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Do program practices matter for mentors?: How implementation of empirically supported program practices is associated with youth mentoring relationship quality

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Abstract

This study investigates how the implementation of program-level practices by formal youth mentoring programs is associated with the quality of youth mentoring relationships as contexts for youth development and also examines whether this connection is mediated by the mentor-staff working alliance. Using data from mentors ($n = 542$) participating in multiple programs ($n = 55$), multilevel path models examined hypothesized direct and mediated effects. Parallel analyses were conducted with assessments of program practices from staff ($n = 219$). Greater exposure to program practices was associated with higher ratings of mentoring relationship satisfaction, commitment, and security and lower mentor-youth relationship negativity. The mentor-staff working alliance either partially or fully mediated these associations. Staff-reported practices predicted mentoring relationship satisfaction and commitment without mediation by the working alliance. This study suggests program practices contribute to stronger youth mentoring relationships. The findings also highlight the mentor-staff working alliance in supporting the development of positive mentoring relationships.

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KEYWORDS

elements of effective practice, program practices, relationship quality, working alliance, youth mentoring

1 | INTRODUCTION

Relationships are significant contexts for human behavior and development, and the presence of safe, stable, nurturing relationships with adults is a foundation of healthy development for children and adolescents (Reis et al., 2000; Sege & Harper Browne, 2017). The goal of formal youth mentoring programs is to create and support positive relationships for youth with caring, consistent adults. Youth mentoring programs have been shown to enhance developmental outcomes for youth across a range of social, behavioral, and academic domains (DuBois et al., 2011; Raposa, Rhodes, et al., 2019; Tolan et al., 2014). However, positive outcomes depend in part on the nature and quality of the mentoring relationship, with strong relationships associated with more favorable youth outcomes (Bayer et al., 2015; Goldner & Mayseless, 2009; Herrera et al., 2007; Silke et al., 2019; Zand et al., 2009). In contrast, mentoring relationships that are characterized by conflict or that end prematurely can have detrimental consequences for youth participants (Cavell et al., 2009; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Spencer et al., 2017).

Establishing a successful mentoring relationship by introducing a new adult into a child's life is not necessarily an easy proposition. The development of every mentoring relationship is uniquely determined by the characteristics, needs, and personalities of the mentors and mentees and influenced by the contexts in which they interact (Goldner & Mayseless, 2009; Keller, 2005a). Mentors may struggle to make a positive connection with youth, to keep youth engaged, and to bridge differences in backgrounds with their mentees (Herrera et al., 2013; Pryce & Keller, 2012; Spencer et al., 2022). Mentors may have unrealistic expectations about what youth need from mentoring and also the effort required to build a strong relationship, which can lead to premature relationship endings (Herrera et al., 2013; Spencer, 2007).

Mentoring programs can help prevent such challenges by facilitating the relationship at every stage in its development through practices and procedures for screening, training, matching, and ongoing supervision and support (Keller, 2005a). The program context itself also provides important structure for relationship development by encouraging a shared understanding of goals for the relationship, establishing expectations regarding the roles and responsibilities of participants, and providing guidelines regarding the frequency, duration, and setting of activities (Keller, 2005b). In fact, a growing body of research supports links between mentoring program practices—such as mentor training and high-quality support—and the development of strong, effective mentoring relationships (Herrera et al., 2008; Kupersmidt, Stelter, et al., 2017; McMorris et al., 2018; McQuillin et al., 2015). Cross-program comparison studies also provide evidence that mentoring programs employing a greater number of empirically supported practices have longer-lasting relationships (Kupersmidt, Stump, et al., 2017) and achieve more favorable outcomes for youth (DuBois et al., 2002). Yet very little research has investigated mechanisms by which program-level practices may yield better individual-level results for volunteer mentors and youth mentees. The current study uses a framework for analyzing the influence of youth program settings to investigate how program implementation of recommended practices is associated with mentoring relationship quality.

