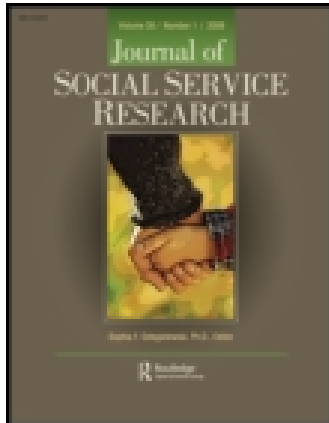


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Child Welfare Professionals' Attitudes and Beliefs About Child Welfare-Based Natural Mentoring for Older Youth in Foster Care

Johanna K. P. Greeson
Allison E. Thompson
Michelle Evans-Chase
Samira Ali

ABSTRACT. This qualitative study is the first to explore child welfare professionals' attitudes and beliefs about implementing natural mentoring as a promising way to smooth the road to independence for older foster youth. The term "natural mentor" refers to a nonparental, caring adult whom a youth identifies in his/her existing social network (e.g., teachers, coaches, adult relatives). Five focus groups were conducted with 20 child welfare professionals from a Department of Human Services (DHS) located in a large urban city in the Northeastern United States. This study used the exploration, preparation, implementation, and sustainment (EPIS) framework to explicate the organizational challenges and opportunities related to the implementation of a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention. The following significant themes emerged related to natural mentoring for older foster youth emancipating from care: a) the strengths and gaps of DHS service, b) the importance of youth perspective, c) the appropriate vetting of supportive adults as natural mentors, d) the benefits of natural mentoring, and e) the relevance of DHS's climate and culture for implementation. Future studies are needed to build upon these initial findings to better understand the organizational contexts in which natural mentoring can be implemented for older foster youth preparing for emancipation.

KEYWORDS. Natural mentoring, child welfare practice, older foster youth, aging out, organizational culture and climate

INTRODUCTION

An emerging evidence base grounded in the frameworks of positive youth development

and resiliency suggests that a caring relationship with an adult who is not a parent can facilitate a young person's growth and development (Bowers et al., 2012; Brion-Meisels &

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Jones, 2012; Spencer, 2011; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). Among normative youth, these relationships function promotively by interrupting a trajectory from risk to pathology and helping youth overcome adversity (Zimmerman et al., 2013). However, among youth who are vulnerable, these relationships function protectively by moderating the effects of risks (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Youth who are vulnerable, such as foster youth, grow up amid the challenges of severe and ongoing adversity in their families and communities. In fact, the most statistically at-risk youth in the United States today are foster youth who have aged out of the child welfare system (Muller-Ravett & Jacobs, 2012). During Fiscal Year 2012, almost 24,000 youth nationwide emancipated/aged out from foster care, representing 10% of all children/youth who exited foster care that year (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2013). A grim picture emerges for many of these youth due to both inadequate independent living skills and the lack of connection to a caring adult upon exiting foster care. As a result, poor outcomes often follow, including mental health problems, delinquency and violence, unplanned parenthood, unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, and criminal justice involvement (Courtney et al., 2011; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Scannapieco, Connell-Carrick, & Painter, 2007).

One promising mechanism for cultivating caring relationships between foster youth and nonparental adults is natural mentoring (Britner, Randall, & Ahrens, 2013; Greeson, 2013). The term "natural mentor" refers to a nonparental, caring adult whom a youth identifies in his/her existing social network, such as teachers, coaches, pastors, social workers, or adult relatives. There are several differences between natural mentors and formal/programmatic mentors. One of the primary differences concerns how the "match" between the youth and a natural mentor comes to be. With formal/programmatic mentors, an external entity, like Big Brothers Big Sisters, makes the match between the youth and adult mentor; they are assigned

to each other. However, with natural mentoring, because the two individuals find each other and the relationship proceeds fluidly during often a long period of time, the bonds between youth and natural mentors are frequently stronger. The definition of natural mentoring rightly suggests that such relationships evolve in an organic way. Even so, their growth and development can potentially be facilitated and nurtured by the child welfare system, which is charged with protecting foster youth, ensuring their safety, and promoting their well-being. Indeed, studies have shown that positive well-being outcomes, such as improved behavioral health and asset acquisition, are significantly associated with the presence of a natural mentoring relationship in the older foster youth population (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Greeson, Usher, Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009). However, roughly half of all older foster youth report not having a natural mentor (Pecora et al., 2006). Furthermore, evidence-based interventions that support youth in foster care with the identification and navigation of natural mentoring relationships have not yet been developed.

The present qualitative study uses the exploration, preparation, implementation, and sustainment (EPIS) implementation framework developed specifically for public mental health and social service settings (Novins, Green, Legha, & Aarons, 2013) to elucidate how child welfare professionals view both themselves and the organizational system of which they are a part in terms of supporting development of natural mentoring relationships between foster youth and caring adults. Little is known about attitudes that facilitate or impede the use of natural mentoring in child welfare agencies, and yet, child welfare professionals play a crucial role in the selection of informal and formal supports for youth in foster care. They are often referred to as "gatekeepers" with respect to controlling access to services for children/youth in their care. Moreover, as research continues to build that endorses the role of caring adults in the lives of vulnerable youth, particularly those who emancipate from foster care, it is critical that we better understand how the

child welfare organization can facilitate (or hinder) the development of these significant relationships. Gaining this understanding is particularly important in light of evidence both within and outside of human services that suggests that organizational culture and climate are especially significant factors in determining the fruitful acceptance of new “technology” (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). Furthermore, Avery and Freundlich (2009) argue for a reconceptualization of “independent living” as “interdependent living” and advise that policymakers mandate a permanent, committed adult be identified for each youth prior to emancipation. As such, with the potential of such policy on the horizon, child welfare organizations need to understand their role in the process of connecting older foster youth (17–21 years old) to caring adults.

