being the salient characteristics in their natural mentor relationships. Natural mentor interventions with foster youth should include providing natural mentors with the necessary resources to be able to offer different types of support, such as training on listening skills and the best ways to guide youth toward healthy decision-making, funding to buy instrumental items that youth may need, information about how to help youth access needed resources, and skill-building around effective communication.

Although not the focus of this study, another salient theme that emerged concerned the negative aspects of foster care. The young women in this study described experiences and feelings related to being in foster care that may help explain the many negative outcomes typically found in the foster youth population. These include the lack of a stable home, stable relationships, and feelings of self worth. Understanding how youth perceive and experience foster care can be used to increase natural mentors’ awareness of what youth are dealing with vis-à-vis the foster care system, and to guide the training of natural mentors on how to also be these youth’s advocates. Moreover, given that the presence of a caring adult, such as a natural mentor, is a protective factor, incorporating such an intervention into standard child welfare practice is another way to potentially lessen some of youth’s negative experiences in foster care.

Research has established that youth aging out of the foster care system and transitioning to adulthood frequently experience a range of negative outcomes. Research has also established that a supportive relationship with a nurturing adult can mitigate the negative effects for youth living in high-risk environments (Fraser et al., 2004; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 2001). Natural mentoring, or the presence of an important adult other than a parent, someone at least 21 years-old, who is willing to listen, share his/her experiences, and guide youth through some part or area of their lives (adapted from Liang et al., 2002), represents a promising approach that may help mitigate negative outcomes as youth emancipate from foster care. This preliminary exploratory study suggests that female foster youth of color may experience a buffering effect from the presence of a natural mentor. As one
youth stated, “She holds my hand, it’s not the fact that I need somebody to hold my hand, but she’s a person that I can rely on when I’ve had a long day.”

Appendix A. Interview Schedule

Please take a moment to think about your relationship with your significant adult, including its beginning, middle, and end (if it has one).

1. With whom is the relationship?
2. How old is this adult?
3. Describe the relationship.
4. How did the relationship come to be?
5. How long has the relationship lasted?
6. Has the relationship changed over time? If yes, how?
7. How often do you have contact with this adult?
8. How far away does this adult live from you?
9. What do you do together?
10. How do you know this adult cares about you?
11. Tell me how this makes you feel.
12. What behavior does the adult exhibit that indicates he/she cares about you?
13. What kind of impact does the relationship have on you?
14. How does the relationship help you?
15. If you had to describe this relationship with one word, what would that word be?
16. Is there anything that the relationship doesn’t provide you that you wish it did? If so, what?
17. Can you tell me a little about being in foster care?
18. If you could change one thing about foster care, what would it be?
19. What are your hopes for the future?
20. Do you see this adult as part of your future? Describe.

References


