It's good to know that you got somebody that's not going anywhere: Attitudes and beliefs of older youth in foster care about child welfare-based natural mentoring ☆

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study is the first to investigate the attitudes and beliefs of older adolescents in foster care toward the implementation of a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention designed to promote enduring, growth-fostering relationships between youth at risk of emancipation and caring, supportive nonparental adults from within the youth's existing social network. Six focus groups were conducted with 17 older youth in foster care attending a specialized charter high school for young people in out-of-home care in a large, urban city in the Northeast United States. Focus group data were transcribed and analyzed using a conventional content analysis approach. The following significant themes emerged related to natural mentoring for older foster youth emancipating from care: (1) need for permanent relationships with caring adults, (2) youth conceptions of natural mentoring, (3) unique challenges related to natural mentoring for youth in foster care, (4) role of a natural mentoring intervention in child welfare, and (5) challenges for implementing a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention. Overall, our findings suggest that these young people are cautiously optimistic about the potential of a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention to promote their social and emotional wellbeing. Future studies are needed to better understand the experiences of older foster youth with an actual natural mentoring intervention, including challenges, opportunities, and outcomes.

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1. Introduction

From 2000 to 2009, the number of older youth emancipating from foster care steadily increased from 20,172 to 29,471 or by 46% (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2006; 2010). Although this number has finally begun to decline over the past several years, older youth exiting out-of-home care without legally permanent, familial connections continue to represent at least one in ten exits from foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013). These youth are at increased risk for experiencing a host of deleterious outcomes (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney & Heuring, 2005), including increased rates of homelessness (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013), unemployment and economic hardship (Dworsky, 2005; Hook & Courtney, 2011), low educational achievement (Blome, 1997; Pecora et al., 2006), criminal justice involvement (Vaughn, Shook, & McMillen, 2008), unplanned pregnancy (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010;

Matta Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013), and untreated behavioral health needs (McMillen & Raghavan, 2009).

Research suggests that the enduring presence of at least one caring, committed adult in the life of a young person may serve protectively to ameliorate many of these risks (Avery, 2010a; Greeson, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2013), and there is wide consensus that the achievement of supportive, permanent adult relationships is beneficial for healthy youth development (Aquilino, 2006; Bowers et al., 2014; Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2010). Thus, over the past two decades, there has been an increased emphasis on securing permanent relationships for youth in foster care (Samuels, 2009). For example, the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-89) and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2009 (P.L. 110-351) both legislate the establishment of timely permanence and the maintenance of supportive relationships among youth in foster care. However, researchers, practitioners, and lawmakers continue to grapple with the complexities surrounding the definition and operationalization of permanence (Avery, 2010b). Traditionally, the concept of permanence has been defined strictly in legal terms, meaning that permanence is said to occur for youth in foster care via reunification, adoption, or the transfer of legal guardianship or custody (Barth, Wulczyn, & Crea, 2004). Such a narrow definition tends to

erroneously equate the achievement of permanence with a legal status, and conversely, youth are assumed to encounter impermanence when they do not attain one of these statuses. The notion of "relational permanence" has emerged as an additional way to conceptualize meaningful permanence (Freundlich, Avery, Munson, & Gerstenzang, 2006), and studies indicate that older youth in foster care believe that the most salient aspects of permanence are relational or emotional in nature, as opposed to legal or physical (Frey, Cushing, Freundlich, & Brenner, 2008; Sanchez, 2004). Semanchin Jones and LaLiberte (2013) define relational permanence as "youth experiencing a sense of belonging through enduring, life-long connections to parents, extended family or *other caring adults*, including at least one adult who will provide a permanent, parent-like connection for that youth" (p. 509).

Natural mentoring is one mechanism through which older youth in foster care may experience relational permanence and has been shown to be associated with improved behavioral health outcomes and asset acquisition for this population (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). The term natural mentor refers to a nonparental, supportive adult whom a youth self-selects from his/her existing social network (e.g., school personnel, coaches, neighbors, religious leaders, adult relatives). Although these relationships develop organically, they may be fostered and supported programmatically by child welfare professionals (Greeson, 2013; Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase, & Ali, 2014). In fact, in the 2013 *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, Britner et al. recommend that service providers mobilize and incorporate natural mentors more systematically into services for youth in foster care (e.g., care coordination and transition planning). However, there are no known studies that have explored the attitudes and beliefs of youth in foster care toward formal child welfare-based services that support the development of natural mentoring relationships. Thus, the present study seeks to answer one primary research question: *What are the attitudes and beliefs of older youth in foster care (ages 15–21) toward the implementation of a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention as a mechanism to support relational permanency for foster youth transitioning to adulthood?*

1.1. Background and significance

Research indicates that supportive, enduring adult connections are associated with healthy human development and successful transitions for older adolescents and young adults (Aquilino, 2006; Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2007; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). Bowers et al. (2012) examined the association between positive youth outcomes and the quantity and quality of relationships with important nonparental adults (INAs) among adolescents ($n = 710$). Findings revealed that the emotional closeness of INA relationships, as well as the number of INAs, was positively associated with a greater degree of hopeful future orientation, which in turn predicted several positive youth outcomes (e.g., youth confidence, character, and caring). Another study used nationally representative data to investigate the association of supportive adult relationships and health-related outcomes among adolescents and young adults ($n = 3,187$) (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Youth who reported an important, positive relationship with a nonparental adult were more likely to have completed high school or attended college, maintained employment, and experienced heightened self-esteem, life satisfaction, and better physical health; they were less likely to participate in gangs, engage in risk-taking behaviors, and be physically aggressive.