Conceptual Framework

The literature that informs this investigation comes from the study of organizations and their culture and climate, as well as the dissemination of evidence-based practice within child welfare agencies and other child-serving settings. Although natural mentoring for foster youth is not yet considered an “evidence-based practice,” it can be conceptualized as a “promising practice,” bearing in mind the accumulating positive research about these relationships. As such, the EPIS implementation framework (Novins et al., 2013) is used to elucidate potential factors for consideration when attempting to employ a natural mentoring intervention in a child welfare organization. EPIS is helpful for discerning how professionals understand barriers and supports related to organizational culture and climate and the adoption and implementation of new technologies, like natural mentoring.

The EPIS model divides each phase of implementation into outer and inner organizational contexts. Each context contains certain factors that are hypothesized to affect evidence-based practice implementation in child and adolescent mental health. Considering our focus on how child welfare professionals view

both themselves and the organizational system of which they are a part with respect to supporting development of natural mentoring relationships, we next review inner-context factors by phase and how they may potentially impact successful adoption and implementation of innovative interventions, like natural mentoring.

Exploration

Novins et al. (2013) describe the exploration phase as involving “awareness of a clinical or service issue and developing processes to identify an improved approach to address that issue” (p. 1010). Part of this phase takes into account evidence-based practice fit with client characteristics. Several studies suggest that practitioner views about client qualities have a strong impact on their attitudes toward and use of evidence-based practices (Mitchell, 2011). Aarons and Palinkas (2007) found that in a study of service provider perspectives on implementation of evidence-based practice in child welfare, some workers believed that such approaches had limited appropriateness for families with complex needs and that they needed to address other pressing issues with the family before they could utilize an evidence-based approach. Similarly, in a study of a manualized adolescent substance abuse treatment, therapists reported needing to be flexible in their use of the protocol with families experiencing more than average chaos and in their use of psychopathology and conflict that were not covered in the manual (Godley, White, Diamond, Passetti, & Titus, 2001).

The exploration phase also involves taking into account individual adopter characteristics (Novins et al., 2013)—for example, persistent championship of the innovation by one or more agency staff (Backer, Liberman, & Kuehnel, 1986). Both the teaching family group home treatment model (TFM) and behavioral analysis and modification in community mental health are examples of psychosocial interventions with persistent championship by one or more agency staff. Regarding the former, development of professional teaching-parents facilitated dissemination of the model, as couples

choosing this path were able to informally recruit and share their experiences throughout their communities as advocates of the model. Similarly, in the latter, a key element in implementing behavioral analysis and modification at community mental health centers was the selection of a coordinator in each whose job included being a champion of the new methods (Backer et al., 1986).

Resource availability is also part of the exploration phase, which includes workforce development strategies, adequate incentives, material resources, administrative support, and changes in organizational procedures and structures (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009). Mitchell (2011) refers to the strengthening and shoring up of these resources as capacity building. Using a single exploratory case-study design to examine staff perception of the implementation of multiple evidence-based practices in a pediatric behavioral health care organization, Kimber, Barwick, and Fearing (2012) found great appreciation for release time from main responsibilities provided to those participating in implementing the evidence-based practice. Further, they also discovered that the success of the innovation would have been greatly impeded had management pushed staff to participate outside of their regular work hours. Similarly, in a study of the impact of public- versus private-sector organization type on organizational support, provider attitudes, and adoption of evidence-based practice, Aarons, Sommerfield, and Walrath-Greene (2009) found that perceptions of resource availability (e.g., staffing resources, staff development and support, funding availability) were rated among the most important factors affecting evidence-based practice implementation.

Preparation

Novins et al. (2013) describe the preparation phase as involving “planning and decision-making regarding adoption and implementation of an innovation and addressing system, organizational, and individual readiness for change” (p. 1017). Part of this phase involves taking into account characteristics of the client

population and resource availability, both of which we already addressed in the exploration phase. Preparation also includes taking into account organizational factors—for example, organizational support, culture, and climate.

Organizational support for innovation is frequently identified as a main factor that promotes (or encumbers) ultimate utilization of evidence-based practices (Backer et al., 1986). Backer et al. (1986) sought to describe three examples of successful dissemination of innovative, evidence-based psychosocial interventions, including behavioral analysis and modification in community mental health, the TFM, and Fairweather Hospital-Community Treatment Program. The researchers found that organizational support for innovation was critical for success in all three case examples, consistent with the importance of promotion from the top found in studies of organizational change. Aarons and Palinkas (2007) also found that multilevel organizational support for implementation and its impact on caseworker perceptions was important for implementation. Similarly, in their study of the extent to which child welfare agencies adopt new practices, Horwitz and colleagues (2014) conducted interviews with the directors of 92 public child welfare agencies that constituted the probability sample for the first National Study of Child and Adolescent Well-Being. Results showed that internal support for innovation was among the most robust predictors of program success.

Aarons and Sawitzky (2006) examined the association of organizational culture and climate with attitudes toward adoption of evidence-based practice in a sample of 301 public-sector mental health service providers from 49 programs providing services for youth and families. Culture was defined as implicit norms, values, shared behavioral expectations, and assumptions that guide behaviors; climate is defined as employees’ perceptions and affective responses to their work environment (Aarons, 2005). Results showed that organizational contexts can either facilitate or hinder implementation of innovation; a constructive culture was associated with more positive attitudes toward adoption of evidence-based

practice. More recently, Aarons and colleagues (2012) conducted a survey with a sample of 1,112 mental health service providers in a nationwide sample of 100 mental health service institutions in 26 states. They found that more proficient organizational cultures and more engaged and less stressful organizational climates were associated with positive provider attitudes toward adopting evidence-based practice.

Implementation

Novins et al. (2013) define the implementation phase as addressing “factors related to active implementation and scale-up of an innovation” (p. 1017). Part of this phase involves taking into account organizational factors and resource availability, both of which were addressed in the exploration and preparation phases, respectively. Implementation also includes understanding attitudes of providers, which can vary in nature depending on the composition of the intervention, the organizational context, and the experience and preferences of the provider (Mitchell, 2011). Aarons and Palinkas (2007) found that among the motivations that caseworkers have for using evidence-based practices, fit with the mission of the organization was critical to adoption and implementation of evidence-based practice. Another finding in this study was caseworker acceptability, which was defined as reporting a positive evaluation of the content of the evidence-based practice.