1.1 | Mentoring relationship quality

A mentoring relationship can have inherent value as a meaningful human connection, and it can be a means for promoting positive youth behavior, development, and well-being (Cavell et al., 2021). Rhodes (2002) theorized that a mentoring relationship characterized by mutuality, trust, and empathy could support youth development by

enhancing social skills and emotional well-being, improving cognitive skills through instruction and dialogue, and fostering identity development through role modeling and advocacy. A mentor who is consistently available and responsive to the youth's emotional needs, for example, may serve as a secondary attachment figure, providing a safe haven when the youth is distressed, acting as a secure base when the youth needs confidence, and reinforcing conceptions of relationships as valuable and supportive (Keller, 2007a; Rhodes et al., 2006). Mentors who become secondary attachment figures have the potential to provide multi-faceted support that enhances youth resilience and well-being (Barrera & Bonds, 2005; Van Ryzin, 2010).

Although establishing dependable and attuned relationships may be the goal, some mentors and mentees may struggle to forge a bond and may have interactions that are tentative, awkward, or marked by conflict and criticism (Morrow & Styles, 1995; Pryce & Keller, 2013; Spencer et al., 2020). In fact, research suggests that successful relationships are more likely distinguished by the absence of disappointment and negative feelings than the presence of positive attributes (Rhodes et al., 2005). Furthermore, conflict in mentoring relationships is predictive of youth externalizing behaviors in other contexts (Cavell et al., 2009). Conflict and criticism that leads to relationships ending abruptly or before expectations may result in feelings of disappointment, betrayal, or rejection (Spencer et al., 2021; Spencer, 2007; Zilberstein and Spencer, 2017). Mentoring relationships that end prematurely also are associated with fewer program benefits—and even setbacks—for youth participants (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Grossman et al., 2012; Spencer et al., 2017).

Because a majority of relationship endings in volunteer mentoring programs are initiated by the mentor (Spencer et al., 2021), attention to factors associated with mentor consistency and persistence are important to the assessment of relationship quality (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Nakkula & Harris, 2013). The mentor's commitment to the relationship, for example, is associated with the use of relationship maintenance strategies that promote longevity (Gettings & Wilson, 2014). Relationship commitment reflects an intention to sustain and remain psychologically attached to a relationship and is an indicator of the likelihood of choosing to continue or terminate a specific relationship (Rusbult et al., 1998; Rusbult, 1980). According to the investment model of interpersonal relationships, satisfaction with a relationship, based on perceived benefits relative to costs and to expectations for an ideal relationship, is a primary contributor to relationship commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003; Tran et al., 2019). In research applying the investment model to mentors' experiences in youth mentoring relationships, satisfaction with the mentoring relationship has been shown to predict mentor commitment (Drew et al., 2020; Gettings & Wilson, 2014). Furthermore, relationship satisfaction and other constructs in the investment model mediate associations between mentor commitment and specific, conceptually aligned practices implemented by mentoring programs, such as pre-match training and expectations setting (Drew et al., 2020).

1.2 | Program practices and staff support

To promote successful mentoring relationships and increase the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs, practice standards for the field based on evidence from research and practice have been compiled in MENTOR's *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (EPPM; Garringer et al., 2015). EPPM standards address procedures for recruiting, screening, training, and matching program participants and supporting the development of their mentoring relationships. Recent research has found links between meeting multiple EPPM standards and match longevity (Kupersmidt, Stump, et al., 2017). A growing number of studies further emphasize the significance of individual practices outlined in the EPPM, including approaches programs use for training mentors (Kupersmidt, Stelter, et al., 2017; McQuillin & Lyons, 2021), making matches (Raposa, Ben-Eliyahu, et al., 2019), and providing ongoing support (Keller et al., 2020; McQuillin & Lyons, 2021). In addition, studies indicate that enhancements to these practices may improve relationship outcomes. For example, McQuillin et al. (2015) tested the effects of enhanced training and support and found that strengthened practices were linked with higher ratings of mentor satisfaction. Stump et al. (2018) study of 45 Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies similarly found that enhanced

practices designed specifically for serving children of incarcerated parents (e.g., specialized mentor training) were associated with longer and stronger matches for these youth.

