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Perceptions of former foster youth regarding their experiences with mentorship programs/relationships while in foster care

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PERCEPTIONS OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH REGARDING THEIR

EXPERIENCES WITH MENTORSHIP PROGRAMS/RELATIONSHIPS

WHILE IN FOSTER CARE

_____

A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

_____

by

Kwaku Antwi Boasiako

Ryan Eugene Shroads

June 2011

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June 2011

Approved by:

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6/8/2011
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County Department of Children and
Family Services

Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the
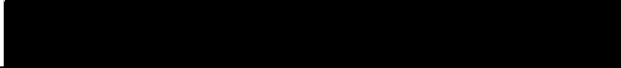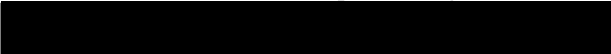perceptions of former foster youth regarding the
experiences with mentor programs/relationships while in
foster care. Furthermore, this research intended to
provide social worker practitioners with an in depth
understanding of the experiences of former foster youth
who had mentors and what impacts these experiences had on
them during and following their transition from care. In
order to achieve this, the study utilized a qualitative
research design by way of face-to-face interviews. The
sample of this study includes eighteen former foster
youth, ranging from 18-24 years of age and currently
participating in the San Bernardino County Independent
Living Program. The study found that participants viewed
their experience with the mentor as positive.

The study also found that almost all of the
participants viewed their mentors as role models or a
person they looked up to. Furthermore, the results found
that the over 75% of the youth are still in contact with
their mentors. Of equal importance is that mentors were
found to influence and support the youth in primary and
secondary educational achievement. A final key finding is

related to formal mentors and mentoring programs. The
study discovered that none of the 18 participants
identified having had a formal mentor while in foster
care. In fact, very few of them stated they were told
such programs existed.

to create this thesis, and accomplish this great task that we set off to do two years ago.

Thanks to Kwaku, my brethren, for his simplistic, insightful and concrete input, as well as his patience, dedication, commitment and perseverance for the duration this project. What started as a partnership, developed into a friendship that will last well beyond graduate school.

DEDICATION

To the children, and the youth who spend most of their young life in the foster care system yet still have dreams of becoming successful adults and parents when they grow up. To mentors who dedicate their time and resources to provide support, guidance, friendship, structure, and hope to the youth in foster care so that that these young men and women can have a reason never to give up on life.

For my mother, brother, and sister who have always been my foundation. For the Pace and Sauer family for your love and support. And most important of all, for my wife, Erica, who came into my life seven years ago and has supported and guided me through my ventures. You have always been my rock and by my side, and now we can focus on our future.

For my mother who sacrificed so much and always put my needs ahead of hers. For my wife who inspired, supported and taught me the value of higher education, also her tolerance and patience over the course of the last two years. For my mother-in-law for sparking my interest in the profession of social work. For my daughter who I hope one day will be proud and strive to continue the tradition of graduating from college.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

When it comes to the history of foster care, many

professionals in the field of social work are likely to

recognize Reverend Charles Loring Brace as a leading

figure. During the nineteenth century, Brace placed

thousands of orphans and abandoned New York City children

on trains in order to transplant them to farm families in

the mid-Western part of the country. This was a new and

progressive approach towards alleviating the overwhelming

number of children living on the streets of New York

City.

In addition to Charles Brace, other reformers began

establishing adoption agencies during the early nineteen

hundreds, but were unsuccessful due to many documented

deaths and illnesses of children while under the

agencies' care. According to the Adoption History Project

(2007), existing data shows that by 1950 children in

foster care exceeded those in institutions and by 1960,

that number doubled. The same data showed that by the

late 1970s the number of children in the foster care

system had exceeded 500,000. According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (2009) there are currently over 463,000 children in foster care nationwide.

Following the Great Depression, the plight of our nation's youth continued to decline. Record levels of children and families were increasingly forced to live in unhealthy and unsafe conditions. At this point, the U.S. government intervened by drafting and passing the Social Security Act of 1935. This was a groundbreaking piece of legislation as it substantiated the legitimacy and urgency of child welfare in the United States. With the Social Security Act in place, each state was granted money and jurisdiction enabling local government to provide "Maternal and Child Health Services" (Social Security Online, n.d.). This was the beginning of a significant funding source needed to support what would become our nations child welfare system. It was also the beginning of establishing additional practice standards and systems of care to ensure the safety our nation's children.

In addition to becoming familiar with the history of our nation's foster care system, it is equally important

to understand the obstacles this system presents for the youth it is designed to protect. One obstacle facing youth in foster care is the disruption of services. Whether it is mental health, general health, foster care or adoption, failure to provide continuity of care is a major obstacle facing this population. Furthermore, the disruption of services appears to have a negative effect in that it may contribute to multiple foster care placements for children in long-term care. This could result from a number of factors which include: dysfunctional adaptive behaviors, past and current child welfare policy and the inability of caregivers to provide an appropriate level of care within the least restrictive environment. Appropriate level of care is of extreme importance for foster youth, as minimizing external stressors maximizes developmental maturation.

Another challenge facing foster youth is the absence of healthy attachment figures. A recent trend among child welfare advocates includes increasing awareness and training about Attachment Theory. Given the dysfunctional environmental contexts our nation's foster youth come from, positive and nurturing attachment figures are often disrupted or completely non-existent. In the absence of a

trusting and supportive relationship, foster youth are likely to suffer from a lack of community participation, family, social skills, peer relationships and role models. Despite social workers' best efforts, limited time and absence of resources, they are often unable to help fill this void in the youth's life. Therefore, mentorship programs are a promising alternative form of supplementing the psychosocial well-being of foster youth.

Research indicates the nation's foster youth as being significantly at risk in several areas of functioning when compared to their peers. These categories include: failure to graduate from high school and/or obtain secondary education, increased risk for drug and alcohol abuse, involvement with the criminal justice system, early pregnancy, and unemployment or under employment, mental health problems and poverty (Gresson & Bowen, 2008). Further, foster youth are less likely to have family support, strong peer relationships and positive role models while in care. Finally, it is important to understand how, if at all, the help of a mentor can minimize negative outcomes among our nation's foster youth population.

The purpose of this research is important at this time for several reasons. However, this project will only focus on a couple of them. It is common knowledge among public child welfare agencies that social workers' caseloads are unmanageable due to size, time constraints, and policy. Therefore, understanding how and in what areas of practice community mentors impact the lives of those in foster care, social workers could be more likely to refer to such services. Additionally, this research has the potential to further the incentive for increased collaboration between public child welfare workers and community mentors. Finally, research about mentoring and foster youth relationships could possibly help identify gaps in foster care services. In other words, improving the continuity of care among current and future foster youth requires a community effort.

Given the emergence and credibility of Attachment Theory among child welfare professionals, this study draws on the theoretical model to help conceptualize the research project. Adolescent foster youth are navigating an extremely complex and confusing time of their life with regard to psychosocial development, peer relationships and life skills. Therefore, getting a

first-hand perspective about their relationships with
mentors could provide a unique opportunity for
understanding the potential role mentors have in
providing foster youth with a secure and consistent
attachment figure. Furthermore, this project could
continue building a foundation for advancing policies
surrounding mentoring programs among child welfare
agencies.

Two rather recent and progressive promising
practices among public child welfare agencies are Team
Decision Making (TDM) and Family-2-Family. Within the
context of child welfare, the TDM uses strength-based,
solution-focused theoretical approach that aims to keep
families together and/or their children in the
communities from which they reside (TDM pamphlet, 2010).
This model was conceptualized under the Family-2-Family
Initiative developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation
(TDM pamphlet, 2010). Over the course of the last five
years, San Bernardino County Children and Family Services
have slowly integrated TDM's into agency policy. TDM's
are now a mandatory part of all appropriate cases. Given
this policy and the structure of TDM's, community
partners are regularly connected to foster youth.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine former foster youths perceptions of their experiences with mentor programs/relationships while in care. This research provided insight for social work practitioners enabling them to understand the experiences the youth had with mentors. Additionally, this study explored the impact these experiences had on the youths functioning during and following their transition from care.

In order to gather the necessary data this study intended to obtain, 18 face-to-face interviews were completed. The specific client population was transitional age youth, 18-24 years old. Both males and females were included. In addition to these criteria, all interviewees were participating in San Bernardino County's Independent Living Program, After Care Services.

Mentoring programs are developed according to specific missions and models. Some programs' missions focus on education, while others are occupationally oriented. Mentor programs also choose to embrace a number of different models which include: One-on-one mentoring, peer mentoring, group mentoring and teams of mentors (Osterling & Hines, 2006). Regardless of the model or

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mission, there are some notable mentoring programs in San Bernardino County that offer a variety of organizational mentoring frameworks. One such example is the City of San Bernardino Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department Mentoring Program. This particular program matches community mentors to youth ages 12-18 who attend local San Bernardino schools. Mentors engage youth in a variety of activities ranging from art to education (sbcounty.gov).