The Current Study

Although studies on natural mentoring as a protective factor for foster youth are accumulating (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2008, 2011; Greeson, 2013; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Greeson et al., 2010; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010), none have explicitly examined child welfare professionals' attitudes and beliefs about implementing natural mentoring in child welfare agency settings. Developing such an understanding will help key stakeholders, like child welfare

leadership, to create and implement context-specific natural mentoring programs, particularly within child welfare organizations. The current study explores these attitudes and beliefs with an eye toward understanding both personal and organizational issues related to potential implementation of an innovative natural mentoring intervention. This study builds on the foster youth and natural mentoring literature by investigating the child welfare organization as a setting and entity that could potentially play a critical and significant role in helping to facilitate and support the development of growth-fostering relationships between older foster youth and natural mentors.

This study is guided by one main research question: *What do child welfare professionals believe about the implementation of a child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention for older foster youth?* The EPIS implementation framework—in particular, the components of exploration, preparation, and implementation—was utilized to better understand the data and how the professionals elucidated these factors with respect to implementing a natural mentoring intervention in their agency. The study sought to garner their feedback regarding the concept of natural mentoring as a protective mechanism for older foster youth, the viability and acceptability of natural mentoring for older foster youth, preliminary support for implementation of such an intervention within a child welfare organization, and potential organizational barriers to implementation. This exploratory study is the first phase of a larger study that will pilot a manualized natural mentoring intervention for older foster youth within a child welfare setting. Data gathered from this exploratory study will be used to inform and shape the implementation of a natural mentoring intervention.

METHODS

Participants and Data Collection

Once approval was received from a university institutional review board, 20 child welfare professionals from a Department of Human

Services (DHS) located in a large urban city center in the Northeastern United States participated in this study. Workers and supervisors were eligible to participate in this study if they had served at least 1 youth aged 15 years or older in the past 3 years who was likely to emancipate or had emancipated from the care of DHS. In accordance with DHS protocol, the agency's management and union leaders produced a cross-sectional oversample of 58 direct caseworkers and supervisors, who were then invited to participate in the study contingent upon a successful prescreen to confirm their eligibility. As participants responded, focus groups were formed, scheduled, and conducted until five groups with a total of 20 participants were completed. The use of five predetermined focus groups is considered sufficient for gaining feedback from a single population (Kitzinger, 1994), and the use of "mini focus groups," which consist of 4 to 6 participants as compared with 8 to 10, is becoming increasingly popular as participants may feel more comfortable and share more openly with the reduced number of participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The majority of the participants were female (75%), Black/African American (53%), and not Hispanic/Latino (94%). The average age was 48.5 years ($SD = 9.8$ years). More than three quarters of the participants had earned a master's degree. Their positions were: direct caseworker ($n = 11$) and social work supervisor ($n = 9$). The average number of months in their current positions at DHS was 73.8 ($SD = 83.7$), the average for their total number of months employed by DHS was 150.7 ($SD = 77.8$), and the average for their total number of months working in the field of child welfare was 179.1 ($SD = 69.3$). Fifty-five percent reported having at least one youth whom they anticipated would age out on their active caseloads at the time of the focus groups, and the average number of these youth on their active caseloads at the time of the focus groups was 7.5 ($SD = 5.2$).

Five focus groups were conducted during a 4-month period from July 2013 to October 2013. The focus groups were facilitated by the principal investigator of the study with help from several research assistants. A focus-group

guide, consisting of a series of open-ended questions, was designed to elucidate attitudes and opinions about using natural mentoring in a child welfare agency setting to improve outcomes for youth who emancipate from foster care. Prior to each focus group, participants were asked to review a natural mentoring intervention manual, developed by the study's principal investigator. Based upon their review of the manual, their casework experiences, and their practice knowledge, participants were then asked to comment on the following areas: a) the process older foster youth experience as they prepare for emancipation, b) the notion of natural mentoring specifically for older youth in foster care, c) the specific components of the natural mentoring intervention contained within the manual, and d) the challenges, barriers, and opportunities that may be associated with the implementation of a natural mentoring intervention in a child welfare setting. Each focus group lasted approximately 2 hr and took place at the DHS office in a private conference room with a closed door. Lunch was provided for all participants.

Data Management and Analysis

All focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber. Transcriptions were reviewed and checked for accuracy by at least one of the authors. Data analysis was guided by the conventional content analysis approach, which we utilized to understand a phenomenon about which there is limited theory or research literature (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Throughout the data collection and analysis phases of this study, constant comparative analysis was utilized whereby concepts and themes were inductively discovered and then compared across the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Dedoose, a Web-based qualitative data management program (*Dedoose Version 4.5*, 2013), and Microsoft Excel were used to facilitate this process. First we performed "open coding" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), or the naming and locating of "data bits" line by line while noting ideas and potential themes and

generating possible concepts. Next, we performed "axial coding" (Padgett, 1998) in which the "open codes" were categorized and grouped around conceptual commonalities or specific "axes." Axial coding was followed by "selective/thematic coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which involved determining how code clusters related to each other and discovering what stories the codes told. Finally, the larger themes from selective coding were organized around the EPIS framework in an effort to gain a better understanding about the impact of the attitudes and beliefs of child welfare professionals surrounding the implementation of a child welfare-based natural mentoring program for older foster youth. Consistent with the content analysis approach, the codes and coding categories were counted to quantify the frequency of their occurrences (Franzosi, 2008).

The method used to obtain interrater reliability of the coding process to identify primary factors and secondary themes involved a three-step process: a) The second and third authors used open coding for half of the transcripts each, b) discussion of the initial open coding was done to organize and reduce the codes to a final set of codes, and c) one full transcript was double-coded by both authors (Carey, Morgan, & Oxtoby, 1996; Hruschka et al., 2004). The fourth focus group, conducted on September 23, 2013, was chosen for double coding because it was the longest transcript, had the greatest number of open codes, and had the widest variety and spread of all codes initially identified. Interrater reliability was computed to be 84% across the 157 codes applied to the 97 statements in the transcript of Focus Group 4. Differences were reconciled through discussion between the two coders to 100% agreement.