Because program staff are responsible for implementing program practices, they are the primary points of contact in service delivery and can make significant contributions to the success or failure of mentoring relationships. Implementation of each program practice (e.g., orienting, screening, training, matching, monitoring, advising, hosting activities) could involve interactions that provide opportunities for program staff to build a supportive bond with program participants. Furthermore, an important function for program staff is to foster communication and coordination among all of the participants in a match to align their expectations and goals for the mentoring relationship (Keller, 2005b). Recent research highlights links between success in the mentoring relationship and support from staff in the form of general availability, advice, structure, and helpfulness. For example, in a site-based mentoring program, mentor perceptions of structure and support provided by staff were positively associated with ratings of mentoring relationship quality (Weiler et al., 2019). McQuillin et al. (2015) similarly found that provision of more training and ongoing coaching led to higher mentor ratings of program support, which contributed to mentor satisfaction and intentions to continue mentoring. Another study of community-based programs found support for a mediational model linking supervisor ratings of staff worker competence to mentor ratings of staff support, which in turn predicted ratings of mentoring relationship quality (Sass & Karcher, 2013). Furthermore, additional research indicates the individual characteristics and approaches of program staff predict ratings of mentoring relationship quality by match participants (Keller & DuBois, 2021).

These findings suggest the interactions between staff and mentors could have an important influence on the development of positive mentoring relationships. Mentoring programs typically have a two-tiered structure in which program staff supervise and support the volunteer mentors whose activities with youth in the relationship context represent the intervention. Once a mentoring match has been made, a staff member provides supervision and coaching that reinforces program priorities, policies, and procedures and offers advice, guidance, encouragement, and appreciation to the mentor through ongoing contacts (Keller et al., 2020; Keller, 2005a). Features of these match support contacts, such as sufficient regularity and length, are associated with more positive volunteer experiences, more consistent meetings between mentors and mentees, and more positive impacts for youth participants (Herrera et al., 2008, 2013; Keller et al., 2020). Thus, a mentor-staff alliance characterized by a positive working relationship and alignment on goals is expected to support the development and maintenance of the mentoring relationship (Keller, 2005b; Spencer et al., 2020).

1.3 | Linking program practices to mentoring relationship quality

A systems framework for analyzing how the influences of different settings are transmitted through youth programs shows how mentoring program practices may be associated with mentoring relationship quality (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Figure 1 depicts how the central elements of this conceptual model inform the current study. Setting outcomes reflect how well a program is functioning as a setting for youth development, which can be indicated by subjective experiences of the setting by adult or youth participants. In the case of youth mentoring, the outcome setting is the nature and quality of the mentoring relationship, which serves as a context for youth development (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009). Social processes represent the pattern of ongoing interactions between the individuals involved in the program reflected in norms, expectations, and relationships. In this case, the social processes of interest are the interactions between program staff and mentors, reflected in the support and guidance provided to mentors in the "point-of-service" setting of program implementation (Hasenfeld, 2010). In the organizational setting, resources and the manner in which resources are organized for program delivery affect the point-of-service social processes. In youth programs, relevant resources include the capacities of individuals providing services (human resources) and the ways in which their time is allocated (temporal resources). The organization of these resources is structured by program models and specifically

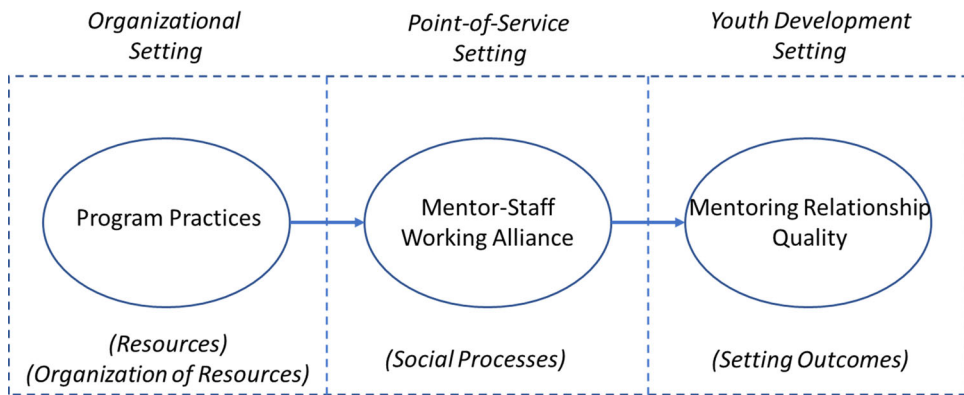


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model linking program practices to developmental context provided through mentoring relationship. Adapted from: Tseng & Seidman (2007).

program practices (Sandfort, 2003). In essence, the model posits that program practices provide structure guiding the interactions between staff and mentors at the point of service. In turn, these point-of-service interactions with staff influence the experiences of participants in the mentoring relationship.