Another example of a mentoring program is THINK Together. Trained volunteers work closely with individuals to provide homework assistance and academic support needed to succeed in school. Mentees also participate in other enrichment activities in an effort to build character and social competence (Thinktogether.org). Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) is another well-respected mentoring program with the specific mission of serving youth in the foster care system. This agency recruits, trains and matches community volunteers to advocate on behalf of foster youth. Once the volunteers complete 40 hours of training, they are then sworn in by the presiding judge at the San Bernardino County Juvenile Court. Volunteers engage the

youth in a variety of activities, but more importantly provide a voice for the youth and ensure they are receiving services the court has mandated. CASA volunteers can also become educational advocates for foster youth (casaofsb.org).

As mentioned before, one goal of this project was to understand how the youth's experiences with mentor programs/relationships could help further public and private agency partnership with community advocates. Furthermore, understanding youth's experiences with community volunteers could encourage social work practitioners to collaborate with appropriate mentor programs, as well as informal mentors in an effort to help supplement services to the youth in care. This approach could also support child welfare workers case management responsibilities, thus lead to a greater likelihood of positive outcomes as youth transition into adulthood.

Given this study is one that intended to explore an area of research that is relatively new to the field, applying the qualitative approach is appropriate. The investigators' rationale for utilizing this method is the sample size is small, it's uniqueness and accessibility.

Also, mentor programs/relationships, formal or informal, are slowly garnering more professional attention. Due to the absence of research about this topic, this study was purely exploratory in nature. By using the qualitative research method, this study permitted the investigators to collect data in the form of words, descriptions and narratives. Data was obtained through pre-arranged face-to-face interviews and guided by an interview schedule.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This study is significant first and foremost because it will likely provide an opportunity for social workers insight into the unique experiences of former foster youth and mentor relationships. Furthermore, this study will permit social workers to hear former foster youth's narratives regarding the experiences with mentor programs/relationships and how this experience impacted specific times of their life during and following transition from care. Finally, understanding how foster youth feel about mentor programs/relationships will help social workers understand the value youth associate with mentors. Thus, social workers will likely remain

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cognizant about the importance of collaborating with community members and agencies in order to improve the quality of life, services and future outcomes among foster youth.

The findings of this study could contribute to social work practice and/or policy as well. If the findings support the notion that mentor programs/relationships can successfully contribute to a range of positive outcomes for current and former foster youth, then new policy could potentially lead to the allocation of more mentoring resources. Moreover, policy at federal, state and local levels may also be directed at training social workers to work collaboratively with community mentors.

Finally, this study is unique, in that there are very few studies exploring foster youths' perspectives with regard to mentor programs/relationships. In reviewing literature, a significant portion of past studies have solely focused on the outcomes of the mentoring relationship. However, quantifying and measuring the direct impact mentor relationships have on foster youth is difficult therefore, this study could add to the body of existing knowledge enabling other

researchers interested in this topic a greater likelihood of generalizable findings in this area of interest. If this study is able to establish evidence supporting the contributions mentor programs/relationships offer foster youth, it is more likely additional research will be sought under the Title IV initiative.

According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services (2010), Title IV, part E is dedicated to foster care and adoptions for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. There is a direct link between this study and Title IV-E because foster youth are the poster child of the child welfare system. A significant amount of time, energy, money and resources are dedicated to this area of child welfare. In addition, this particular research question was presented by the Department of Children and Family Services of San Bernardino County, which is funded in part by Title IV-E. Therefore, this study's research question is: What are former foster youth's perceptions of mentor relationships while they were in care?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Chapter two of the research project includes an analysis of previous literature reviews related to mentor programs/relationships and foster youth. This chapter is divided into three subsections which include: "formal" mentoring relationships among foster youth, "natural" mentoring relationships among foster youth, and finally, theories guiding conceptualization as it relates to foster youth and the mentoring experience.

Throughout the literature examining mentoring and at-risk youth, authors always included a discussion about the differences between formal and informal or natural mentors. For example, Munson and McMillen (2008) define natural mentors as unrelated adults that are older than the participants, but willing to listen to and share experiences while guiding the youth through his or her life. Aherns, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, and Lazano (2008) defined a mentor as a non-parental adult who has participated in an adolescent's life longer than two years. Natural mentors can take the shape of teachers,

coaches, neighbors or bosses. However, according to the literature, they are typically not related to or younger than the youth themselves. Other than these few exceptions, determining what constitutes a natural mentor is purely subjective.

Unlike natural mentors, formal mentors are typically individuals who have sought out the mentoring experience and/or were recruited for the specific purpose of mentoring in a particular setting. The distinguishing characteristic of formal mentors is that these individuals are always affiliated with an established program designed to recruit and train community volunteers. These programs are often non-profit 501 (C) 3 organizations. Many of them offer ongoing training and support, case management and recruitment. Moreover, formal mentoring programs often require a minimum six-month commitment, but many prefer 12-18 months. Some examples of such agencies are Big Brothers/Big Sisters and Court Appointed Special Advocates.

Formal Mentor Relationships among Foster Youth

In an effort to obtain further insight into how formal mentor relationships play a part in a foster

youth's life while in the system, it is important to see what past research has found. Osterling and Hines (2006) presented information on foster youth and mentors partaking in a formal mentor program aimed at increasing the independent living skills of adolescents who are supposed to transition out of the foster care system. The investigators utilized a quantitative method to examine the effectiveness of the foster youth and mentor but also used this method to examine the experiences of the youth in care and the mentors in the program. The study employed a self-administered questionnaire to collect the data on foster youth who were 15 years and older in the program. The mentors were also invited to fill out an advocate survey for the qualitative section of the research. The demographics of youth were 58.8 % female and an average age of 16.3 years during the study. Most of the youth were either Caucasians or of Mexican/Latino decent.

Youth who participated in the study entered the foster care system at an average age of 10.7 years old, and had an average of 5.1 foster placements. On the other hand, most of the mentors were Caucasian females, with an average age of 47.1 years old. The mentors had worked as

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advocates for almost three years and had mentored at least two youth during that period. Researchers found that the youth viewed their mentors as helpful and supportive, and had all seen an improvement in their lives and an increase in their independent living skills since being mentored. The study reported all the mentors portrayed the course of building a bond and trust with the youth as a critical piece of the mentor-youth relationship. A limitation of the study was that the mentors vigorously employed the youth to partake in this research, which might have swayed the findings.

In an attempt to build the toughness of youth in foster care by mentoring their abilities and awareness, Gilligan (1999) utilized a chain of case illustrations to show that participation in activities can significantly advance the vision for a more triumphant emancipation out of care. Moreover, the author explained "mentoring" as the supporting and sustaining of a foster care youth's abilities, awareness and their spare time through activities by a trusting and caring grown-up. Gilligan also mentions protection, compensation, maintenance, and preparation, as the main functions of the foster care system to help youth transition out of care.

Also included in the study was a description of the roles mentors fulfilled during their time with the youth, which included: sharing an awareness or gift with the youth, helping the youth find his/her place in this world, validating the youth's capabilities and qualities, and listening to the youth's emotional and social needs. Gilligan added that mentoring foster youth in areas such as culture, animal care and sports by committed adults can build the youth's potential, self-esteem, mental health, open new community affiliations, and increase the likelihood of a more triumphant emancipation out of the foster care system. She ended by suggesting the mentor-youth relationship was supreme when it was based on a shared passion/interest between the foster youth and the mentor, especially when the mentor comes from the youth's community association.

Diane de Anda (2001) attempts to capture experiences of both at-risk youth and mentors during the first year of the relationship. Although this study considers both mentee and mentor perspectives, only mentee perspectives were considered. Despite this particular mentor agency's mission being related to educational attainment and at risk youth, several other themes were identified and

highlighted over the course of the evaluation. For example, the results indicated that youth developed a strong bond with their mentors, which enabled them to make positive developmental changes with regard to emotional and social contexts (de Anda, 2001). In her study, she included several direct quotes from the youth, as well as four case examples. Within the case examples are descriptions of changes in pro-social behaviors and developmental growth (De Anda, 2001).

Limitations to this study were identified as not containing a representative sample; therefore, the results are not generalizable in the research context, as well as to other mentor programs. Additionally, it was pointed out that the social status of the mentors could have influenced the outcomes. Further, she suggested that longitudinal studies of the program are needed to substantiate the findings in her study. Unlike this study, the following research demonstrates generalizable findings with regard to macro social work.