RESULTS

Our results are organized around the EPIS conceptual model. Within this model, four primary factors emerged in relation to the implementation of a natural mentoring program for older foster youth in a child welfare setting: a) issues related to youth aging out of foster care

(exploration); b) challenges related to natural mentors for youth aging out of foster care (exploration, preparation); c) attitudes and perceptions of natural mentoring as a program for foster youth (preparation); and d) concerns related to the involvement of a child welfare agency in the delivery of a natural mentoring program for older foster youth (implementation). Table 1 shows the frequency with which each of these factors was addressed, along with the subtopics or themes that made up each factor. The most commonly addressed themes within each primary factor, thus interpreted as the most important, are discussed in the following sections.

Exploration: Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

The most common factor addressed across focus groups was the exploration of natural mentoring for foster youth within the context of what the existing child welfare system can offer youth aging out and the firsthand experience of participants with the youth themselves. Themes related to this included challenges in developing relationships with youth in foster care; foster youths' need for unconditional, secure relationships with adults; the importance of taking the perspective of foster youth in considering a natural mentoring program; the importance and challenges of parent and/or family involvement; the importance of building internal assets in and developing external resources for foster youth; and the role that a child welfare agency can and cannot play in addressing the needs that may be addressed by a natural mentoring program.

Role of Child Welfare Agencies

The most common issue discussed surrounded the current role that the child welfare system plays in the lives of foster youth and how it can/cannot or does/does not fill the need for youth to have adult connections and support going into young adulthood. Many participants discussed the challenges inherent in the

TABLE 1. Primary Factors in Relation to the Implementation of a Natural Mentoring Program for Older Foster Youth

	FG1	FG2	FG3	FG4	FG5	Total
Youth Aging Out of Foster Care	43	56	37	106	64	306
<i>Role of DHS</i>	7	8	8	34	10	67
<i>Youth Perspective</i>	8	13	10	14	15	60
Life Context	9	9	4	19	12	53
Family Involvement	12	9	2	15	9	47
Developing Relationships	5	8	7	8	12	40
Adult Connections	2	9	6	16	6	39
Natural Mentors	20	6	26	20	29	101
<i>Vetting</i>	6	5	14	13	9	47
Life Context of Natural Mentors	11	1	5	2	4	23
Commitment	3	0	7	2	7	19
Connection	0	0	0	3	9	12
Natural Mentoring	11	9	9	20	23	72
<i>Authentic Support</i>	7	6	7	9	10	39
Skill Building	4	3	2	11	13	33
DHS Role in Natural Mentoring	11	5	7	18	9	50
<i>DHS Climate and Culture</i>	11	4	4	12	9	40
DHS Liability	0	1	3	6	0	10

Note. DHS = Department of Human Services; FG = focus group; Italicized data are the most commonly addressed themes and those discussed in this article.

relationship between child welfare workers and foster youth on a micro level. For example, they noted the limitations of a relationship within the context of a paid job:

I actually liked working with older youth best and sometimes when some of them would get frustrated, even the ones that I did have a good relationship with, they would express that, ‘You don’t really care, I’m just a paycheck or I’m just another case.’ And as much as you’re trying to say, ‘no you’re not,’ but nonetheless the reality is this is my job. I got the opportunity to get a promotion and by my getting that promotion, I’m no longer going to be their caseworker.

Participants also suggested that some of the challenges associated with emancipating from foster care could be attenuated by a natural mentoring relationship. For example, one participant stated:

And sometimes when our kids get to be 18, they just want to get out of the system, so maybe if they’d have a mentor—you

know, somebody that can give them structure and guidance—they might go on towards education, because a lot of them, they’re just like I want to be done with DHS and when you ask them what do they want to do with their life, they don’t know.

Participants also conceptualized that a natural mentoring relationship may provide a connection to the youth’s “world” in the midst of the trauma and instability associated with the removal from one’s home setting. They described how a natural mentoring program would be complementary with and a supplement to existing child welfare programming:

... but then they’re traumatized by us because we take them; no matter how bad the house is, that’s home. And we rip them out of that. And if they can, you know, we think if it’s a little child, oh you take the teddy bear with you or whatever something—well, when you are older, you are not looking at a teddy bear, but the person you have the connection with, that is something to hang on to in what is,

you know, a maelstrom of emotions and confusion. So yeah, I mean, being able to pull someone into that, from a child's experience into their world and continue with them, I think is just very important.

Likewise, another participant stated:

I just hope that you get this program up and running; I think it could be beneficial to these kids that age out. 'Cause I've seen one too many times—I think my coworker was just telling me a story about this kid... and the kid was in placement and just continued to be in placement and he turned 18, and he didn't want to go back to the placement where he was at. They pretty much just discharged him. He is an adult, 18 years though he didn't want the extensions, so she said she was just walking through [a park] and she sees him sitting on a bench and she's like, "Hi, what's going on?" he is like, "Yeah, I'm homeless," and she was like—it's just sad because at the end of his placement like, it's like, what is the plan?

Youth Perspective

The second most common issue discussed was the importance of including youth in decision making and in considering program characteristics from their perspective. Focus-group participants discussed the importance of partnering with youth, providing them with real choices and supporting them in their decisions, and considering them as the primary source of information to ensure that the mentoring relationship works. From one participant's perspective, youth resistance to the case workers' attempts to steer them in the right direction may be connected to the authoritarian practice of child welfare professionals "telling them what to do."

I think a lot of teens, they want help and they want advice, but they don't want to admit it. So I think that's a difficult thing, wanting the independence, so you have to

try to find a connection somehow to get to that, to have them let you help them, let you assist them or frame it in them having the choice, giving them the choice and not telling them what to do, giving them options of what to do or how to do something because when you tell a teen to do something, the most immediate reaction is "no." They just say "no." So that's been my experience in trying to encourage them, but give it, put the ball in their court, try to help them, have them think and make the decisions, and then if they fall, be there to try to support them.