1.4 | Current study

The current study evaluates this proposed mediational model using data from a large multi-program data set featuring novel measures of a broad range of EEPM mentoring program practices. First, it is hypothesized that greater use of recommended program practices will be associated with indicators of mentoring relationship quality. Second, it is hypothesized that the mentor-staff working alliance will mediate this association. Specifically, it is posited that greater use of program practices will contribute to better mentor-staff bonding and alignment, which in turn will result in mentors reporting more positive mentoring relationships with their youth mentees.

2 | METHOD

This study utilized data from a large, multi-state, randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluating implementation of the Quality Mentoring System (QMS) (Keller et al., 2019). QMS is an initiative of MENTOR, a national advocacy and training/technical assistance provider for youth mentoring programs, in which its state-level affiliates implement a quality rating and improvement strategy with mentoring programs to strengthen their organizational functioning and program service delivery. During this study, the QMS assessment and improvement workplan process was based on the earlier third edition of the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (EPPM3), which contained sections focusing on program design and management, program operations, and program evaluation. Before randomization of programs into QMS intervention or waitlist control conditions, survey data were collected from three types of respondents: an agency leader; all mentoring program staff; and a random sample drawn from all active mentors within the program. To determine program-level changes associated with the QMS intervention, additional surveys were collected approximately 15 months later from separate but comparable samples drawn from the programs at that time. The current study examines cross-sectional data primarily from mentor surveys but also staff surveys obtained at the first assessment, before program randomization.

2.1 | Procedures

MENTOR identified eight state-level affiliates to participate in the study. Each affiliate was responsible for recruiting mentoring programs from within their service networks to implement QMS. The number of programs recruited by each affiliate varied based on its capacity to support programs through the intervention. Affiliates were encouraged to target programs reflecting the diversity of mentoring programs in their area with attention to factors such as program structure, model, setting, and size. As noted, before program randomization, there was an attempt to collect survey data from all staff members, regardless of their position, who were affiliated with each mentoring program. Programs provided the researchers with contact information for their current employees. These employees received emails inviting them to participate in the study with a link to the online study consent form and survey. Likewise, before randomization, there was an attempt to collect surveys from a random sample of 15 mentors from each program, or all program mentors if fewer than 15 were active at the time. Programs produced a numbered list of all eligible mentors in their program, providing the researchers with the total number and no identifying information. Researchers then generated a random sequence of 20 numbers to indicate the mentors to be sampled. The first 15 mentors selected in this manner were contacted by mentoring program staff who described the study and sought permission from the mentor to release contact information to the research team. If a mentor was not willing or could not be reached, the next prospective participant on the list was contacted until 15 mentors had given permission to be contacted. Interested mentors were sent an introductory email with information about the study and a link to the online study consent form and survey. Participants were offered a \$20 gift card as an honorarium. All data were collected online using Qualtrics survey software. All recruitment and data collection efforts followed IRB-approved procedures.

2.2 | Participants

2.2.1 | Mentors

The analysis is based on survey data from mentors in 55 programs recruited by six of the state-level affiliates (see Table 1 for a summary of program characteristics). A total of 777 mentors from these mentoring programs were invited to participate in the study, and 595 mentors (77%) consented to and actually initiated the baseline survey. The number of participating mentors from each program ranged from 2 to 16 ($M = 11.0$, $SD = 3.1$). Only participants with valid data for mentoring relationship outcome variables and relevant control variables were included in the analyses, resulting in 542 mentors in the final sample.