In an attempt to critique the effectiveness of mentoring programs Spencer, Collins, Ward, and Smashneya (2010) employ a quantitative research by way of secondary analysis. Spencer et al. (2010) acknowledged mentoring

programs were a promising alternative to supplement the care of foster youth. However, they also suggest a lack of empirical evidence needed to establish efficacy of these programs is something that shall not be ignored. Spencer et al. (2010), through their research, listed a number of characteristics to be considered when it comes to the efficacy of mentoring programs and they include: duration, consistency, emotional connection and program support for mentoring relationships. Conversely, Spencer et al. (2010) also identified "pitfalls" for mentoring programs. These include unhealthy or negative interpersonal relationships, program administration and policy.

This study holds particular importance because it has identified gaps in the literature related to mentor programs aimed at serving the needs of foster youth. Spencer et al. (2010) do not minimize the impact mentoring programs have on individual foster youth, particularly one-to-one mentoring. Although attention was drawn to the fact that the magnitude of the foster care system and the complexities that accompany it derive from a systemic rather than an individualistic problem.

Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, and Lozano (2008)
conducted a study to assess if foster care youth had
improved adult psychosocial development and health if
they had a mentor during their teenage years compared to
individuals without a mentor. This study used data from
Waves I-III of the National Longitudinal Study of
Adolescent Health (1994-2002). The participants in the
study identified themselves in Waves I-III as being in
foster care. Researchers regarded the adolescent mentored
if subjects described the presence of a non-parental
adult who made a vital constructive change in their life
after 14 years of age. The study also indicated the
mentoring association had to have taken place before the
subject was 18 years of age, and must have lasted for at
least 2 years. The results were focused on education,
physical health, mental health, and the participation in
harmful deeds. The study utilized multiple logistic
regression means to judge the connection between being
mentored and each of the above mentioned outcomes. Sample
size for this study was made up of 300 foster care youth.

Results from the study indicated that mentored youth
accounted for considerable superior overall health, were
less likely to have been diagnosed with an STD, also less

likely to describe suicidal plans and less likely to report having injured someone in a fight in the past year. The study also showed a movement toward higher educational involvement with the mentored youth. The overall findings of this study also suggested that foster care youth who were mentored had considerably advanced results compared with non-mentored youth. Further, the results suggested sustained mentoring affiliations and/or the establishment of additional relationships may offer secure interventions for youth in care.

A limitation to this study pertains to some of the foster youth. They might have regarded their foster parents as mentors, which meant the advanced results might have been credited to their established bonds with these caretakers.

Rhodes, Haight, and Briggs (1999) study examined the influence of a mentoring program (Big Brothers-Big Sisters) on the peer relationships of foster care youths in relative and non-relative care. This study employed a method of randomly assigning youth to either the treatment or control condition. Changes in their peer relationships were then assessed after 18 months. The study revealed that foster parents were more likely than

non-foster parents to report that their child showed
improved social skills, as well as greater comfort and
trust interacting with others. Whereas peer relationships
of all non-foster youths remained stable, treatment
foster youths reported improvements in pro-social and
self-esteem enhancing support, and control foster youths
showed decrements over time.

In an effort to determine the effects of the Court
Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program in child
protection court processes, Leung's (1996) study employed
the method of comparing an experimental group that
received CASA services from 1987 to 1990, to a group
randomly selected from all cases without CASA involvement
in the juvenile court during the same time period. The
study then compared the original experimental group to a
second comparison group consisting of CASA referrals that
did not receive CASA intervention services due to an
insufficient number of CASA volunteers.

The study suggested that CASA programs are effective
in reducing the length of time of out-of-home placement
of a child. Results indicated CASA interventions tended
to decrease the number of placement changes. The study
also revealed a percentage of subjects returned home was

higher in the group receiving CASA services than in the comparison groups. This study also indicated that the subjects in the CASA group had experienced more positive changes than subjects in the comparison groups. The study then recommended that CPS and CASA begin working together early on to identify relevant information from risk-assessment and social-environmental perspectives to facilitate the court's decision-making. Since this study only involved 66 CASA cases and 107 non-CASA cases from just one CASA program, the limitation here is the ability to generalize it to other mentorship programs.

Litzelfelner (2000) studied the effectiveness of CASA in achieving positive outcomes for children involved in the child welfare system. He further examined the process variables believed to lead to permanency for children. The study defined child outcomes as: (1) case closure rates, (2) the length of time children were in court jurisdiction, and (3) the number of children adopted. It also examined the process variables: (1) type of placements children were in while in care, (2) number of court continuances, and (3) number of services provided to children and their families. The study then

compared children with CASA to those without CASA on child outcome and process variables.

Results indicated the presence of a CASA on a case did not influence permanency outcomes for children. Here, the children from the CASA group and those from the non-CASA group achieved about the same outcomes. But the findings did indicate the children with CASA have statistically fewer placements and fewer court continuances while in care compared to those without CASA. Moreover, the study also suggested children with CASA received more services during the course of the study than those without CASA.

A limitation of this study was the researcher's inability to obtain permission for random assignment of cases for the CASA programs from the juvenile court personnel and judges. Due to this selection bias, it was impossible to know if the results of the study were directly correlated to CASA interventions. Another limitation in the study was the small sample size, which makes it difficult to generalize to the larger population.

Mech, Pryde, and Rycraft (1995) studied the trends in mentorship programs for adolescents in foster care.

Data for this study were collected from 29 mentorship programs located in 15 states. The study indicated that the movement towards extending mentoring services to youth classified as at-risk was receiving considerable support in the child welfare field. They noted that, even though these programs for youths in foster care were new, small, and had low visibility, the movement shows an important transitional support.

Natural Mentor Relationships among Foster Youth

Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott Jr., and Tracy (2009) explored the nature of the non-kin natural mentoring connections among 19-year-old youths in the course of transitioning out of the foster care system. There were 189 participants in the study and they all described the existence of a natural mentor at age 19. The participants were 65% female and 58% youth of color. Seventy percent of them had endured at least one type of abuse or neglect. This study revealed that participants identified their natural mentors as grown persons who were trusted, and who presented them with a sense of feeling cared for and even loved. The researchers identified trust, consistency, empathy, and authenticity

on part of both mentors and the participants as an essential feature of the mentoring association.

This study suggested that authenticity was a decisive element of natural mentoring connections among older youth transitioning out of care and the significant natural supports in their lives. Data also revealed that participants felt understood by mentors and that it was critical to them that their mentors seemed to know and value them. A limitation of this study was the data was obtained from transcripts of only six questions suggesting the responses may lack important information. For future studies, the researchers also proposed to center on learning about both kin and non-kin natural mentors that were engaged in the lives of older youth. The following study fulfills a portion of this recommendation.

Munson and McMillen's (2006) study explored the non-kin natural mentoring relationships among older youths in foster care. This study employed a cross-sectional survey design which included 339 youths nearing their exit from one state's alternative care system. The study found that compared to white youths, non-white youths were less likely to nominate a non-kin

natural mentor. Results indicated that youths living in congregate care placement were more likely to have nominated a non-kin mentor that they met through a formal pathway than youths living with relatives. Results also showed that compared to youths living with relatives, youths living in semi-independent living situations were less likely to be in a mentoring relationship that had lasted for longer than a year. When compared to youths living with relatives, youths in congregate care settings were also less likely to be in a relationship that lasted longer than one year. A limitation to this study is that varying conceptualizations of natural mentors creates difficulties when comparing results between studies.

With the disproportionality and difficulties originating from racism, sexism, and poverty, Greeson and Bowen (2008) centered their study on the helpful experiences and caring associations that may safeguard female youth in foster care. This study was aimed at increasing knowledge and awareness about the functions of natural mentors in the lives of female foster youth of color. Greeson and Bowen (2008) collected their data from 7 teenage females with involvement in the foster care system, and who also signified a previous relationship

with a natural mentor. The researchers pulled 3 of the participants from a New England public high school, and 4 from a Southeastern Department of Social Services. All youth were females of color including African American, Hispanic and Multi-racial. Their education ranged from 7th grade through community college. The study also noted the participants named foster mothers, teachers, an extended family member, a school professional, and a former programmatic mentor as their natural mentors.