Conversely, participants relayed the importance of empowering youth to lead the process in setting goals and making plans for their own lives.

To listen to this child's voice and find out really what, what are their goals, what are they interested in because I tell my kids, 'I can honestly sit back and plan for you all day but my plans may not be your plans. So that's why it's important that you bring your voice to the table, we'll listen, OK? Because you're my guide, OK? I'm not your guide. I'm here to provide resources; I'm here to listen to find out what are your needs. What can we do for you? But you have to tell me, you need to be able to guide us in the direction that you choose to go, as long as it's a positive direction.'

Focus-group participants also discussed the importance of considering the unique context of foster youth in the delivery of a natural mentoring program. For example, many foster youth have encountered previous loss and rejection, and participants were concerned that foster youth may experience further rejection in the natural mentoring relationship:

My concern is that if the teenagers identify maybe one or two people that they might want to be a mentor then when the—whoever the person is going to be

the mentor and that person—the possible mentor says, ‘No, I’m not available, I can’t do it, no.’ And then the child who’s had so much rejection already, I would hate for that child to hear another rejection, you know?

Participants, however, noted that youth in foster care have a critical need for supportive, enduring adult connections. One participant said:

So to think that kids that are our youth, who are in our care don’t want the same thing? Meaning they don’t want somebody that’s going to turn their back on them, what makes you think that they don’t feel that way? That they are not going to go through their own developmental stages being an adolescent. So they have that as well as histories of trauma, abuse, neglect, depression, but in between all of that what do you find that they want? They want to be connected to somebody, they want to be loved. They want to know that even if I miss my curfew you’re not going to put on a 30-day notice.

Participants also discussed the context in which foster youth develop relationships with adults as compared with their peers from the general population. Foster youth may be unique in that they need time to build trust and may not be able to form relationships on a set timeline.

... you don’t hear in the first 4, 5, 10 conversations you have with a child everything, they are very, especially in a system like this, they are guarded because as everyone knows that’s power and if they hang onto that knowledge, they are holding onto something that gives them some power, if you wanted nothing else. And only when they’re ready to share, then you are going to find what’s really important. So it is not a process that can be done on a specific timeline.

Exploration and Preparation: Natural Mentors for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Another primary factor addressed across focus groups was the exploration of the characteristics that natural mentors would ideally have. Themes related to this included the need for the natural mentor to be a positive influence and good role model for the youth; the need for an authentic connection between the youth and the adult; the need for the natural mentor to fully commit to the relationship, thereby raising issues of the possibility that youth could experience abandonment; and the need for natural mentors to have clear and healthy personal boundaries. Issues related to how such characteristics could be identified as well as issues regarding personal histories and the need for a screening process to protect youth from questionable choices were also primary themes connected to the preparation phase of program implementation.

Vetting

The theme addressing how to vet or gather background information on adults identified by youth as possible mentors was by far the most commonly addressed theme in exploring the identification of natural mentors for older foster youth. Discussion surrounded the likely problems with personal histories of identified adults; the need and importance of a screening process and how that may be different from the one used by child welfare agencies; the possibility of youth picking questionable adults; and the importance of making sure that the natural mentors chosen would have a positive influence on the youth.

Participants reported that DHS policy prohibits the use of paid kinship caregivers with certain criminal histories, and this policy precludes some caring adults from being considered as placement resources for youth. However, participants also acknowledged that because the natural mentors would not be paid caregivers, such a rigid screening process may not be necessary. In fact, participants stated

that a caring adult with a questionable history who has turned his life around may be just the natural mentor that a struggling youth needs, especially if that is who the youth has identified. Of particular importance was the need to consider adults within the context of their current as well as former lifestyles:

So in life people make mistakes, people change, people get better . . . you beat somebody up or even, and I'm going to say it, you sold drugs; that is a horrible thing but you sold them when you were 19, you went to jail for 5 years and you've come out, paid your dues, and you've got a job and that is no longer part of your life or who you are. Some of that experience might be very valuable to this 17-year-old who is questioning whether that's a way to make a living.

Similarly, another participant stated:

So I think it would have to be some sort of case-by-case basis . . . Because I agree with you that that person that had sold drugs and was incarcerated and turned his life around, I don't think that this background should automatically rule him out.

Preparation: Natural Mentoring for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

Another primary factor identified across focus groups was the conceptualization of natural mentoring as an innovative approach to supporting foster youth and one that is both needed and acceptable to child welfare professionals. Common themes revealed an understanding of natural mentoring as an approach to supporting youth that would fill gaps in child welfare services better than classic mentoring due to its more enduring and lifelong quality; as a relationship that already exists and has developed naturally so time is not spent building a relationship that may not be successful in the long run; and as involving adults who are more personally invested and committed to the child and as a result can provide a longer-term role

model, guide, and anchor for youth as they move into young adulthood.

Authentic Support

In particular, discussion focused on themes of intrinsically motivated commitment by the natural mentor that would be longer-lasting and more genuine in its care, even across generations or when the relationship may go momentarily awry. For example, one participant shared how such intrinsic commitment is at the heart of being able to work through problems and not giving up on a youth:

She may have a girlfriend that goes with her to meet this new grandbaby and somehow stays a part of this baby's life as this baby grows. Now at 11, 12, or 13 there's a need that this child has that the family can't meet but because I've been investing for so long, I can help [with] that need. Or when you do break your curfew rather than say, 'come get this kid; he's not listening to my rules,' it's, 'I need to go find Jonah.' Or I need to go find out—we need to find out why you need to take money out of my pocketbook. We need to work through it because my connection to you is a natural one.

Participants also described the enduring quality of a natural mentoring relationship over a relationship with a paid professional. One participant commented:

There's a bond that, 'I'm not your mother, I've never been your mother, but I've cared about you for so long that the fact that you're doing things that are displeasing to me doesn't change the love that I have for you.' And to me that's the difference with a natural mentor and someone who's paid to provide the service; even if it's kin who provides a temporary home, they're being paid to provide a service, and if the bond isn't there, it could get to the point where it's not worth the money.