The benefits of enduring, permanent adult relationships have been shown to include marginalized youth, including those in foster care (Cushing, Samuels, & Kerman, 2014; Noble & McGrath, 2012; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013; Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010). One study examined the relationship between natural mentoring and wellbeing outcomes among a sample of marginalized adolescents ($n = 1,173$) who were participating in an intensive residential program for youth who had dropped out or were expelled

from high school (Schwartz et al., 2013). Findings revealed that enduring natural mentoring relationships were positively associated with sustained, improved educational, vocational, and behavioral outcomes even at 38 months post-baseline. However, outcomes for youth who did not maintain a relationship with their natural mentor did not differ significantly from youth who did not have a natural mentor. Another recent study among a sample of former foster youth ($n = 160$) found that at age 22, young people with connections to their biological parents and parental figures as well as those with connections to only parental figures experienced better educational, employment, and financial outcomes than those with minimal adult connections or connections only with biological parents (Cushing et al., 2014). Conversely, young people with minimal adult connections (whether biological or nonparental) were found to be the most vulnerable group, with greater likelihood of substance abuse risk, mental health diagnoses, and arrests. Furthermore, legal permanence did not determine whether young people had connections with supportive adults. Rather, factors associated with the presence of relational permanence (e.g., enduring presence of parental figures, the sense of belonging to a family while in care) significantly distinguished young people with supportive adult connections from those without.

Several qualitative studies corroborate the findings from Cushing et al. (2014), reinforcing that young people with foster care involvement may conceptualize permanence as a relational, or emotional, construct rather than solely a legal status. For example, Freundlich et al. (2006) conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 young adults who had previously been placed in foster care. They concluded that these young people were "far less focused on the legal meaning of permanency and emphasized instead the long-term emotional and relational connections with family members and others in their lives" (p. 757). Another exploratory study reported that young adults who had aged out of foster care without a legally binding familial connection subjectively created a self-defined notion of permanence, which was "complex and fluid often transcending the boundaries of biology or law" (Samuels, 2009, p. 1233). Although most of the participants in this study suffered from absent connections with their biological family, some of them reported the presence of relational permanence via a life-long relationship with a caring, committed parental figure, sometimes called a natural mentor.

Researchers consider enduring relationships with natural mentors to be a form of relational permanence (Semanchin Jones & LaLiberte, 2013), and studies support a positive association between natural mentoring and improved wellbeing among older youth in foster care (Ahrens et al., 2008; Greeson et al., 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). For example, Ahrens et al. (2008) found that former foster youth with a natural mentor had better physical and behavioral health outcomes (e.g., less likely to have experienced suicidal ideation, to have received a sexually transmitted infection, and to have hurt someone in a fight). In another study, natural mentoring was associated with a decreased likelihood of arrest, fewer depressive symptoms, less stress, and greater life satisfaction among older youth in foster care (Munson & McMillen, 2009). Greeson et al. (2010) investigated the relationship between natural mentoring and asset-related outcomes. Young people with natural mentors whose roles were described as "like a parent," "role model," and providing "guidance/advice" were more likely to have increased asset ownership and income expectations. In two different qualitative studies utilizing one-on-one interviews with youth in foster care, the most important characteristics of natural mentoring relationships included trust, love and care, availability and support, authenticity, respect, and consistency and longevity, all of which are consistent with previous definitions of relational permanence (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010).

Although studies are accumulating that support the benefits of natural mentoring among older youth in foster care, there are no known theory-based, empirically-verified child welfare interventions that promote the identification and growth of these relationships. Furthermore, studies indicate that roughly half of all older youth in foster care report the absence of a permanent relationship with a caring, committed adult

(Ahrens et al., 2008; Greeson et al., 2010; Pecora et al., 2006), suggesting that such an intervention may play a crucial role in both the identification and fostering of these natural mentoring relationships. One interpretive research study examined the reasons why some youth in foster care experience emancipation without these critical relationships and found that youth often associate self-reliance with independence and therefore success (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). The authors linked this social construction to a broader societal context that tends to pathologize interpersonal dependence, confirming that child welfare systems must lead the charge with a reconceptualization of "independent living" to "interdependent living," prioritizing relational permanence for older youth in foster care (Avery & Freundlich, 2009).

1.2. Present study

In order to identify, nurture, and sustain natural mentoring relationships for older youth transitioning out of foster care, the PI and first author for this study developed a 12-week child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention called Caring Adults 'R' Everywhere (C.A.R.E.) ©, which is currently being tested as a randomized controlled pilot through a partnership with a large, urban public child welfare agency (Greeson, Thompson, & Kinnevy, 2014). Consistent with the suggested stages of program material development as outlined by Fraser, Richman, Galinksy, and Day (2009), a first version of the program manual has been developed, and the manual is now being revised iteratively via this pilot study. Using the manual, a MSW-level interventionist delivers all C.A.R.E. services, which consist of trauma-informed training for natural mentors, relationship support for the youth and their natural mentors, and independent living skill building for youth mentees in a relational context that more closely mirrors how youth in the general population learn these skills.