Results from the study established that on average, participants had known their natural mentors for about 36.9 months. Further, the participants were found to view trust, love, care and the sense of having a parent-child relationship as the most significant features of the youth-mentor relationship. The study also found that the youth acknowledged their natural mentors for assisting them with a positive personal transformation. The researchers also suggested that child welfare practice with foster youth can be improved by joining adolescents to concerned adults by including natural mentor affiliations into usual service delivery. As with other studies, a limitation to this study was the small sample size, which makes it difficult to generalize to the

larger population. The study suggest future research need to examine the experiences and perceptions disclosed by the participants as possible themes for larger studies.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

With regard to theoretical perspectives guiding the conceptualization of this study, Attachment Theory will serve as a framework for understanding foster youth's relationships with mentors. However, it is important to first consider other theories guiding past research. One example is relational-cultural theory. Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, and Tracy (2009) apply this theory in their study of non-kin natural mentors and foster youth. According to Munson et al. (2009), relational-cultural theory suggests that "growth fostering" relationships built on respect, mutuality, empathy and authenticity led to psychological growth and well-being while providing safety from contempt and humiliation. The authors emphasized respect as being a significant part of the Relational-Cultural theoretical equation because this aspect of the growth fostering relationship establishes a platform for accepting the other person's past life experiences regardless of who they were.

Another theoretical concept related to mentoring and foster youth is what Diehl, Howse and Trivette (2010) identify as a "positive youth developmental framework." They describe this as a movement deviating from the typical research approach focused on youth problems and deficits. Deihl et al. (2010) as cited in Damon (2004) further define this movement as treating youth like competent members of society who were capable of learning and developing like everyone else (Damon, 2004, p. 2). This concept is consistent with the strength-based solution-focused school of thought, in that seeing foster youth in this light attempts to identify assets that promote and maintain resilience through empowerment, rather than disempowerment. Deihl et al. (2010) supported this framework by finding that youth with more developmental skills had very positive attitudes about mentoring and adoption. Furthermore, youth reported interest in mentoring because they liked the idea of having "someone who checks in with them, listens to them and takes them for outings" (p. 8). This theory did support the idea that former foster youth may have strong perceptions on the type of experiences or relationships that they either had with a mentor. This perception may

also encourage social workers to inform their clients about mentors and/or mentoring programs.

Given this study is utilizing Attachment Theory as a frame of reference it is important to understand some of the guiding principles. Mary Ainsworth as cited in Lesser and Poppe (2007) explained attachment as the basis for which a young child uses the attachment figure to explore the world around them. She goes on to say the attachment figure provides a "secure base" only if he and/or she is responsive and attentive to the needs of the child. If the child's needs are responded to in a caring way, then the child is likely to trust that this person will always be there to protect and care for them. Conversely, if the attachment figure is psychologically and/or physically absent then the child will be reluctant to explore their environment because the "secure base" has not been established, therefore neither will the likelihood of building mutual trust.

Schofield and Beek (2009) also identified the "secure base" as an important concept related to attachment. They describe this as encompassing resilience, sensitivity, practical and emotional help and support. Furthermore, reliable caregivers who provide the

secure base reduce anxiety, potentially enabling the youth to move towards competence and confidence during developmental transitions, work, and peer relationships (p. 257). Schofield and Beek (2009) as cited in Cashmore and Paxton (2006) also refer to "felt security" which goes on to say that youth needed to know they have someone to walk with them in times of hardship and celebration (p. 257). This theory supports the idea presented earlier regarding the incentive for increased collaboration between public child welfare workers and community mentors may be necessary. Furthermore, mentoring and foster youth relationships could possibly help identify gaps in foster care services.

Klaus (1976) as cited in Fahlberg (1991), defined attachment as "an affectionate bond between two individuals that endures space and time and serves to join them emotionally" (p. 20). This concept and theoretical perspective is appropriate for this study because youth in foster care often experience disrupted and inconsistent attachment figures. This traumatic experience begins with youth being removed from their biological caregivers therefore, are faced with a significant and possibly permanent disruption in the

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attachment process. Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of the foster care system is these youth are often moved multiple times in care. Tragically this causes youth to experience cycle of broken attachments because most youth in foster care find themselves in several different placements. With that said, foster youth are unlikely to build any kind of meaningful bond with peers or caregivers. This cycle is likely to result in ongoing mistrust and superficial relationships throughout their life. In the absence of consistent and trustworthy attachment figures, mentors can potentially provide a "secure base" thereby allowing the youth to experience a healthy and consistent relationship from which to learn and grow.

Summary

When discussing the impact mentoring relationships had on the lives of foster youth, the overall results are positive with regard to psychosocial and developmental outcomes. Areas such as, peer relationships, social support, developing trust, participation in higher education, stabilizing mental health and decreased engagement in high risk behaviors were reported to

improve during the course of the mentoring relationships. While these results are promising, some of the literature identified the absence of empirical evidence needed to support the design and implementation of mentoring programs aimed at meeting the needs of youths in foster care. Unfortunately, capturing empirical evidence needed to fully understand the true impact mentor relationships have on the youth in care is difficult to quantify and measure. Part of this difficulty arises from not having standardized tools available to gather the data.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

Chapter three will present the methods used to conduct this research study. After the introduction, a number of research methods are discussed which include: study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, protection of human subjects, procedures and data analysis. Following the methods sections is a brief summary of what was examined.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine former foster youth's perceptions of the mentor programs/relationships they had while in foster care. With respect to this study, mentors include those that are "informal" or "formal." Natural mentors are individuals former foster youth considered to be an influential figure at some point in their life. Examples include, but are not limited to, teachers, athletic coaches, neighbors, family members, foster parents etc. Formal mentors were viewed as individuals who were purposefully recruited and trained by mentoring programs

with the specific goal of serving foster youth who reside in foster care within immediate and/or surrounding communities (Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995). Examples include, but are not limited to, Court Appointed Special Advocates, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and Guardian Ad Litem programs. Related literature has suggested that community mentors, whether natural or formal, have the potential to provide foster youth who come from neglectful and abusive environments an opportunity to re-experience an adult figure in a trusting and supportive relationship (Greeson & Bowen, 2008).

In order to examine former foster youth's perceptions of mentors while in care, the study employed a qualitative research design by way of face-to-face interviews. Eighteen former foster youth ranging from 18-24 years of age participated in the interviews. All of which are currently participating San Bernardino County's Independent Living Program, Aftercare Services. An interview guide designed by the research team was used to structure individual interviews.

Rationale for choosing the qualitative research method and face-to-face interview is grounded in the fact that this type of data collection permits higher response

rates, quality of data, attention to nonverbal responses and flexibility with regard to data collection. This is an appropriate approach in that it allowed the researchers to gain comprehensive and in-depth insight about the experiences of the foster youth. Furthermore this approach is applicable given the small and unique sample size, but also because the definitions of mentors for foster care youths are often defined in different ways. Face-to-face interviews permitted data collection in the form of words, descriptions and narratives.

As with most studies, whether quantitative or qualitative, there are limitations. For this study the limitations are: small sample size, non-representative and non-probability sample, and inability to generalize the findings among similar populations.

Sampling

The sample of this study included eighteen former foster youth currently participating in the San Bernardino County Independent Living Program, a subsidy of Aftercare Services. The sampling method used in this study was convenient and purposeful. The population size that the sample was drawn from is 371. This sample is

most appropriate for this study because the foster youth are the ones who have experienced mentors while in foster care, therefore were able to provide direct responses based on their individual experiences. As indicated earlier, all the participants were 18 years of age or older therefore, legally able to provide consent for participation.

The number of participants in the study is appropriate given time constraints and funding. To meet our sampling criteria, the eighteen participants were former foster youth ranging from 18-24 years of age and are currently participating in the San Bernardino County Independent Living Program, Aftercare Services. Quality of data shall not be compromised given the chosen data collection method. The study had a very diverse group within this sample, as it was approximately representation of the demographic make-up of the youths currently in foster care in San Bernardino County.

Data Collection and Instruments

As previously mentioned, data was collected by way of face-to-face interviews. During the face-to-face interviews, data was hand-written on the interview guide,

as well as audio taped. In order to obtain the most relevant and appropriate data to effectively examine this research question, an interview guide comprised of 26 questions was utilized. The interview guide covered three sections as it related to former foster youth. The first part related to the foster youth's past experiences with mentors. Such as, definition of mentor, length of mentor/mentee relationship, like or dislike of the mentor, name of the program (if applicable), contact with mentor etc. The second part focused on the foster youth's placement information while they were in foster care. These questions asked about length of time in foster care, age when entered foster care and number of placements while in foster care. A final part of the guide related to participant demographic information. This included: age, ethnicity, and gender (Refer to Appendix A for a list of the questions to appear on the interview guide).

In an effort to identify any unforeseen problems with the interview guide, a pretest interview was conducted with a former foster youth. This youth is not a part of the study. Therefore, the responses were not included in the results. One reason for the pretest was

to assess the research instrument. In addition, pretest allowed the researchers to determine whether the questions were worded clearly, not confusing and gathered relevant and usable data.