Similarly, another child welfare professional described the difference between unpaid natural mentors and paid professionals as:

Automatically going to do whatever the circumstances require, you're there, with or without the compensation, the monetary compensation, I should say. Natural is more to me like a holistic approach, there is nothing in it for you to receive. It's just what you're supposed to do.

One participant summed up the impact that having only paid professionals "care" for you can have. He stated, "It corrodes the soul," meaning that it makes us less human. Our brains are social organs. We live and die literally based on our relationships. We are hard-wired to belong. If the only people who care for us are paid professionals, we are deprived of belonging.

Implementation: The System's Role in Natural Mentoring for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care

The fourth primary factor identified across focus groups addressed the role that child welfare agencies may or may not be able to play in implementing a natural mentoring program for older foster youth. The most salient themes addressed challenges to the involvement of child welfare agencies; issues of liability in being involved in vetting adults identified for natural mentors, providing contacts of potential mentors, or approaching families for contacts of potential mentors; resistance to program involvement due to current organizational and system climate and culture; and challenges of potentially divisive relationships among involved parties.

Child Welfare Climate and Culture

One primary theme that arose across focus groups addressed the challenges to child welfare involvement due to existing time constraints faced by existing workloads:

But the phone call with the social worker or the worker and the mentee and the mentor, that would be beneficial because under my time, I wouldn't be able to do anything like this even though I would want to. I couldn't do that. I'm going to take out time to be with the child, I'm going to do the monthly support group, and then I'm going to meet with you weekly? That's not going to happen, it's just not.

Likewise, when asked what the greatest challenge would be in implementing a natural mentoring intervention, one participant stated:

The volume of work that we have and then the numerous changes that our agency is experiencing. In my mind this would be very difficult to do, you know, if it was assigned for us as social workers.

Two other child welfare professionals also expressed concern regarding the additional work associated with implementing a natural mentoring program:

... it would have to be an identified group of people whose time and energy was spent on the natural mentoring process because we do so much. We have so much responsibility and so many time constraints and so many regulations and so many deadlines, with so many resource limitations that you would need the people who were working on it to bring the same level of commitment that you would expect from the natural mentor and from the child. It couldn't kind of be something that was thrown on top of what you are already doing, because there wouldn't be the time to give it what it deserves. Because what you're asking people to do is to find a person and make a lifetime connection with them.

... it has to be a designated team who would kind of focus on natural mentoring because again everybody is inundated, not just the supervisors but the workers

and just the whole staff, and then there are so many changes. I think for it not to be like something that feels like it's mandated. It can't feel like it's bureaucratic; it can't be consumed with red tape.

Taking into account these inherent challenges, however, focus-group participants also discussed potential solutions that could increase the likelihood of successful implementation. One participant suggested educating direct case workers on the benefits of natural mentoring to champion the intervention among relevant parties:

... getting the word out and getting everyone educated about how it works and what you're trying to do. You know, the reason that ... [the intervention] is being put into place, because some teens or even parents or even anyone might question, 'Why are you—?' And if a worker doesn't have the knowledge to explain, 'Well this is why we're doing this and this is what we're trying to aim for.' Then, you know ... if I'm asking a worker, 'Why are you doing this?' And they don't give me an answer that's like convincing, why [am] I going to—

In addition to educating all direct case workers regarding the "paradigm shift" of a natural mentoring program, another participant proposed the establishment of a specialized unit or staff responsible for the implementation:

Now, whether it grows into a whole other, which I think is worthwhile to look at, a whole designated unit or whatever, centralized, yeah, it probably would—it definitely would be worth it, but how do you roll that out, you know? But I definitely think that it would have to be continuously mentioned. So just looking at it from a management position, it definitely is a paradigm, part of the paradigm shift that would need a lot of prompting or coaching, insisting. That whole thing I think.

Likewise, another participant suggested subcontracting the implementation of a natural mentoring program to a private provider agency:

Well I think it would be great if like an agency would be like we are going to implement this program like Pathways or something. And then they would have a staff person that was paid to run the program, that would be the point person, that would do the recruitment, the screening, that would hold the trainings for the natural mentors in groups or cycles or whatever.

In discussing the partnership with other entities in implementing a natural mentoring program, one participant noted that a collaborative effort would be essential:

... it needs to be a collaborative effort only because we share information, sometimes we don't share all of the information, like you say, when you're reviewing a file, information may be in my file and may have not have been shared with the provider and the provider may not have the same thing. So, I think that it needs to be a collaborative effort in terms of identifying like they do now with the meetings where you know, the team who goes and collects the information; they go both to the agency and to DHS to get that information.

Summary

In exploring the use of natural mentoring to support youth aging out of the foster care system, child welfare professionals discussed the current role that the system plays in the lives of foster youth and how it can/cannot fill the need for youth to have permanent adult connections to support them as they age out of foster care. This exploration also concluded that a natural mentoring program could be complementary with and a supplement to existing child welfare programming. Discussion also focused on the

importance of partnering with youth, providing them with real choices and supporting them in their decisions, and the importance of considering the unique context of foster youth in the delivery of a natural mentoring program. Discussion also reflected considerations of the preparation and implementation phases of program adoption in how to vet or gather background information on adults identified by youth as possible mentors. Of particular importance was the need to consider the “person in environment” (Greene, 2011) in terms of youths’ current as well as former lifestyles when vetting possible natural mentors. Focus-group participants largely agreed that natural mentors would be more personally invested and committed to the child and as a result would provide a longer-term role model, guide, and anchor for youth as they emerged into young adulthood. Finally, focus-group participants noted challenges for the child welfare system in the implementation of a natural mentoring program due to existing time constraints faced by workers and supervisors, but they also provided concrete solutions to overcoming such obstacles.

DISCUSSION

This is the first study to examine the attitudes of child welfare professionals toward a natural mentoring program for older foster youth embedded in the child welfare system. With a growing body of literature suggesting that natural mentoring relationships may promote resilience and healthy development among adolescent foster youth (Britner et al., 2013; Greeson, 2013), this exploratory study contributes to understanding the feasibility of implementing a natural mentoring program within a child welfare system. Moreover, this study uses the EPIS framework to explicate the organizational challenges and opportunities related to adoption and implementation of evidence-based practice in a human services setting.