The first iteration of C.A.R.E. was developed largely out of existing theoretical frameworks (e.g., resilience perspective, relational–cultural theory, human development theory) and based on past relevant research cited above. However, implementation science researchers have proposed an "integrative approach" to evidence-based or promising practice which seeks to incorporate theory and past research with "practice wisdom" and the knowledge of the specific context and characteristics of the population receiving the intervention (Mitchell, 2011). Thus, focus groups with 20 child welfare professionals were completed to garner their feedback about C.A.R.E. (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase, & Ali, 2014), and similarly, the present study sought to elicit, understand, and contextualize the thoughts and feelings of older youth in foster care toward the implementation of C.A.R.E. Hence, this study had two primary aims. The first was to better understand the conceptions of permanent relationships and natural mentoring among older youth in foster care, including their cognitive definitions, their ideas based on personal experiences, and their beliefs about the characteristics and qualities associated with helpful natural mentors. The second aim was to obtain youth feedback directly related to the contents of the C.A.R.E. intervention, focusing on the identification of natural mentors, relationship support, and the development of independent living skills in a relational context.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample selection and description

Following approval for this study from a university Institutional Review Board, 17 participants were recruited from an urban charter high school in the Northeast United States that exclusively enrolls students who are active in the city's child welfare foster care system. A non-probability, purposive sampling procedure (Daniel, 2012) was utilized to ensure that youth participants met specific inclusion criteria that fit with the purposes of the study, namely that participants resembled youth who would be eligible to participate in the natural mentoring

intervention, C.A.R.E. Youth from the charter school were asked to participate in the study if they were ages 15–21, were residing in an out-of-home child welfare placement setting, and were considered to be at risk for aging out of foster care without a legally binding, permanent family connection.

The majority of the participants were male (53%), Black/African American (94%), and not Hispanic/Latino (88%). The average age was 18.1 years ($SD = 1.4$ years), and the majority (82%) were in the 12th grade. On average, participants had been attending their current charter school for 2.4 years ($SD = 1.3$), and the average number of high schools attended by participants in addition to their present charter school was 2.1 ($SD = 1.6$). Roughly three-quarters of the participants planned to graduate in the upcoming year. The average number of years in foster care was 7.2 ($SD = 5.2$), and nearly half (47%) of the participants reported living with either a kinship or non-relative foster parent. Other participants reported living independently, in a congregate care setting, or did not know how to categorize their living situation.

Youth participants were recruited through open and repeated school announcements. Each week on the same day, either the principal investigator or a doctoral student-level research assistant came to the school during their after-school programming and conducted a focus group with any youth who were available and willing to participate, met the eligibility requirements, and had completed the appropriate assent/consent process. Pizza and soda were provided for all participants, and they were also compensated with a $30 Visa gift card. This process went on until there were no more eligible youth willing to participate.

2.2. Data collection

We conducted a total of six focus groups with seventeen youth participants. Focus groups lasted approximately one and a half hours and took place in a private conference room with a closed door. The inclusion of approximately 20 participants from a single population is considered sufficient for garnering feedback about a single topic (Kitzinger, 1994), and the use of smaller focus groups is thought to bolster the quality of feedback obtained in each session, as participants may feel more comfortable and share more openly within a smaller setting (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

A focus group methodology was selected, because it has the potential to empower older youth in foster care to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about natural mentoring relationships within a supportive and safe context of a group of peers with similar circumstances. Researchers suggest that the use of focus groups may be more appropriate than the use of one-on-one interviews for some marginalized groups, as the group context can provide "collective power" among members who may otherwise feel isolated in the presence of a lone, potentially less connected researcher (Liamputtong, 2011). This was especially relevant for our study. We discussed the topic of relationships with older youth in foster care, which could be a sensitive area as all of the youth had experienced familial maltreatment and relationship disruption. Group interviewing provides a natural support group in which to have such sensitive conversations. Additionally, the use of focus groups allows the researcher to better understand a range of responses from a group of participants and to gain insight into their meanings and interpretations in relation to each other about a broader topic. The research questions guiding our group interviews were few and broad, as this method supported the generation of questions and conversation from the youth participants during the focus group. The focus group facilitators used a semi-structured protocol developed by the principal investigator to garner feedback from the youth participants across the following domains: (1) their conceptualization and definition of natural mentoring; (2) their personal experiences with regard to the presence of a natural mentoring relationship; (3) their thoughts and feelings toward C.A.R.E., a novel child welfare-based intervention that purposefully supports natural mentoring relationships among older youth in foster care; (4) their reactions toward the specific

components of C.A.R.E.; and (5) their feelings toward potentially receiving this natural mentoring intervention.

2.3. Data analysis

A conventional content analysis approach was used to guide the data analysis process, as the aim of this study was to inductively synthesize new information not previously discussed in the literature rather than to apply a priori codes or theories (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, each of the audio recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and then reviewed by a member of the research team who was present at the focus group to ensure accuracy. Three of the authors then used an iterative, descriptive coding process whereby concepts and themes were inductively discovered and then deductively applied using a heuristic method of discovery. The three coders, supervised by the PI and first author of the study, divided the transcripts and conducted first cycle coding whereby initial codes and sub-codes were inductively discovered and applied to chunks of data. Next, all three coders reviewed the list of codes and reduced, combined, and organized the codes into a codebook based on the larger patterns and emerging themes. We then applied second-cycle coding, whereby two coders deductively applied our codes to all of the transcripts in an effort to identify exemplary quotes and construct a more parsimonious understanding of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Differences were reconciled through discussion between the two coders to 100% agreement. We used Dedoose (2013), a web-based qualitative data management program, to facilitate this process.

3. Results

3.1. Need for permanent relationships with caring adults

Throughout the focus groups, there was wide consensus among the youth that permanent relationships with caring adults were valuable and desirable. Because the youth participants resided in out-of-home care, they had experienced relationship disruptions in the form of familial loss, particularly with regard to their families of origin. Many youth discussed the ubiquitous desire for permanent relationships with adults characterized by love, affection, and safety, themes which are corroborated in the scientific literature. One youth discussed her experience of impermanence within the context of a finalized adoption, suggesting that the presence of legal permanence does not necessarily guarantee relational permanence.