The data collection methods and instruments had their strengths and limitations alike. Our interview guide was designed to maintain focus upon the participant's experiences with, and opinions about mentors while in foster care. Additionally, our data collection method maximized response rates and quality of data. Moreover, our physical presence during the interview was advantageous because we could listen, take notes and record the data based on each individual narrative. Our presence also allowed us to clarify questions when they were confusing or unclear. On the other hand, a limitation considered was the participant potentially feeling violated by some of the questions in the interview guide. It is worth noting that this did not turn out to be true for any of the participants.

The investigators collaborated with and were guided by their research advisor from California State University San Bernardino, as well as members of the Legislation and Research Unit in San Bernardino County

Human Services System. Investigators devised the interview questions with the intent of obtaining relevant and distinguishing information related to the study. The investigative team also created the guide based on information derived from the literature reviews.

Procedures

The data was gathered through eighteen face-to-face interviews. An interview guide designed by the investigators was used to conduct each interview. All responses to the questions were recorded on audiotape. In addition, to verbal responses and nonverbal responses of the participants were also noted manually.

To solicit participants, the investigators sent out flyers to the San Bernardino County Independent Living Program (ILP), Aftercare Services. The ILP Program Coordinator agreed to forward the flyers, via email, to their staff, as well as local service providers/approved contractors serving former foster youth currently participating in the ILP program. The staff and contracting agencies also agreed to provide the information to individuals interested in participating in the study. The researchers then set up meetings with the

prospective participants through the ILP staff and local contracting agencies service providers to discuss the study and physically recruit them.

Once the participant's eligibility had been established by the investigators, a meeting was arranged at the ILP program's local office, the participant's own residence and other neutral locations. The participants were offered a Jack-in-the Box gift card to recognize them for their time and participation in the study. The interviews were conducted on an average of four interviews per week for a period of five weeks. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. Following the interviews, the participants were asked if the investigators can contact them at a later time if any additional information is needed. Once the interviews were completed, the data analysis and synthesis of the material began in April 2011. Data analysis and synthesis lasted approximately two weeks.

Protection of Human Subjects

In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, at no time during the interview process was a participant's identity linked with the data provided.

Informed consent was received from each individual prior to participating in the research. The informed consent presented the participants information on how they will be protected during their participation in the study. The informed consent provided the participants with information on: the purpose of the study, a description of the interview guide, the participation of the subject, confidentiality or anonymity, duration of the interview, risks and benefits of their participation in the study, expected date for the results of the study, and the contact information of the research advisor. The data was coded, meaning a random number between one and eighteen was assigned to each participant to match the researcher's documentation to the relevant interviewee. Therefore, no connection will ever be made as to the identity of the interviewee or the data recorded from the interview. Once again, this method was meant to maintain the confidentiality of each participant. The researchers stored the data in a computer file, which was then kept in a locked cabinet. All participant information remained confidential and was destroyed at the conclusion of this research. Informed consent was received from each individual prior to participating in the research.

Furthermore, participants were provided debriefing statements at the conclusion of the each interview. Included in the debriefing statement was contact information for two individuals who the participants would be able to consult with in case of distress resulings from participation.

Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative data analysis techniques. Eighteen Face-to-face interviews were audio taped. Also, particular details were hand-written on the interview guide itself. Employing both methods as a source of data collection permitted the investigators to gather accurate information from the participants. This assisted in processing and analyzing the data. The first step of qualitative analysis was to transcribe the information from the audio taped and hand-written interview content. Following this step, the investigators devised a plan for data analysis which included identifying meaning units otherwise known as categories. This included documenting the meaning units in a journal. The third step in the analysis of data involved assigning codes to the categories. As part of the coding process

similarities and differences were drawn out in order to determine relationships between each category. Step four of the data analysis was to describe categories identified in step 3 of the analysis process. In addition, the investigators counted the number of times each category appeared. This part of the data analysis allowed the investigators to obtain meaningful information from the data set. The final step of data analysis related to assessing the trustworthiness of the data. The investigators utilized triangulation and member checking, which are two established methods for ensuring information from the data is consistent. A full description of the participants' demographics was also made available within the data analysis of this study.

Summary

The goal of this chapter was to outline and explain the research methods that were employed throughout the study. The outline included the study design, sampling procedure, data collection and instrument, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis. Each of the categories performed a vital function to the research process. Therefore, it has been essential to include each

category in the study in order to maintain appropriate

research methodology.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter describes the findings of this study.

Qualitative research method and data analysis were

utilized to achieve the purpose of this study. Eighteen

former foster youth participated in separate face-to-face

interviews. To guide the interviews, a structured

interview schedule composed of open and closed ended

questions were designed. Each interview was audio taped

and manually recorded to ensure the participant's

experiences were fully captured.

Presentation of the Findings

After completing the interviews, the data were

transcribed word for word according to the audiotape.

Following the transcription of the data, the study team

compared the audio and manually recorded data to ensure

accuracy. Next, the study team began identifying the

categories, subcategories and responses within the data

set in order to present the following analysis.

A total of 18 former foster youth participated in

the study. All 18 participants identified having been in

foster care within the County of San Bernardino. Of the
18 participants interviewed, 61% were female and 39% were
male. Moreover, the ethnic breakdown is as follows: Black
not Hispanic totaled 44% and Hispanic 28%. Seventeen
percent of participants identified as being "other". Of
this seventeen percent, two participants identified as
Hispanic/White and one as Black/Asian. The least
represented ethnic group was White not Hispanic at 11%.

Age ranges of participants were between 18 and 24
years old. Of the eighteen participants, 50% were between
20 and 21 years old and 28% were between 18 and 19 years
of age. The remaining participants were between 22 and 24
years old.

With regard to the educational background of the
participants, 94% of the participants had obtained "some
college" education while the remaining 6% completed "high
school".

Now that the demographical information has been
presented, the remaining analysis will explain the data
describing the participant's perceptions of mentors.
Therefore, the following categories were extrapolated
from the transcribed data to achieve this purpose. With

that said, the interview schedule began by asking two general questions about the mentoring relationship.

Who are the Mentors

When participants were asked if they had a mentor while in foster care, all 18 participants stated they had. When asked who they identified as a mentor while in foster care 3 categories surfaced. Of the 18 participants who responded, six identified their "foster mom" as their mentor. This turned out to be the largest category. The second largest category of mentors identified were "professionals" which include: teachers, group home staff, social workers and therapists. Three participants identified a teacher, one identified group home staff, one identified a therapist and one identified a social worker.

The third largest category of mentors identified were "friends, guardians and family members". Three participants identified friends, two identified family members and one identified a legal guardian.

Definition of Mentors

When participants were asked about the definition of a mentor, twenty-six different responses were recorded. Each response was counted according to the number of

times it was stated throughout the interviewing process. While all responses were relevant, four defining categories surfaced which include: Role Model/Look Up To, Helpful/Supportive, Guidance, and Trustworthy.

The category "Role Model/Look Up To" was most prevalent as it was stated 13 times during the interviews. For example, one respondent said, "A mentor is someone who you can look up to and see what they have achieved to give you an insight and inspiration of what you want to be yourself and what you want to achieve in life" (Participant 6, Personal interview, February 2011). Another participant stated "someone who you look up to and want to follow in their footsteps. Someone you will want to be like and take their success or something and turn it into your own" (Participant #7, Personal interview, February 2011).

The second most dominate category was "Helpful/Supportive", as it was stated 9 times. One respondent offered this response, "someone that if you need any help or have any trouble you can go to them and they can try to assist you with anything you need (Participant #10, Personal interview, February 2011).

The third most dominate category identified was "Guidance", as it was referred to six times. This participant's response offers insight about the significance of the mentoring relationship by saying "a mentor is someone who helps you accomplish your goals and is also able to steer you along the right path, but also gives you a reality check when you are not heading along the right path" (Participant #11, Personal interview, February 2011).

A final category was "Trustworthy". While this response was counted only four times, it reflects the value and impact a mentor can have in the life a foster youth. One participant offered this response;

> I felt confident in what I told her was not going to be told to anyone else. It was refreshing and felt like I could trust her and tell her anything that I need and she would give me vital feedback. She never steered me wrong. (Participant #18, Personal interview, March 2011)

The following categories will offer information about how foster youth describe their experience with a mentor, as well as provide more clarification of the youth's perception of them. The four categories

indentified are as follows: Description of experience
with mentors/program, liked/disliked about mentoring
experience, what did mentor influence most/least and what
do you still use today. Under each category,
subcategories were established.