Mentors in the final sample (66.6% female) ranged in age from 15 to 80 years old ($M = 39.18$, $SD = 15.79$). Most identified as European American/White (69.6%), with 20.3% African American/Black, 6.3% Asian American/Asian, 1.1% American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.6% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 2.0% Other. A small proportion (4.3%) identified as Hispanic or Latinx. Approximately half of the mentors (52.4%) reported being currently married or living with a partner, and 35.2% had children of their own. Most mentors had completed at least a bachelor's degree (72.9%) and reported a household income above \$60,000 (61.4%). A sizeable proportion (43.0%) reported volunteering with another organization in addition to the mentoring program.

Participants served as mentors in programs representing a wide range of mentoring models. Most participants were in one-to-one mentoring relationships (88.0%), meaning that even if the mentor had multiple mentees, they met with each one individually. The remaining mentors were in group (one mentor with a group of mentees, 6%), team (a team of mentors working with a group of mentees, 5%), or multiple mentoring (multiple mentors working with one mentee, 1%) formats. While most mentors were assigned to just one mentee (79.2%), others reported being assigned multiple mentees at the time of data collection. Mentors

TABLE 1 Descriptive characteristics of mentoring programs ($N = 47$)¹.

| Program characteristics | %/M (SD) |
|---|---------------|
| Organizational structure | |
| Embedded in community organization | 42.5% |
| Stand alone non-profit | 29.8% |
| Other | 27.7% |
| Provides services other than mentoring | 59.6% |
| Affiliated with a national organization | 21.3% |
| Years providing mentoring services | 11.5 (12.5) |
| Number of paid staff devoted to mentoring program | 2.6 (3.8) |
| Number of mentors active during last 12 months | 107.6 (197.2) |

¹Agency-level surveys were not completed for eight programs.

served in a variety of settings, with 53.6% in site-based programs, 34.5% in community-based programs, and 11.8% in other settings (e.g., online mentoring, hybrid). Almost all mentors were volunteers (96.7%); however, a small number (18) were hired and paid to serve as mentors.

2.2.2 | Staff

A total of 308 staff members from the 55 mentoring programs were invited to participate in the study at baseline, and 250 staff (81%) consented to the initial survey. However, not all staff members were in positions enabling them to report on the implementation of specific program practices and therefore responded "don't know" on these survey questions. Thus, a total of 219 staff provided information for the current analyses, constituting the final sample for this study. The number of staff from each program ranged from 1 to 20 ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 3.11$). Participants (77.2% female) ranged in age from 19 to 71 years old ($M = 37.87$, $SD = 12.67$). The majority of participants identified as European American/White (62.3%), with 21.6% African American/Black, 3.4% Asian American/Asian, 1.5% Hispanic or Latino, 0.5% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 10.3% Multiethnic, and 0.5% Other. Most staff had completed at least a bachelor's degree (91.2%) and had mentored a child or youth through either a formal program (51.2%) or informally (24.4%).

Positions of the staff included 27% direct service providers (i.e., counselor, caseworker, program specialist), 25.1% program manager/supervisor, 15.3% support staff, 13.5% CEO/executive director, 12.1% VP for programs/program director, 4.2% administrator for finance/operations, and 2.8% working on development/fundraising. Most staff were full-time employees (77.5%) and were paid employees in their organizations (88%), whereas a small portion (12%) were volunteers. Most staff (80.7%) reported their position involved responsibility for working directly with program participants on core program functions (i.e., recruiting, screening, training, matching, or supporting mentors and mentees), and 51.4% spent more than half of their time on these core program functions. The majority of staff (55.5%) described their mentoring programs as providing only one-to-one mentoring relationships, and most others (40.8%) reported their programs as offering one-to-one mentoring in combination with another format, including group, team, or multiple mentoring. Finally, while most staff (52.5%) indicated that their programs provided mentoring options across different settings, 26.5% indicated that their program provided only school-based mentoring, 11.0% only community-based, and 10.0% only site-based.

2.3 | Measures

2.3.1 | Mentoring relationship

Mentors responded to several questions about the quality of their mentoring relationship. Those matched with multiple youth were instructed to “respond to all questions on this survey thinking of the mentee to whom you have been matched for the longest time. If you began mentoring multiple mentees at the same time, please think about the mentee whose name comes first alphabetically.”