…you've got to just basically stay humble and it's so crazy because at the end of the day, us kids, like, you're in foster care, then like especially if you ain't got your parent, all you, all you want and all you, all you really desire is just love and affection. That's it at the end of the day. … before I moved in with my aunt, this lady, this lady that me and my little sister was with, right, you know, she was all good, like she was cool, all that. She like called us her kids, all that stuff, like yeah we, we good, we happy and all that. But like right after we got adopted by the lady, she, like the whole, she did a 360. She started acting like real crazy to us. Her son was like trying to fight my sister and he was like three years older than her. I had to fight this man probably almost every day, like every single day I had to fight this boy. But there was not really nothing that we could do because of the simple fact that we was already adopted by the lady. But, I mean, later on, it turned out good because we got away from them, moved in with our aunt.

Similar to the participant above, many youth talked about the benefit of having an enduring relationship with their natural mentor, intimating the importance of relational permanence. Participants voiced that the long-term nature was an important characteristic of their

natural mentoring relationship. One participant discussed that her natural mentor is always there.

I mean, when I need it, they're there. Like if I need help with homework or I don't understand something or even if I'm having problems on the street, she always going to be there.

Another participant chimed in as well:

It's good to know that you got somebody that's not going anywhere, no matter what you do. They could be disappointed in you, but—They'll never go anywhere, so it makes you appreciate them.

3.2. Youth conceptions of natural mentoring

Youth participants were asked to discuss the concept of natural mentoring, including their ideas related to the qualities a natural mentor should possess and the relational characteristics necessary for a positive and helpful natural mentoring relationship. In other words, we were interested in understanding youth participants' beliefs regarding the most salient aspects of successful natural mentoring relationships. According to the youth, natural mentors should be like a family member, honest/trustworthy, able to serve as a role model, and the relationship should be mutually meaningful. Some of their conceptualizations were based on the ideal natural mentor, while others were based on relationships with existing natural mentors or important people in their lives.

3.2.1. Like a family member

A number of youth discussed the importance of a natural mentor being "like a family member." This is interesting given the fact that most youth had limited exposure to their birth families (or any family for that matter among those with extended stays in congregate care settings), yet these youth still felt that a natural mentor should be like a family member. Their comments indicate the presence of family-like relationships outside of the context of traditional, legal permanencies. For instance, one youth noted:

Me and my person we joke, we play, we go out. I mean, not all the time 'cause she does have to work, but we go out. We do things as a family 'cause that's what we are, a family.

Revealing a story about meeting her natural mentor, a caseworker, in a congregate care setting at the age of 14, one youth describes the moment in which she started to call her "mom."

I didn't really trust people when I was in placement. Like I was 14 at the time so I was just like everybody out to get me. But people, like people would try to talk to me and I'd just be like I could just get a vibe like no, they're not going to be here long-term. I get attached easily. So I didn't want to get attached knowing I was leaving. But when I met her, I was actually in a crisis at the time. I was getting restrained I remember and she came over and she was talking to me. I don't know why, I just calmed down, just like yeah, she's going to be the one I talk to all the time. And from then I started calling her my mom. So from that day forward once I started calling her my mom, she started acting like as if I was her daughter.

For some youth, their conceptualization of a natural mentor's qualities was based on their exposure to extended family members, many of whom served as natural mentors among the youth in our sample. For example, in response to being asked if she had a natural mentor, one youth replied:

Yeah, my aunt because, you know, like my mom, she had passed when I was like, like 12–13 so, she served as a real strong, I mean,

she been doing it for the longest, but she just really picked it up after my mom passed, so my aunt.

3.2.2. Trustworthy

Trustworthiness was another quality of a natural mentor that was repeatedly discussed throughout the focus groups. Many youth noted that loved ones, such as parents or role models, had broken their trust. As such, honesty was a quality that youth valued in a natural mentor, and the restoration of trust within adult relationships was considered to be crucial. Reflecting back on a natural mentoring relationship, one youth discussed the development of trust with a neighbor over time.

He was my neighbor. His name was Mr. B. He was a pastor at a church and like he was kind of like my mentor too.... Like I remember one summer I couldn't have a summer job because I was dealing with the court and all that, so like he just brought me to his church, you know. He gave me like little jobs to do around his church. You know, like he'll pay me and then, or like if he'll go away, he'll leave me, like he'll leave me with his dog, you know, to help feed his dog and feed his plants. And like, then like he used to take me out to games, to Sixers' games and all that. Then like we'd talk about my situations. Like we wouldn't really talk, like talk around people like, like that was around us like, like people, like members of his church because like he was the only one who knew about my situation. He didn't want everybody to be, their business.

The activities identified by this youth potentially facilitated the development of the trust that many of the youth desired. Interestingly, the activities occurred in the youth's community, a shared space that was familiar to him. Trust, in this relationship, was earned over time. He confided in the pastor because he did not disclose to others about his "business" so the youth developed trust and eventually discussed sensitive topics with him.

Conversely, some youth talked about the challenge of bringing trust into new relationships with unfamiliar adults, where trust had not yet been established. For example, one youth shared:

Like how would I feel if a grown man that I never met, a new worker, any of that, like 'Yeah, you can trust me. Just tell me this, tell me that.' I'm going to look at you like you're crazy. I can't trust you. Don't even act like you my friend because I don't know you.

3.2.3. Role models through providing guidance and support

Many of the youth in foster care lack role models or someone who provides them guidance. As such, many felt that natural mentors could serve as role models, potentially providing them with guidance. Specifically, one youth noted:

That's someone they should look up to [a natural mentor], they could look up to, a role model or something, especially people, especially I guess like boys, you know, their father and they're like, you know, mentors.