Across the five focus groups, the following significant themes emerged in relation to the implementation of a natural mentoring program: a) the role of DHS in the lives of older

foster youth preparing for emancipation, b) the importance of the foster youth perspective and context in adopting a natural mentoring program, c) the appropriate vetting of supportive adults as natural mentors, d) the benefits of natural mentoring for foster youth preparing for adulthood, and e) the relevance of the DHS climate and culture in implementing a natural mentoring program. Results suggest that child welfare professionals believe that many older foster youth lack supportive adult connections upon exiting services. Focus-group participants were amenable toward, and even excited about, the use of a natural mentoring program as a mechanism to help older foster youth sustain growth-fostering relationships with caring adults. They identified many of the benefits associated with natural mentoring that researchers have posited, such as the established bond of the existing relationship and its enduring, lifelong quality, as well as the personal investment and commitment that may be inherent to an extant relationship (Rhodes, 1994; Spencer, 2011). The two biggest concerns voiced by participants in relation to implementing a natural mentoring program within a child welfare system were the vetting process of potential natural mentors and the time constraints and workload requirements of the child welfare professionals. Participants identified strategies to overcome these barriers, including the need for a more nuanced screening process to discriminate adults’ past behaviors from their present functioning as well as specialized staff dedicated to implementing a natural mentoring program to alleviate any additional work burden on the ongoing, assigned case worker and supervisor.

Role of DHS

The exploration phase of the EPIS model involves understanding a service concern in conjunction with identifying an improved approach that will lead to the amelioration of the concern (Novins et al., 2013). It is notable that the theme that emerged most frequently from the focus groups was the concern of older youth aging out of foster care and the role that

the current child welfare system plays in the process of foster youth emancipation. Participants identified the issue of many older youth aging out of foster care without a plan and without supportive, naturally occurring adult relationships as primary areas of concern. This concern is also well documented in the research literature (Bussiere, 2006; Charles & Nelson, 2000), and studies show that nearly half of all adolescent foster youth report not having an important nonparental adult who has made a positive difference in their lives (Ahrens et al., 2008; Greeson et al., 2010).

In response to the issue that many older youth age out of foster care without supportive adult relationships, participants described how a natural mentoring program could serve as an improved approach to address this concern. Similarly, researchers have asserted that natural mentoring relationships may serve as a protective mechanism for adolescent foster youth, and a growing body of research supports this notion. For example, Ahrens and colleagues (2008) found that adolescent foster youth with natural mentors had better physical health, were less likely to report suicidal ideation or to have received a sexually transmitted infection, and experienced decreased aggressive behaviors. Likewise, Greeson et al. (2010) found that foster youth who described having a natural mentor who was "like a parent," was a "role model," and provided "guidance/advice" were significantly associated with having increased income expectations and asset ownership. Another study showed that natural mentoring was associated with fewer depressive symptoms, lower levels of stress, and higher life satisfaction (Munson & McMillen, 2009).

Youth Perspective

The exploration phase of the EPIS model also considers the fit between the intervention and client characteristics as well as practitioner views about client qualities (Novins et al., 2013). Focus-group participants stated that successful engagement and planning for the older foster youth population was largely dependent on giving foster youth a strong voice and

supporting them in their ability to make choices. Natural mentoring, then, has the potential to be a good fit for older foster youth, as one of its key tenets is the notion of supporting youth as they self-select their natural mentors from their existing social networks (Brewer, 2012; Spencer, 2011).

In describing the unique context of older foster youth, participants voiced concern over the need to ensure that foster youth did not encounter additional rejection, were able to form healthy relationships with caring adults despite their trauma histories, and were provided extended time to build trust. Researchers have posited that natural mentoring relationships may be an appropriate mechanism for addressing these endemic concerns. For example, Greeson (2013) suggests that natural mentoring relationships may actually reduce mentor abandonment, especially if the youth–natural mentor relationship is supported within a child welfare context. This caring relationship already exists within the youth's social network, and thus, a natural mentoring program can build upon and strengthen what is already in place. When a relationship must end, trained natural mentors may do so in a healthy and potentially corrective way, meaning that they can model the appropriate way to end a relationship so as to not create a new loss for the youth, in contrast to the negative experiences of loss many foster youth have encountered during their years in the child welfare system. Additionally, the extant relationship provides youth with the time they need to build trust as opposed to forcing a matched relationship within the timeline of a formal mentoring program like Big Brothers Big Sisters. For example, Munson et al. (2010) interviewed almost 200 emancipating foster youth with natural mentoring relationships and found that the youth characterized positive natural mentoring relationships by their consistency and longevity as well as their qualities related to trust, authenticity, respect, and empathy. For some youth, the relationship with their natural mentor was the longest, most consistent relationship they had experienced.

Vetting

Novins et al. (2013) describe part of the preparation phase of the EPIS model as understanding the organizational and systemic factors that could affect the implementation of the intervention. The challenges associated with the identification and screening process of potential natural mentors within a child welfare context was a dominant theme that emerged from the focus groups. Participants discussed the need for a nuanced screening process that would be more flexible and would allow for case-by-case decisions to approve appropriate adults to be natural mentors, even with the presence of a criminal history.

Consistent with the focus-group feedback, the National Mentoring Partnership, MENTOR, provides guidelines for mentor screening and proposes that for some at-risk youth populations, adults with criminal histories, such as reformed ex-gang members, may be well suited to serve as mentors, and factors surrounding the conviction, such as the amount of time that has passed since the crime and the nature of the crime, must be considered (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2014). Research suggests that the strength of the relationship between the youth and mentor may be a key factor associated with an impactful mentoring relationship and thus should be given high consideration in the assessment and screening process, even when there is a criminal history present. In a meta-analysis of 55 mentoring programs, DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) found a modest/small benefit for the average youth, with the impact significantly increasing when a strong relationship was present between the youth and mentor.