2.3.1.1 | Satisfaction

The mentor's satisfaction with the mentoring relationship was assessed using a measure based on the satisfaction subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Although originally developed in the context of romantic relationships, central theoretical constructs of the Investment Model Scale have been adapted and used successfully in a variety of settings (Le & Agnew, 2003; Tran et al., 2019) including several recent applications for adults mentoring youth (Drew et al., 2020; Gettings & Wilson, 2014; Jarjoura et al., 2018). The satisfaction measure assesses the degree to which a relationship fulfills the respondent's expectations with respect to costs and benefits and comparison to an ideal relationship. The current adaptation included five items relevant to mentoring (e.g., “My relationship with my mentee does a good job of meeting my expectations for the program; I feel satisfied with my relationship with my mentee; My relationship with my mentee is an important source of fun and companionship in my life”) rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Internal reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = 0.85$).

2.3.1.2 | Commitment

The mentor's commitment to the mentoring relationship was assessed with a measure based on the commitment subscale of the aforementioned Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998). Commitment reflects the respondent's intention to sustain and remain psychologically engaged in a relationship, indicating the likelihood of choosing to continue rather than terminate the relationship. This measure had 4 items framed for a mentoring context (e.g., “I am determined to make my relationship with my mentee successful; I want to make my relationship with my mentee work even when times get rough.”) rated on the same 5-point scale ($\alpha = 0.83$).

2.3.1.3 | Security

The extent to which the mentor served functions of an attachment figure for the youth was assessed with a measure combining the “provides safe haven” and “provides secure base” subscales of the Network Relationship Inventory—Behavioral Systems Version (Furman & Buhrmester, 2009). The safe haven subscale has three items (e.g., “How much does your mentee turn to you when s/he is troubled about something?”), and the secure base subscale also has three items (e.g., “How much do you encourage your mentee to try new things that s/he would like to do but is nervous about?”) rated on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*). The security measure had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.80$).

2.3.1.4 | Negativity

The extent to which the mentoring relationship was characterized by negative interactions was assessed with a measure combining the conflict, criticism, and antagonism subscales of the aforementioned Network Relationship Inventory (Furman & Buhrmester, 2009). Each subscale has 3 items reflecting conflict (e.g., “How much do you and your mentee argue with each other?”), criticism (e.g., “How much do you and your mentee criticize each other?”), or antagonism (e.g., “How much do you and your mentee get annoyed with each other's behavior?”) rated on the 5-point scale noted above. The combined negative interactions measure had acceptable internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Because the mean of this measure was skewed, an inverse transformation ($1/x$) of this variable was used for analyses, meaning higher values indicate fewer negative interactions (or a more positive relationship).

2.3.2 | Mentor–staff working alliance

The mentor's perception of support and alignment in the relationship with the agency staff worker was assessed with a measure based on the Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989), which was originally designed to assess the level of bonding and agreement on goals and tasks between a counselor and client. Mentors were asked to respond to 14 statements describing the "relationship with your primary contact person with the mentoring program. By this, we mean the person who has ongoing responsibility to check in with you about how your match is going. We refer to this person as the 'agency worker' but the actual title might be coordinator, caseworker, match support specialist, etc." Items reflected both mentor–staff bond (e.g., "Agency worker and I trust each other") and mentor–staff agreement (e.g., "Agency worker and I have established a good understanding about what I should be doing with my mentee") rated on a 6-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*). The working alliance scale had good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.89$).