Some youth felt that this support and guidance could be achieved through a natural mentor leading the youth "down the right path" and telling them right from wrong. Specifically one youth noted:

I think for youth in care especially [natural mentoring] is needed. I think it's a good idea because it's like you, like we honestly need somebody there for us, like they say like leading us down the right path and actually being there for us.

Interestingly, another youth discussed that while it was important for a natural mentor to help youth answer questions and provide them with guidance, it was also important to let youth answer their own questions. Thus, while the natural mentor is providing support, they are simultaneously instilling autonomy and trust so that the youth can make their own decisions.

Natural mentor with me is a person who is there to help you answer your own questions. But at the same time he is not answering, he is making sure that you answer your question but at the same time he is not answering, he may be sure that you answer your own question.

3.2.4. Mutually meaningful

Reflecting on her relationship with a caseworker, one participant noted that it was important to develop a connection with a natural mentor that was based on trust, but also a relationship that was mutually meaningful.

Miss J, she works here. I feel like she a mentor with me because like I go through a lot of stuff and a lot of people that I came across I feel like they don't really open up like Miss J. And she told me stuff like about her life that she didn't have to tell me but I felt like it's hard for me to trust a lot of people so for her to open up with me, that means she cares because if she can tell me the stuff that she told me, then I know that she really cares about me and wants me to know and be comfortable with her because she was comfortable enough to tell me that. … I feel like Miss J's like the mom I never had because she's there for me like a mom should be.

Another participant reflected on his current mentor-like relationship as well. He told us that his aunt took it upon herself to care for him after her own son had died. In discussing their relationship, he notes that while the Aunt does everything for him, she also considers him to be a son, holding him to high standards. As such, the relationship is mutually meaningful, and not just one-sided.

My aunt, because like whenever I don't got something, I know she always got it for me. Whenever I need somebody to talk to, she there, because that was what my mom did, like I could tell my mom anything. And my aunt, she's just basically now looking at me like not just as a nephew but as her son too because she just lost hers. She just lost her son so she also looks at me as her son and she'll tell me all the time like 'You know, you're the man of the house now.' So she hold me to a high standard.

3.3. Unique challenges related to natural mentoring for youth in foster care

Although the majority of youth in our focus groups discussed the benefit of natural mentoring relationships in their lives, some youth discussed its challenges as well. The concept of natural mentoring relies on the existence of supportive relationships within a youth's social network, but for some youth in foster care, these sorts of relationships are sparse. Given their history in foster care and a socially constructed depiction of being "deviant," some youth felt insecure about others' perceptions of them. As such, one youth noted that she preferred a mentor that she did not know, because she felt this person would not pre-judge her as others from her social network might. In response to probing regarding the benefit of a mentoring relationship with an unfamiliar adult, she responded:

Because they get to start from scratch. They have not already heard stuff about you from other people so they can't pre-judge you, just some, you could tell them how you really feel and, you know, it's always two sides to a story so they could get your side and you want them to be on your side anyway so they can kind of give you feedback on you.

Other youth had not yet found a helpful relationship with a caring adult, though they spoke of the desire and longing for the presence of such a relationship. Discussing the absence of fathers while growing up in foster care, one youth noted the challenges and the significance of such voids.

A lot of us, we grew up without our fathers, you know, so it's like we're searching for, we're searching for manhood almost our whole lives but nobody gonna ever fill that void that your father burnt. So it was always like we're trying to get it on our own, that's why I feel as though like we're losing the identity, like what it really is to be a man … I mean, I lost my dad when I was young so I'm still searching for somebody that could be there for me, you know, so, I mean, I, it's not really too much to say because I'm still searching and ain't nobody there and I'm just lost a little bit. I'm still looking.

3.4. Role of a natural mentoring intervention

The challenges above speak to the vital role a natural mentoring intervention could play in the lives of youth in foster care. Although the notion of natural mentoring implies the existence of organically formed relationships, such relationships may not be readily recognizable to youth in care or may require some amount of support in terms of mending and healing. Youth provided feedback regarding the role of a natural mentoring intervention for youth in foster care: the identification and engagement of natural mentors, relationship support for the dyads, and independent living skill building for the youth in a relational context.

3.4.1. Identifying natural mentors

Youth discussed multiple methods to identify natural mentors for youth in care, including case file reviews, a traditional method often used to identify youth's important connections. Almost all participants indicated that engaging in conversation with youth about the identification of a natural mentor was preferable as opposed to reviewing a case file for potential connections. Involving the youth in the discovery process places the youth as the leader and expert of his/her life. Conversely, solitarily reviewing the details of the youth's case file could be perceived as an invasion of privacy and a threat to the building of trust. In discussing the option of talking to youth versus reviewing the case file for potential adult connections, one youth responded:

Going through my personal life- I mean, me personally, I got nothing to hide, but- I got nothing to hide, but next person might. He might not want to see you going through his life. And then, time like time change because like, alright, that teacher was probably cool back then, but now you might not know, so I think the first one [talking to the youth]. Yeah. I think the first one because, I mean, they, if they was really important to us, we would remember. Yeah. When somebody's important to you, you gonna remember them no matter what.

Other youth were concerned about case file reviews, feeling that they might be judged according to misinformation in the case file. Some youth reported that case managers sometimes inaccurately represent them in their case notes. In response to an inquiry about using case file reviews to identify potential natural mentors, one youth stated:

Anybody could say anything, anybody could write anything down. Until I speak of it or say something, then you could probably believe it. It could be on file that everything's pretty good, but in the person's head, you don't know how they feel. You might say that this person, him and her were good to work together for this amount of time, but she might be thinking oh he like, I really don't want to, no.