Authentic Support

The preparation phase of the EPIS model also takes into account organizational support, culture, and climate, and organizational support is frequently identified as a main factor that promotes (or encumbers) the utilization of an intervention (Backer et al., 1986; Novins et al., 2013). The results of this study revealed that

child welfare professionals were supportive of a natural mentoring program for older foster youth and conceptualized it as a mechanism to fill gaps in child welfare services through the establishment of a naturally occurring, enduring, lifelong relationship characterized by authentic support, genuine care, and personal commitment. The natural mentoring relationship was juxtaposed with programmatic mentoring (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters) and relationships with paid professionals, both of which were said to be less likely to endure in the midst of struggles.

The important aspects of a natural mentoring relationship conceptualized by the child welfare professionals from this study are consistent with those found in other qualitative studies. Greeson and Bowen (2008) interviewed a small sample of female adolescent foster youth about their relationships with their natural mentors. Youth described the most important qualities of their relationships as trust, love and caring, and mirroring a parent-child relationship. Ahrens and colleagues (2011) interviewed 23 former foster youth and found that successful natural mentoring relationships were characterized by similar qualities, such as authenticity, genuine care, trust, respect, persistence, and commonalities.

DHS Climate and Culture

The implementation phase of the EPIS model includes addressing “factors related to active implementation and scale-up of an innovation” (Novins et al., 2013, p. 1017). Assessing and ensuring resource availability is also a part of this phase, and child welfare professionals reported that they believed additional infrastructure would be necessary to implement a natural mentoring program within DHS. Child welfare professionals reported time constraints and full workloads that would make their implementation of a natural mentoring program difficult, and they suggested dedicating an internal unit or subcontracted private provider staff to lead the intervention. However, participants saw value in educating child welfare professionals in the “paradigm shift” of

a natural mentoring program so that assigned case workers could support the work of natural mentoring program staff. The literature examining the implementation of innovative practice in child welfare settings cites the lack of sufficient resources as a key barrier to the successful adoption of a best practice (Chaffin & Friedrich, 2004; Luongo, 2007; Schorr & Farrow, 2011). Thus, it is crucial that a natural mentoring program be implemented within a child welfare setting with appropriate resources, including staff with protected time who are able to focus on supporting the developing youth–natural mentor relationships.

Implications

Several of our findings suggest important implications for child welfare practice. These findings, based on the feedback from child welfare professionals, include: a) Many older foster youth emancipate without enduring, supportive, adult relationships, and this service concern may be partially addressed by a natural mentoring program; b) youth perspective is critical for the success of a natural mentoring program; c) a nuanced screening process is necessary to ensure that appropriate, natural mentors whom youth select are not precluded from participation based solely on historical behaviors and lifestyles; d) the benefits of natural mentoring relationships for older foster youth may exceed those of paid professionals and programmatic mentors; and e) additional funding and resources may be necessary to successfully implement a natural mentoring program in a child welfare context.

The implications of these findings relate to increasing awareness among child welfare professionals about the benefits of natural mentoring relationships and increasing funding and resources to support the implementation of natural mentoring programming within child welfare organizations and systems. The findings from this study indicate a favorable response from child welfare professionals to the notion of natural mentoring among older foster youth. Although it may not be feasible for child welfare workers and supervisors to serve as the

staff responsible for implementing such programming, they could be champions within the child welfare system, promoting the benefits of natural mentoring relationships for older foster youth among key system partners, some of whom could be nominated by youth as potential natural mentors. As champions, they could incorporate the discussion of natural mentoring and its benefits into family team meetings, which may provide opportunities for buy-in for both youth and members of their social network.

Additionally, the findings from this study reveal the need for funding and resources to support an infrastructure necessary to implement natural mentoring programming for older foster youth. Such programming may need more support than what child welfare workers and supervisors with their present workloads can offer. Both private foundations and public entities targeted at improving outcomes for emancipating foster youth should prioritize funding for interventions that support natural mentoring relationships and programming for older foster youth.

Limitations of the Current Study

This study's primary limitation is the non-representative sample of child welfare professionals who participated, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Given that all of the focus-group participants self-selected to participate and were from one large, urban child welfare agency in the Northeast, the sample may not be representative of all child welfare professionals across the country. As this was the first study to examine child welfare professionals' attitudes toward natural mentoring, the attitudes reflected in this study's findings cannot be compared to other studies, though the themes that emerged from the focus-group participants were corroborated by the literature and research on natural mentoring relationships among older foster youth.

As with any focus group, there is a risk for bias, as participants may feel pressure to respond positively to the moderator's questions. It is unlikely that this occurred with this

study, as focus-group participants freely shared both their support and their concern related to natural mentoring programming. This risk was also decreased by the use of outside research staff not associated with the child welfare agency so as not to pressure the child welfare professionals to respond in a certain manner. Additionally, only the focus-group participants and the research staff were present during the focus groups, so participants were less likely to worry about their responses.

CONCLUSION

This study is the first to examine child welfare professionals' attitudes toward a child welfare-based natural mentoring program for older foster youth. The findings from this study indicate a favorable response from child welfare professionals regarding natural mentoring for older youth in foster care within a child welfare agency setting. With appropriate supports and resources, participants believed that implementation was feasible and could help to alleviate some of the challenges older youth encounter as they emancipate from foster care. Participants also identified potential challenges associated with implementation and strategized related solutions. Given the growing body of literature supporting the benefits of natural mentoring relationships for older foster youth, such a study provides a timely first step in examining the context in which such programming could be implemented. In the 2013 *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, Britner and colleagues provide three recommendations for mentoring youth in foster care, one of which is to "mobilize and incorporate natural mentors more systematically into services for youth in foster care (e.g., care coordination and transition planning), particularly for older youth for whom formal, programmatic relationships may be potentially less effective or difficult to establish" (p. 351). Future studies are needed to build upon these initial findings to better understand the organizational and systemic contexts, including both challenges and opportunities, in which natural mentoring

can be implemented for older foster youth preparing for emancipation.

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