2.3.3 | Mentor perceptions of program practices

The implementation of program practices was assessed with a measure created for this study with 21 items asking the mentor about practices that might have been experienced while engaging with the program (see Appendix A). These items, which were based on practices from the EEPM3 assessed in the QMS process, were primarily drawn from the program operations domain focusing on service delivery and pertained to practices that could be known to mentors participating in the program, that is, practices that involved direct interaction with participants. Specifically, the mentor was asked "to what extent has your mentoring program done the following" for items reflecting pre-match practices (e.g., "oriented you to the mission, goals, and intended outcomes of the program"); matching practices (e.g., "matched you to a mentee in a way that accounted for personal characteristics, goals, and preferences"); match supervision and monitoring practices (e.g., "checked in with you on a regular schedule (weekly, monthly or quarterly) over the phone or in person"); match support practices (e.g., "provided suggestions and ideas for activities"); volunteer management practices (e.g., "recognized and appreciated you for your contributions as a volunteer"); and program management practices (e.g., "regularly ask you about the progress of your match toward program goals"). Mentors rated the items on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all true* to 5 = *very true*). Although item prompts differed based on the timing of a practice (pre-match, during match, nonspecific) to allow for appropriate verb tenses, the aim was to examine the extent to which the range of assessed EEPM practices were implemented, so a mean score was computed from all items ($\alpha = 0.94$).

2.3.4 | Staff perceptions of program practices

The implementation of EEPM3 practices was assessed as a program-level variable via the staff survey with a similar measure. The goal was to determine the extent to which a wide range of recommended EEPM3 practices were consistently implemented. Although staff surveys assessed a comprehensive set of EEPM3 practices, for the current analysis 23 items were selected as practices that would be directly relevant to mentors in active matches (i.e., excluding practices pertaining to match closures, recruitment, evaluation, program management, etc.). Again, these items were primarily from the program operations domain highlighting service delivery, and there was almost complete overlap with the practices included in the mentor assessment of program practices (e.g., orientation/

training, matching, match support). However, staff were asked to estimate the proportion of mentors in the program exposed to each practice using the following response options: none/we don't do this; almost none [1%–20%]; some [21%–40%]; about half [41%–60%]; most [61%–80%]; almost all [81%–100%]; and don't know. The response for each practice was dichotomized to indicate when a practice was consistently implemented with almost all [81%–100%] mentors. For each respondent, the total number of the 23 different practices reported to be applied with “almost all” mentors was summed. Finally, this count reflecting the breadth of practices implemented with high consistency was averaged among staff members within a given program to arrive at a single program-level measure ($n = 55$).

In Chan's (1998) composition typology for Level-2 constructs, the construction of this variable is consistent with a “referent-shift consensus” model because the responses are not self-referential but instead the reference is shifted to the perception of the program operating as a whole. The aggregated Level-2 variable enhances reliability to the extent it reflects a consensus among respondents within a program, as indicated by the intraclass correlation (ICC). In this case, the ICC for the individual staff count of highly implemented program practices is large (ICC = 0.323), suggesting meaningful within-program agreement regarding levels of implementation.

2.3.5 | Control variables

2.3.5.1 | *Mentor characteristics*

Several variables were considered as potential control variables and assessed for associations with the model variables. Mentors were asked to report demographic characteristics including their age, gender, and race/ethnicity. A dichotomous variable was created for race/ethnicity, coded 1 for “non-Hispanic White” and 0 for all others. Annual income and highest level of education were reported on 8-point scales. A dichotomous variable signified experience as a mentor before the current relationship.

2.3.5.2 | *Mentoring context*

Because the mentoring relationships included in this data set represent a wide variety of mentoring programs and models, three measures of mentor-reported mentoring context were considered as control variables. All of these contextual variables were dichotomous. Mentors reported the capacity in which they mentored (volunteer or paid staff), the primary format of their mentoring relationship (one-to-one or other), and the setting (community-based or other).

2.4 | Analysis

Preliminary steps in the analysis included examining bivariate correlations among all mentor-level variables included in the model, evaluating the ICCs of analysis variables in unconditional models, and cross-validating the mentor and staff reports of program practices. Next, path analysis was used for testing theory-driven models demonstrating the associations between exogenous and endogenous variables as hypothesized (Garson, 2014; Hancock & Mueller, 2004). Given the sample size, indices other than the chi-square test were used to assess model fit. Based on convention, comparative fit index (CFI) values above 0.95 were considered good model fit. A root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value < 0.05 was considered a good model fit, and a value < 0.08 was considered adequate. All structural models were analyzed with MPlus, version 8.7, using the full information maximum likelihood estimator with robust standard errors and addressing missing data by including all non-dichotomous variables in the model. Multilevel modeling was used to account for the nesting of participants within programs. Multilevel modeling was warranted on a conceptual basis and was necessary given between-program variation in model variables, in particular the mentor-reported program practices, as indicated by ICCs (see Table 2). For parsimony, control variables were included only where they were correlated with model variables.