Interestingly, one youth felt that it was important for the case manager to initially refrain from discussion and to just observe the youth before broaching the subject of relationships with caring adults, again emphasizing the sensitive nature of this process and the need for first establishing trust with the youth. This participant shared:

You got to really get to know that person, you got to really like put everything aside, not worry about no paperwork or nothing like that and just try to get to know them even if you just sit and observe them for a couple days and then slowly, slowly find something that they might have in common with you and start a conversation from that and then move on slowly from that.

3.4.2. Relationship support and development

The primary goal of C.A.R.E., the natural mentoring intervention, is to support and promote the growth of natural mentoring relationships for youth in foster care. Each youth/natural mentor dyad has weekly sessions with the C.A.R.E. interventionist, engages in a variety of large group activities, and has regular, informal "match time" each week in the community. We asked the youth to provide feedback about these activities. Some youth discussed the benefits of having one-on-one weekly check-in times with a third-party interventionist, who would be available to more objectively navigate any conflicts that the youth and their natural mentor may be experiencing. This participant related such meetings to past therapy sessions:

But thinking back, therapy helped me a lot, like having somebody, like she's not around all the time but having, like just talking to her and telling her what was wrong. I see her once a week. What I tell her that week, she'll like talk to me about it and I'm like you weren't there so maybe what you're saying is right. Like yeah, maybe I was wrong for yelling and maybe I was wrong for breaking something like that.

In conceptualizing separate support groups for the youth and their natural mentors, one youth suggested the following opportunities for peer support:

They could offer each other different ways on how to be better mentors or, you know, the kids can, they could open up doors, like make a kid want to open up to their mentor more because maybe they're seeing that the other kid is changing or becoming a better person from actually taking heed to what their mentor said.

Youth also discussed ideas for community-based bonding activities between the youth and their natural mentors, emphasizing the value of quality time over the money spent, using these activities to further the relationship.

P1: It don't have to be expensive. It don't have to—
P2: That's right.
P1: It don't even have to involve money. Take them out. Take them around a park. Walk with them. Talk with them. You could even stay in the house and joke around and play.
P2: I think board games like bring people closer together, like games where you've got to like be like in each other's like, not space but like—
P1: Yeah.

3.4.3. Independent living skill building

Unlike traditional classroom-based independent living courses for older youth in foster care, C.A.R.E. seeks to help youth develop these skills within the context of the natural mentoring relationship, more closely mirroring how youth from the general population learn such skills. We were particularly interested in speaking with youth who had been taught independent living skills via the traditional

instructional model, and wanted to gauge their opinions about the feasibility of learning these skills within a relational context. By and large, the youth were very supportive of relationship-based independent living skill building. For example, the following interaction between the facilitator and two youth participants exemplifies similar conversations across focus groups. Youth in this particular focus group emphasized the normative and trust-building nature of learning independent living skills in relationship.

> P1: 'Cause it's like, it's like not saying normal kids 'cause we are normal, but just like the kids with their families. They got to teach them.
> P2: They're supposed to teach you though. I mean, yes, it's cool to go to a class and you learn with other kids, but it's, it's—
> P1: It's a bonding like.
> P2: Yeah, it's like a bonding experience for you to learn with you—
> L1: For the kids.
> P2: Yeah, for the kids when you learn with your mentor.
> P1: It's a bonding.

Similarly, another youth discussed the advantages of learning hands-on independent living skills in the community:

> The hands-on is way better, I think better because you could sit in a classroom and somebody could tell you something repeatedly over and over again and you never could hear it. But that way it's going to be easier because you're going to actually be able to go out into the community and do it. You're not going to be stuck, like I had to read about it. You know how to do it like the back of your hand, the hands-on part is, is better.

It was difficult for some youth to conceive of community-based independent living skills building outside of the traditional model, suggesting that such an approach may be counter-cultural to some youth in care. This is particularly salient for those who have not lived in family-type settings. One youth had grown up in a number of residential treatment facilities and group home settings, and he felt that it was more important to discuss and talk about independent living skills rather than engage in activities in the community.

> Y'all need to sit down and talk about it. It's not always going out places and doing activities, because–after the kid's graduated, the youth graduated the [natural mentoring] program, they might be coming back into the same situation because they didn't really talk about it, just went to do stuff. … I think y'all need to do more talking and more sitting down and what's that, problem solving.

3.5. Challenges for implementing a natural mentor intervention

Although many youth provided positive feedback about the child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention, some mentioned challenges as well, namely the issue of securing youth buy-in, particularly among youth for who trust may be difficult to gain. Youth reflected that it may be difficult to encourage participants to open up, both with the interventionist running the program and with the natural mentors. Specifically, one participant suggested that some youth in foster care either do not know how to express their feelings or do not feel comfortable talking about feelings, which could be a barrier to cultivating a relationship with a natural mentor.

> So it's hard for a lot of people to talk and it's hard to talk sometimes because you don't know how to express it and that's why it might be scary. Some people don't know how they feel. They might ask somebody how do you feel? You know, you might feel happy but, okay, what you mean, like they don't know what or how.

Similarly, one participant voiced concern over youth being distant in relationships, suggesting that for some youth, relationship development just takes time.

> You have your kids that do want to get close, I think that's a good idea, like do the mentor, like things with your mentor, but for the kid that don't like being close, it's going to take time, so they're going to be distant. They're going to not want to be close. Like they're, you may have like a one-on-one with your mentor but they may not talk.

Another participant voiced her concern about youth genuinely opening up to natural mentors, rather than just voicing the words that adults want to hear.