Description of Experience with Mentor

When asked to describe their experience with their
mentors, the responses provided were classified into two
subcategories: emotional experience and learning
experience. Under emotional experience, 16 responses were
identified. Of the 16 responses, three were most common:
positive, supportive and trusting. For example, one
participant responded, "She is more like my mother. I
lived with her and could tell her anything and trust her
with anything and we are very close" (Participant 4,
Personal interview, February 2011). While some
participants described their experience in detail, others
were direct and to the point. One participant said, "It
was uplifting and very positive" (Participant #5,
Personal interview, February 2011).

Another participant was quoted as saying;

It was good. Anytime I was feeling down or struggled

in school she always been my support. She would say,

"O.K. you can do this and don't let it stress you out". She would always sit with me one-on-one and help me process my thoughts or whatever she was always my support. It was positive. (Participant #9, Personal interview, February 2011)

With respect to the learning experiences, ten responses were documented. Of the ten responses, two were prominent including enlightening and guidance. One participant offered this response;

He was like a father figure, he would tell me what was wrong from right and helped me get into college. He let me make my own decisions and would help me by telling me why that decision was a good or bad. I told him I wanted to be a teacher and he told me to be the best I could be. (Participant #7, Personal interview, February 2011)

Another participant stated;

My experience was definitely enlightening and my mentor broadened my horizon. My mentor took me to Barnes and Noble to get new books, to feed the homeless, spend time with her family and ultimately see new parts of the world had she not come into my life. She even got me into taking school more

seriously and thinking about colleges and preparing

me for the things I needed to know to go to college.

(Participant #18, Personal interview, March 2011)

What did Mentees Like/Dislike about Mentors

Participants were asked to share their perceptions

about what they liked and/or disliked about having a

mentoring relationship. Three subcategories emerged:

self-esteem, companionship and no dislikes.

With respect to the category of self-esteem, nine

responses were identified. Of the nine responses, two

were counted most often: confidence building and trust.

For example, one participant stated;

I think that they pushed me to do things that in the

beginning I could not do. I would always tell myself

I could not do it, they (mentor) would say yes you

can do it, and they will push me to do the things I

thought I could not do. In doing so they gave me

confidence and motivation. (Participant #4, Personal

interview, February 2011)

Another participant offered this statement;

I felt confident in that whatever I told her was

going to stay between us. It was refreshing and felt

like I could trust her and tell her anything that I

need and she would give me vital feedback and never

steer me wrong. (Participant #18, Personal

interview, March 2011)

Interviewees identified 14 responses related to

guidance and listening. Of the 14 responses, three were

mentioned more than twice: Someone I could talk to,

someone who listened and gave you advice and hearing

someone else's opinion. For example, one participant

stated;

I liked that you can ask them (mentor) for their

opinion about something you are not clear about and

they could give you an answer from their own

experience, but because you have a different view,

you can evaluate the advice and make your own

decisions. (Participants #6, Personal interview,

February 2011)

Another respondent replied;

I liked just having someone to talk to regardless of

what it was about. I knew I could just go and

explain to them how my day went and if I was having

a bad day, I was able to get things of my chest by

just talking to them. (Participant #9, Personal

interview, February 2011)

While understanding what the youth liked about the experience is valuable, the study also explored what they disliked about the experience. Therefore, when asked what they disliked about having a mentor, 44% of the youth stated there was "nothing" they disliked about the relationship. However, the remaining participants offered a diverse range of responses such as "that it didn't happen sooner", when I let them down" and "they always knew my business."

What Mentors Influence Most/Least

When participants were asked what areas of their life the mentor influenced the most, one dominant category emerged: education. Twelve of the youth indicated the mentor had influence this area of their life. Of the 12 youth, seven indicated being influenced the most in high school. One participant stated, "Going to school because she saw I did good and she would say, oh yea, you are going to college. She felt like if I went another route it would have been a failure. So she motivated me to continue" (Participant #10, Personal interview, February 2011).

Another participant offered this response;

I would probably say my education when she came into

my life. I was on probation and, not hanging out

with the right people. So she opened my eyes to take

education seriously and showed me how far education

can actually take me. (Participant #18, Personal

interview, March 2011)

What Mentees Still Use Today

Participants were asked if there was anything they

learned from their mentor(s) they still use today. Two

subcategories emerged: personal values and active

guidance/life skills.

With respect to personal values, 14 responses were

identified however, 2 were referenced the most:

determination and persistence. One participant was quoted

as saying;

Staying persistent and striving to do my best. She

taught me how to strive for myself, and since she

did it on her own without a husband and made it,

gave me the belief that I can also make it as long

as I get my education in school. (Participant #11,

Personal interview, February 2011)

Another participated offered this response, "Just how to think or act on things and I guess knowing my goals and how to get there and knowing that nothing can slow me down. I guess you can say being determined and confident" (Participant #6, Personal interview, February 2011).

Another participant said "Just things liked being family oriented. I feel family oriented and these are values I feel like I have gained" (Participant #10, Personal interview, February 2011). One other participant was clear and to the point and responded by saying, "being responsible, honest and not giving up". (Participant #14, Personal interview, March 2011)

Ten responses comprised the active guidance/life skills category. Of the ten responses, 2 were most dominate: independence and express emotions. For example, this participant stated that, "Learning to cook, drive and how to be independent. I guess you can say that I now know how to do things on my own for myself from having her as a mentor." (Participant #4, Personal interview, February 2011)

This participant said;

I know to take my time before making any rush

decisions. I think about all the different angles

and how my decisions can affect myself and other

people. And I still know to also give back to the

community when I can. (Participant #18, Personal

interview, March 2011) While this quote also speaks

to the youths ability to make rational decisions for

themselves the following quote offers insight into

how mentors helped the mentees manage their

emotions: "I know how to control my temper and

communicate appropriately and know how to love and

express it, show it. I use everything she taught

me". (Participant #9, Personal interview, February

2011)

Summary

This data was collected by way of eighteen

face-to-face interviews with former foster youth. To

guide the interviews, a structured interview schedule

composed of 26 questions was developed. Of the 26

questions, fourteen opened-ended questions were used to

understand former foster youth's perceptions of the

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mentoring relationship/program. Each interview was audio taped and manually recorded. All participants volunteered to be a part of the research.

After completing the interviews, the data were transcribed word for word and organized into categories. Following the identification of major categories, subcategories were developed to further analyze the data. This task was achieved by listing all the responses provided and grouping them into the appropriate categories.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter discusses the results of this study. It also includes recommendations for practice, policy and research. Additionally, limitations of the study will be discussed as well as implications for research. Following implications are the limitations of the study and an abstract highlighting the major findings.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to understand former foster youth's perceptions of mentor programs/relationships. While the study anticipated their perceptions to be positive, additional information was sought to provide an in depth understanding of such a unique experience. In order to achieve this objective, the data was collected from face-to-face interviews with eighteen former foster youth. All participants had identified having a mentor while in foster care.

After reviewing the demographical characteristics of the participants, two important findings surfaced. The first of which is related to the ethnic background of the

participants. Compared to Caucasian, Hispanic, Asian and

Other, the largest ethnic population represented in the

sample was African American totaling 44%. This is

important to draw attention to because the

overrepresentation of this ethnic population is well

documented in the foster care system at the national and

state level. The U.S. department of Health and Human

services 2002 data, as cited in Scannapieco et al (2007),

found that 15% of the children under the age of 18 were

African American, while this population represented 30%

of those in foster care. This data is consistent with the

current study's findings among the 18 former foster youth

interviewed.

A second key finding drawn from the demographical

characteristics relates to education. It is also well

documented that children residing in foster care have

significantly lower educational achievement when compared

to peers in the general population. According to the

Children's Law Center of Los Angeles (2010), 75% of

children in foster care are working below grade level,

35% are in special education, 46% do not complete high

school (as compared to 16% of non-foster youth), and as

few as 15% attend college. Contrary to the national

trend, this study found that 94% of the participants were either currently enrolled in college or had taken college classes.

While analyzing the demographical characteristics is important, understanding how the youth described their mentoring experience comprised the core of the study. The study found that all 18 youth viewed their experience as a positive one. Moreover, this finding is also congruent with the youths definition of a mentor. The most dominate and reoccurring description of a mentor was perceived to be someone the youth defined as a "role model". Thus, the study discovered the youth looked to the mentor as a person they held to a higher standard, aspired to be like and respected. Further, the youth spoke of being able to observe and reflect on what their mentor had achieved in his or her life and applied to their own. Considering foster youth are less likely to have a positive role model while growing up, this key finding indicates mentors play a critical role during an extremely vulnerable time in the life a foster youth.

Another key finding of the study is related to how the youth described the experience with the mentor. Two such descriptions identified include emotional and

learning experiences. Emotional descriptors indicated

characteristics that are indicative of most healthy

relationships. Such descriptive terms included someone to

talk to, friendship, supportive, caring, genuine and

trustworthy. Knowing the youth perceived their mentors in

this light is compelling because many foster youth have

experienced unhealthy relationships. Therefore, the youth

may be left with a distorted perception of what healthy

relationships entail.

Further, the participants' descriptions of the

mentoring experience showed that mentors offered a source

of emotional support during a very difficult time of the

youth's life. The above finding was consistent with

Greeson and Bowen (2008) who found that trust, love,

caring and emotional support were constantly identified

by the youth when discussing their relationships with

their mentors while in foster care.

Another key finding related to emotional experiences

was the youth's capacity to manage strong emotions. The

study found that youth perceived the mentor to have

helped them learn how to regulate and express their

emotions more appropriately. The youth credited this with

having someone to talk to, being heard and getting

feedback about what was discussed. Being able to express

emotions is a valuable lesson for these youth because

anger, depression, hopelessness, and fear often plague

this population and ultimately interfere with

psychosocial functioning. In fact, Munson and McMillen

(2008) found that youth nominating a mentor reported

fewer depressive symptoms, lower levels of stress and

higher life satisfaction. Moreover, the current study

suggests that having the opportunity to re-experience a

positive relationship, develop trust and obtain new

perceptions of a close relationship with the mentor can

help foster youth effectively cope with unresolved

emotions resulting from the trauma of disrupted

attachments.

With respect to the youth's learning experiences

some key findings were revealed. The most notable was the

mentors teaching the majority of youth the value and

importance of education, particularly college education.

As was previously indicated, 94% of the youth interviewed

were in college or had some college education. This

statistic alone speaks to the role mentors played in

influencing the youth to explore facets of their life

they may have never considered had they not developed

such a relationship. Many of the participants credited the mentor with influencing their choice to seek secondary education and benefited from having the support in doing so.

Mentors' offering their support and guidance was also a key finding of the study. This is congruent with the earlier key finding related to the youth's perception of a mentor as "role model/someone they look up to". All of the youth identified at least one thing their mentor had supported them in or provided guidance with. Mentors were found to have offered guidance in money management, education, transportation, cooking, grocery shopping, filling out job applications, personal relationships and child rearing. This finding is very significant because life outcomes for transitional age youth are typically grim. Studies have found high rates of homelessness and incarceration, poor physical and mental health, limited educational attainment, higher unemployment and use of public assistance, and higher rates of parenting and substance abuse among transitional age foster youth when compared to their peers (Spencer, Renee, Collins, Elizabeth, Ward, Rolanda, Smashneya and Svetlana, 2010).

The study also found that two-thirds of the youth interviewed are currently still in contact with their mentor. This is encouraging because it appears the youth have established a long term and potentially permanent connection to someone they value and respect. Such a finding is important because child welfare professionals have recognized the importance of permanent connections among foster youth. Therefore, legislative initiatives have been implemented at federal, state and local levels encouraging social service agencies serving this population to integrate such permanency practices into their organizational structure.

A final key finding resulting from this study was that none of the youth identified having had a formal mentor while in foster care. In fact, only 2 of the 18 participants had been told such programs existed. This is not to undermine the quality and value of informal mentors, rather suggests attention needs to be given to such an alternative. While this finding cannot be ignored, it did not permit the study an opportunity to explore any potential differences or similarities about how such relationships were perceived.

Recommendations for Social Work
Practice, Policy and Research

One recommendation is that additional mentoring

programs need to be established in the community. Social

workers currently refer foster youth to formal mentors

when they feel the youth could benefit. However, it

appears there is a lack of such programs in the county.

To support this observation the San Bernardino County

Foster Care Summit (2006) found progress is needed in

this area. The Summits council specifically identified

formal mentoring agencies such as C.A.S.A. and Big

Brothers/Big Sisters. While not all foster youth would

benefit from a formal mentor, such programs may be a cost

effective resource during such difficult economic times.

Moreover, formal mentoring programs within the community

are likely to forge relationships with other public and

private child welfare agencies leading to a more

comprehensive safety net for such a vulnerable

population.

Besides suggesting there is a need for additional

formal mentoring programs, these findings present a

strong argument that more research should be completed

regarding the availability of formal mentoring programs

that recruit and train community volunteers. One the

other hand, this study has allowed foster youth to share

their perspective about the mentoring experience, thus

offered social workers a rare look into the benefits of

having a mentor. However, other research methods need to

be initiated to further support or refute the findings of

this study.

This study recommends more research be initiated

exploring the roles both informal and formal mentors play

in the lives of foster youth. Further findings of such

research are likely to provide child welfare

administrators with empirical evidence supporting mentors

as potentially valuable community partners. Additional

research could also build a case for lobbying policy

makers, which then could provide access to funding for

developing formal mentoring programs. Another

recommendation is for future studies to examine a larger

and more diverse sample size. Additionally, getting

access to the youth involved with the existing formal

mentoring programs will likely result in increased

validity and reliability.

Limitations

The most obvious limitation of the study was the small sample size. Although the participants were diverse with respect to ethnicity, gender and age, the number of participants is simply too small to generalize the findings.

A second limitation to the study is the absence of further clarification with particular questions during the interview. The study results would have likely offered a greater understanding of former foster youths perceptions of the relationship with their mentor, particularly with respect to emotional experiences. Another limitation to the study is not including a comparison group. In other words, the study purposefully sought youth who identified as having a mentor while in care. Therefore, it can be argued the findings are not generalizable, nor are they representative of the foster youth population.

Limitations also include the inability to distinguish whether or not the participants were offering less then honest responses to the questions being asked of them. At the same time the study team did not have any reason to believe the participants were not being

truthful. A final limitation to the study is that many of the participants new each other by way of school, work, family relations and living arrangements. This could compromise the integrity of this study's findings if they discussed the study prior to or following the interview process.

Conclusions

This study examined the perception of former foster youth regarding their experiences with mentor programs/relationships while in foster care. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 18 former foster youth to collect the data. The study found that "foster mom" was identified as the largest category of mentors by the participants. This category was followed by "professionals" which included teachers, group home staff, social workers and therapists. A final category of mentors identified were "friends, guardians and family members".

Another finding of the study was that the participants defined a mentor as someone who they considered as helpful/supportive, providing guidance, trustworthy, and a role model. The study also found that

a majority of the participants described their experiences with their mentors as positive, supportive, trusting, genuine, caring, enlightening, and educational. Additionally, the study revealed that a majority of the participants cited their mentors as helping them develop trust, confidence, independence, and companionship. Another key finding was that a large number of the participants credited their mentors for helping them in the specific areas of education, career goals, regulations of emotions, self-esteem, attitude, how to love, and developing and maintaining positive relationships. Finally, the study revealed that two-thirds of the youth are currently still in contact with their mentor.

Implications for Practice

Findings from this study also suggest implications for social work practice. The first such implication is that informal mentors are an asset for foster youth, as well as child welfare workers. According to this study, former foster youth perceived mentors to provide support in some critical areas of functioning while in care. Social workers rarely have the time needed to spend with

foster youth and must rely on community resources to provide even the most basic needs of their clients. Therefore, the results from this study indicate that mentors could offer social workers an additional resource to help augment the existing system of foster care.

A second implication of this study is that mentors appear to be one way in which social workers can use to help connect the youth with a long term and positive role model. Hearing that foster youth perceived their mentor to be someone they grew to trust, respect and depend on has a profound implication for practice because these qualities are often missing or distorted within their own families of origin. Therefore, if social workers were able to use mentors as a resource, not only would they have provided service, but will likely improve the youth's quality of life.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Study of former foster youth's perceptions of the quality and value of formal mentorship programs while they were in foster care.

PART I: EXPERIENCE WITH MENTORS

1. While you were in foster care, was there someone you considered a role model or mentor? If so, who?

   _____

   _____

2. What is your definition of a mentor?

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. How long were you in foster care before you had a mentor? Or someone like that?
   1. Less than 1 year
   2. 1 – 2 years
   3. 3 – 4 years
   4. 5 – 6 years
   5. 7 or more years

4. From whom did you first learn about mentors for foster care youth?

   _____

5. How long was your relationship with your mentor(s)?
   1. Less than 1 year
   2. 1 – 2 years
   3. 3 – 4 years
   4. 5 – 6 years
   5. 7 or more years

6. Are you still in touch with your mentor?
   1. Yes
   2. No

7. What was the name of the agency(s) or program(s) that your mentor(s) was from?

_____

_____

8. How would you describe your experience(s) with your mentor(s)?

_____

_____

_____

9. What did you **like** about having a mentor(s)?

_____

_____

10. What did you **dislike** about having a mentor(s)?

_____

_____

11. What area(s) of your life did your mentor(s) influence the **most**?

_____

_____

12. What areas of your life did your mentor(s) influence the **least**?

_____

_____

13. Is there anything that you learned from your experience(s) with your mentor(s) that you still use today?

_____

_____

14. Thinking about your experiences as a former foster youth who had a mentor, and given a chance to start your own mentorship program, how would yours be different than the one you experienced?