> I think everything else will be fine like trying to get them to participate and listen shouldn't be difficult, but trying to get them to really open up about how they really feel about foster care, 'cause I know when my foster parent asked me 'So how do you feel about me,' I'm not going to say anything that's going to hurt your feelings 'cause you're not going to send me back. I'm going to say everything you want to hear.

3.6. Summary

In exploring the need for and feasibility of implementing a natural mentoring intervention within a child welfare context, older adolescent foster youth shared their feelings and thoughts about their desire for relational permanence, their experiences and ideas about enduring connections with caring, supportive adults, and their reactions to an intervention that could facilitate and support these relationships. Their shared desire for permanent relationships with caring adults emerged as a common theme across focus groups, and youth likened these relationships to those of a family member, emphasizing the need for established trust, which takes time and concerted effort, particularly among youth who have experienced past relational disruptions. Youth often looked to their natural mentors to provide guidance and support, though they valued mutually meaningful relationships, meaning that they too wanted to play a vital role in the lives of their natural mentors. Although youth consistently told us that they wanted to have supportive adult relationships, some youth discussed the challenges that they or their peers encounter with regard to establishing these relationships, including fractured or limited social networks.

Youth believed that a natural mentoring intervention, if implemented correctly, could address some of their relational needs. They suggested that carefully approaching youth to discuss potential adult relationships would be preferable over traditional case file reviews. Youth also discussed the third-party support that an interventionist may be able to offer the dyads, and they conceptualized the benefits of peer support in helping other foster youth open up to their natural mentors. The majority of the youth also recognized the benefit of gaining independent living skills within a relational context as opposed to a classroom setting, though at least one youth did not, suggesting that such a practice could be a cultural shift for some. In discussing the challenges of implementing a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention, youth primarily discussed the difficulty of engaging in trusting relationships and opening up to adults.

4. Discussion

This study is the first to explore the attitudes and beliefs of older youth in foster care about child welfare-based natural mentoring. As such, it both corroborates previous research on how these marginalized young people perceive supportive relationships with caring adults, and adds to the knowledge base about the potential for natural mentoring to be purposefully utilized within child welfare as a social intervention for promoting relational permanence and wellbeing for youth in foster care. Although new research suggests that child welfare professionals support the notion of a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention for older youth at risk of aging out of foster care (Greeson,

Thompson, Evans-Chase, & Ali, 2014; Greeson, Thompson, & Kinnevy, 2014), this study importantly adds the youth perspective and voice to that discussion. Five significant themes emerged related to child welfare-based natural mentoring for older foster youth emancipating from care: (1) need for permanent relationships with caring adults, (2) youth conceptions of natural mentoring, (3) unique challenges related to natural mentoring for youth in foster care, (4) role of a natural mentoring intervention in child welfare, and (5) challenges for implementing a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention.

Findings related to the first two themes corroborate previous research in this area. Prior work of Munson and McMillen (2009), Greeson et al. (2010), Greeson and Bowen (2008), and Munson et al. (2010) has demonstrated that young people at risk of aging out of foster care both conceptualize a need for permanent relationships with caring adults and can articulate the characteristics of these adults and relationships that they find or would find most helpful. Likewise, the youth in our study described a desire for relational permanence with a significant adult and the characteristics that such an adult ideally has or would have, including being trustworthy, being like a family member, and serving as a role model. As one young woman noted, "if I need help with homework or I don't understand something or even if I'm having problems on the street, she always going to be there."

Findings related to the last three themes expand our knowledge pertaining to the potential of the child welfare system to mobilize and incorporate natural mentors systematically into services for youth in foster care. Our participants provided valuable feedback related to the unique challenges related to natural mentoring for youth in foster care, the potential role of a natural mentoring intervention in their preparation for adulthood, and their perceived challenges related to implementing a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention. One of the most salient findings emerged from the comments of multiple youth, that the concept of natural mentoring for foster youth presupposes the existence of supportive relationships within a youth's social network, yet for some youth in foster care, these sorts of relationships may be sparse. As such, any intervention which seeks to heed the call of Britner, Randall, and Ahrens (2013), to mobilize and incorporate natural mentors more systemically into services for youth in foster care, must be ready to address the concern expressed by one young man who stated, "I lost my dad when I was young so I'm still searching for somebody that could be there for me…and ain't nobody there and I'm just lost a little bit. I'm still looking." What remains uncertain is whether young people in foster care do not possess potentially supportive adult relationships or whether they have not yet been sufficiently supported to capitalize on these relationships. Although there are no known studies examining the efficacy of a natural mentoring intervention among youth in foster care, Schwartz et al. (2013) evaluated the impact of programmatically supported natural mentoring relationships among a sample of marginalized youth who had dropped out or had been expelled from high school. Both this study, as well as an in-depth qualitative study with a subsample of youth from the parent study (Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2013), revealed that with programmatic or adult support and guidance, youth were successfully able to identify potential adult connections, and these adults were willing to participate in a program to enhance their naturally occurring mentoring relationships. Further research is needed to assess whether this finding holds true for youth in foster care.

Our participants also provided constructive advice pertaining to the role of a natural mentoring intervention in child welfare. They had unanimous strong feelings about how foster youth's case files should and should not be used to facilitate the identification of potential natural mentors. The overwhelming sentiment was that the youth's permission should be sought first, and only after the individual (like the C.A.R.E. interventionist) has taken the time to get to know them. The majority of our participants felt strongly that the information in their case file could likely be outdated and misleading, and that they know more than the documentation about themselves. As one youth

noted, "Anybody could say anything, anybody could write anything down."