_____

_____

15. Do you have any suggestions for other mentors/programs that serve foster youth?

_____

_____

16. Would you recommend other foster youth to participate in mentorship programs? Why or why not?

_____

_____

PART II: FOSTER CARE PLACEMENT

17. What age did you enter the foster care system?
    1. 0 – 5 years old
    2. 6 – 10 years old
    3. 11 – 15 years old
    4. 16 years and older

18. How long were you in foster care?
    1. 0 – 5 years
    2. 6 – 10 years
    3. 11 – 15 years
    4. 16 or more years

19. How many foster care placements did you have while you were in care?

    _____

20. What type of placement(s) were you in while in foster care?
    (Please **check all that applies**):
    1. Relative Foster Care
    2. Non-relative Foster Care
    3. Group Home
    4. Other (Please Specify):_____

PART III: BACKGROUND:

21. How old are you?
    1. 18 – 19 years old
    2. 20 – 21 years old
    3. 22 – 23 years old
    4. 24 years and older

22. How old are you?
    1. 18 – 19 years old
    2. 20 – 21 years old
    3. 22 – 23 years old
    4. 24 years and older

23. What is your ethnicity? (please **check only one**):
    1. White not Hispanic
    2. Black not Hispanic
    3. Hispanic
    4. Asian or Pacific Islander
    5. American Indian/Alaskan Native
    6. Other (Please Specify): _____

24. Please check the highest level of school completed:
    1. Elementary School
    2. Middle School/Junior High School
    3. High School
    4. Community College/Some College
    5. College/University (Undergraduate Level)
    6. Graduate or Professional School

25. What city do you currently reside in? _____

26. What is your current living arraignment/situation?
    1. Live alone
    2. Live with a girlfriend/boyfriend
    3. Live with a friend/roommate
    4. Live with a relative
    5. Other (Please Specify): _____.

27. How would you describe your current support system?

    _____

    _____

Developed by Kwaku Boasiako and Ryan Shroads

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APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

You are invited to add your opinions to a study on former foster youth's perceptions of the quality and value of mentorship programs/relationships while they were in foster care This study is being conducted by Ryan Shroads and Kwaku Boasiako, MSW students from California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) under the supervision of Dr. Janet Cheng, Professor of Social Work Research, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this research is to provide an in-depth understanding about how former foster youths perceived their experiences with mentorship programs/relationships while in care.

DESCRIPTION: If you are a participant in this study, you will be participating in an interview that is guided by the Interview Guide (Questionnaire). The interview guide is composed of questions that will ask about your experience(s) with mentorship programs/relationship while you were in foster care.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is totally voluntary, therefore you are free to skip any question you do not want to answer and/or withdraw from the interview at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: The information you provide for this study will remain confidential and anonymous and no record will be made or kept of your name or any identifying information. The data obtained from these questionnaires will only be viewed by the researchers. All participant information will remain anonymous and will be destroyed at the conclusion of this research.

DURATION: The interview should take approximately than 30 minutes long.

RISKS: There are no foreseen long or short term risks associated with participating in this study and no direct personal benefits involved.

BENEFITS: It is our hope that our study will provide an opportunity for social workers to understand the in-depth experiences of foster youth and mentorship programs/relationships, which could guide promising practices during case planning and case management throughout the County of San Bernardino.

VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH: I understand that this research will be audio recorded. Initials_____.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Dr. Janet Chang, Professor of Social Work Research, California State University, San Bernardino at (909) 537-5184.

RESULTS: The results of this study will be made available in the John M. Pfau Library at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) after September 30, 2011.

SIGNATURE: By initialing below, you agree that you have been fully informed about the research and this interview content and are volunteering to take part.

Place a check mark here	**Date:**

APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

"What are former foster youth's perceptions in regards to their experiences with mentorship programs/relationships while they were in foster care?"

Debriefing Statement

This study you have just completed has explored former foster youth's perceptions regarding their experiences with mentorship programs/relationships while in foster care. The researchers were particularly interested in the participants' views based on their individual experiences with mentorship programs/relationships. It is hoped that findings from this study will provide social workers with an in depth understanding of how youth in care perceived their experiences, including what they did or did not like about this experience. Further, results from this research have the potential to promote the use of community mentorship programs as a promising practice during case planning. Additionally, this study aims to offer current and past social workers an opportunity to hear a unique perspective regarding foster youth's experiences with mentorship programs/relationships and how these experiences impacted specific moments during and following transitioning from care. Finally, understanding how foster youth feel about their experience has the potential to motivate social workers to collaborating with community members and agencies who remain committed to improving quality of life, services and future outcomes for youth in the foster care system.

Thank you for your participation in this study and for not discussing the contents of the questionnaire with others. If you feel uncomfortable or distress as a result of participating in this study or have questions regarding the study you are advised to contact Dr. Janet Chang at (909) 537-5184. If you would like to obtain a copy of the results of this study, please contact Dr. Janet Chang after September 30, 2011.

APPENDIX D

CONSENT TO AUDIO TAPE INTERVIEWS

.

PHOTOGRAPH/VIDEO/AUDIO USE
INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR NON-MEDICAL HUMAN SUBJECTS

As part of this research project, we will be making a photograph/videotape/audiotape recording of you during your participation in the experiment. Please indicate what uses of this photograph/videotape/audiotape you are willing to consent to by initialing below. You are free to initial any number of spaces from zero to all of the spaces, and your response will in no way affect your credit for participating. We will only use the photograph/videotape/audiotape in ways that you agree to. In any use of this photograph/videotape/audiotape, your name would *not* be identified. If you do not initial any of the spaces below, the photograph/videotape/audiotape will be destroyed.

Please indicate the type of informed consent

☐ Photograph   ☐ Videotape   ☐ Audiotape

(AS APPLICABLE)

- The photograph/videotape/audiotape can be studied by the research team for use in the research project.

  Please initial: _____

- The photograph/videotape/audiotape can be shown/played to subjects in other experiments.

  Please initial: _____

- The photograph/videotape/audiotape can be used for scientific publications.

  Please initial: _____

- The photograph/videotape/audiotape can be shown/played at meetings of scientists.

  Please initial: _____

- The photograph/videotape/audiotape can be shown/played in classrooms to students.

  Please initial: _____

- The photograph/videotape/audiotape can be shown/played in public presentations to nonscientific groups.

  Please initial: _____

- The photograph/videotape/audiotape can be used on television and radio.

  Please initial: _____

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of the photograph/videotape/audiotape as indicated above.

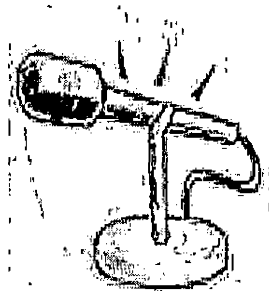The extra copy of this consent form is for your records.

_____   _____

Place a check mark here   **Date**

APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT FLYER

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD

This is your opportunity to be apart of a research project that can help other youth transitioning from care!!!!!!!

**DID YOU HAVE A MENTOR WHILE YOU WERE IN FOSTER CARE?
ARE YOU WILLING TO SHARE THAT EXPERIENCE?**

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

To understand former foster youth's perception of their experiences with mentorship programs while in foster care

WHO:

Will be conducted by MSW students from Cal State San Bernardino. Face to face interviews will take place during January-March of 2011 with the first 20 foster youth who agree to participate

*****More details soon to come*****

CONTACT INFO:
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Kwaku Boasiako   Email: boasiakk@csusb.edu
Kevin Anderson   Email: kanderson@hss.sbcounty.gov or 909-891-3677
GIFT CARDS WILL BE A PROVIDED TO ACKNOWLEDGE PARTICIPATION

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors

collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the

project, certain authors took primary responsibility.

These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed

below.

1. Data Collection:

Team Effort: Kwaku Boasiako & Ryan Shroads

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Kwaku Boasiako & Ryan Shroads

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

a. Introduction and Literature

Team Effort: Kwaku Boasiako & Ryan Shroads

b. Methods

Team Effort: Kwaku Boasiako & Ryan Shroads

c. Results

Team Effort: Kwaku Boasiako & Ryan Shroads

d. Discussion

Team Effort: Kwaku Boasiako & Ryan Shroads