Regarding the specific components of the C.A.R.E. intervention, participants had useful insights about many of the different elements. For example, one of the elements is separate support groups for the youth in care and their natural mentors. One youth suggested that these could provide important opportunities for valuable peer support that in turn could help the youth/natural mentor dyads grow themselves. This youth stated,

> They could offer each other different ways on how to be better mentors or, you know, the kids can, they could open up doors, like make a kid want to open up to their mentor more.

The participants also expressed important views about the concept of learning independent living skills within the context of a relationship. Just as youth in the general population learn these skills organically within the context of relationships with parents/caregivers when they naturally emerge as needed, the C.A.R.E. intervention provides a framework for the youth/natural mentor dyads to identify one or two independent living skills that the youth desires to learn and then work toward mastery as part of the natural mentoring relationship. This approach is in stark contrast to how the participants in this study have acquired or have tried to acquire these skills, which is through the traditional classroom-based approach. In its place, C.A.R.E. uses the natural mentoring relationship as the mechanism for teaching independent living skills, just as youth in the general population learn how to open a bank account, fix meals, ask for help, apply for a job, fill out a rental application, etc. from their parents/caregivers. Developmentally, an approach to teaching independent living skills that capitalizes on the emotional connection between the foster youth and his/her natural mentor is a better fit with how youth naturally learn such skills. As one of our participants stated,

> The hands-on is way better, better because you could sit in a classroom and somebody could tell you something repeatedly over and over again and you never could hear it. But that way it's going to be easier because you're going to actually be able to go out into the community and do it.

The youth were also very forthright with their concerns related to potential challenges for implementing a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention. Their concerns coalesced around securing youth buy-in about such an intervention, particularly among youth for whom trust may be difficult to gain, and how to handle youth who are generally distant in relationships. We were cautioned that it could be challenging to get C.A.R.E. participants to open up enough to talk about relationships, particularly given their history of losses, with either the interventionist running the program or their natural mentors. Similarly, we were also cautioned about the potential for foster youth to either not know how to express their feelings or not feeling comfortable doing so, which could then be a barrier to cultivating a relationship with a natural mentor. Therefore, an intervention such as C.A.R.E. must be ready to address the concerns expressed by one of our participants,

> You have your kids that do want to get close… but for the kid that don't like being close, it's going to take time, so they're going to be distant. They're going to not want to be close. Like they're, you may have like a one-on-one with your mentor but they may not talk.

4.1. Limitations

Although this study provides an important and unique step toward the implementation of a natural mentoring program within a child welfare context, there are several limitations. Because this was an exploratory study, a non-probability sampling procedure was utilized.

Such a procedure is non-representative and may limit the generalizability of the findings. As with any qualitative study, the data analysis, interpretation, and conclusions of the authors are subjective, and in order to improve the trustworthiness of the findings, multiple coders, supervised by the PI and first author of this study, engaged in the data analysis process. Additionally, the youth who participated in these focus groups were asked to reflect on the intervention were they to participate. Further studies are needed following the implementation of the intervention to garner feedback from youth who actually participated.

There are also inherent limitations to the focus group methodology, even though it was selected to promote a safe and supportive context for sharing. Namely, the amount and depth of the information obtained from each individual may be limited as participants are allotted less time within focus group settings as compared to in-depth, one-on-one interviews. In order to address this drawback, we employed the use of smaller focus groups, and the facilitators systemically engaged each of the focus group participants for all questions. Because the PI was the developer of the intervention, participants may have felt pressure to respond positively to focus group questions and prompts. However, it is unlikely that this occurred, as the youth openly and freely provided both support and criticism related to the intervention. Additionally, groups have norms, and within group settings, there may be opinions or ideas which participants do not feel comfortable openly sharing around their peers. Thus, participants' opinions, as well as the direction of the interview, may be influenced by other focus group members' responses (Smithson, 2000). However, we considered the benefit of creating a supportive context in which to discuss personal relationships with marginalized youth to outweigh this potential limitation.

5. Conclusion

As studies continue to emerge that endorse the value of natural mentoring relationships for marginalized youth, including those at risk of aging out foster care, a logical question that follows is: How can we better capitalize on these protective relationships and leverage their innate ability to buffer youth from the negative outcomes that typically follow emancipation from foster care? One answer is provided by Britner et al. (2013) who call for embedding natural mentoring into services for youth in foster care. As such, the child welfare system becomes tasked with determining how to incorporate natural mentoring into its service provision for older youth in foster care. Previous research suggests child welfare professionals are supportive of the concept of natural mentoring, having it embedded in the child welfare system, and see the value of such an intervention for this marginalized group of young people (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase, & Ali, 2014; Greeson, Thompson, & Kinnevy, 2014). Given the movement toward systematically incorporating foster youth into the decision-making that impacts their futures, the present study sought to elicit the attitudes and beliefs of this group of young people about incorporating natural mentoring into the child welfare system. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate these youth's attitudes and beliefs about such an intervention and its role in their lives. Overall, our findings suggest that these young people are cautiously optimistic about the potential of such an intervention to promote their social and emotional wellbeing. As one young person commented,

> …you've got to just basically stay humble and it's so crazy because at the end of the day, us kids, like, you're in foster care, then like especially if you ain't got your parent, all you, all you want and all you, all you really desire is just love and affection. That's it at the end of the day.

Future studies are needed to build upon these initial findings in order to better understand the experiences of older foster youth with an actual natural mentoring intervention, including challenges, opportunities, and outcomes. Such studies will enable us to further refine our understanding of how natural mentoring both protects against negative outcomes and promotes positive ones during the transition to adulthood for youth who age out of foster care.

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