TABLE 2 Bivariate correlations, variable means, and intraclass correlations of mentor measures.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Satisfaction | – | | | | | |
| 2. Commitment | 0.601*** | – | | | | |
| 3. Security | 0.500*** | 0.431*** | – | | | |
| 4. Negativity ¹ | 0.123** | 0.136** | –0.048 | – | | |
| 5. Working Alliance | 0.421*** | 0.339*** | 0.331*** | 0.160*** | – | |
| 6. Program Practices | 0.447*** | 0.294** | 0.262*** | 0.084 | 0.580** | – |
| Respondents (N) | 542 | 542 | 542 | 542 | 524 | 515 |
| Mean (SD) | 3.93 (0.66) | 4.30 (0.58) | 3.36 (0.67) | 0.81 (0.19) | 5.12 (0.64) | 3.93 (0.75) |
| ICC | 0.094 | 0.066 | 0.096 | 0.097 | 0.052 | 0.307 |
| τ^2 | 0.041** | 0.022** | 0.043** | 0.003* | 0.021 | 0.181** |
| σ^2 | 0.397*** | 0.309*** | 0.404*** | 0.031*** | 0.394*** | 0.408*** |

¹Inverse transformation means higher score indicates more positive relationship (less negativity).

** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Based on the study hypotheses, analyses were conducted to evaluate the joint significance of component pathways to establish mediation (Yzerbyt et al., 2018; see also Baron and Kenny, 1986). An initial set of models examined the first hypothesis regarding the association between program practices and mentoring relationship quality. The first direct effects model tested associations between Level-1 mentor-reported practices and the mentoring relationship indicators, with mentoring program as the Level-2 clustering variable. This model estimated paths from program practices to all mentoring relationship variables simultaneously and allowed correlations among the mentoring relationship outcome variables. Next, a parallel direct effects model used the program-level mean of staff-reported practices as a Level-2 variable. Again, this model simultaneously estimated paths from staff-reported practices to all mentoring relationship indicators, which were allowed to correlate.

A subsequent set of models evaluated the second hypothesis that the mentor-staff working alliance would mediate the association between program practices and mentoring relationship quality by examining the indirect pathway components in the mediation model. Building on the first model above (i.e., direct effects of mentor-reported practices), a third model added the mentor-staff alliance to test the hypothesized mediation model with program practices predicting the mentor-staff alliance and both program practices and mentor-staff alliance predicting all mentoring relationship indicators. Finally, in a parallel analysis building on the second model above (i.e., direct effects of staff-reported practices), the mentor-staff alliance was added to test the pathways hypothesized in the mediation model.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Preliminary analyses

Correlations and descriptive statistics for all mentor-level model variables are presented in Table 2. Relationship negativity was not associated with relationship security and only marginally associated with mentor-reported program practices ($p = 0.056$). All other correlations among model variables were statistically significant and in the hypothesized directions. Table 2 also shows that the ICCs in unconditional models for the mentoring relationship outcomes ranged from 0.066 to 0.097. In addition, as anticipated, the ICC for mentor-reported program practices

was substantial (0.307), indicating high within-program agreement and between-program differences. Finally, in a two-level model, the mean of staff reported practices within a program corresponded strongly to the mentor-reported program practices ($\beta = 0.536, p < 0.001$).

3.2 | H1: Direct effects

3.2.1 | Mentor-reported program practices

A first multilevel model simultaneously estimating associations between mentor-reported program practices and mentoring relationship outcomes indicated that each path was statistically significant, with standardized coefficients for these direct effects shown in Table 3. Mentors reporting greater exposure to program practices gave higher ratings of their satisfaction with and commitment to the mentoring relationship. Similarly, mentors reporting greater exposure to program practices had more supportive interactions with their mentees as indicated by greater security and less negativity (given inverse transformation).

3.2.2 | Staff-reported program practices

A second multilevel model linking the program-level mean of staff-reported program practices to mentoring relationship outcomes also found statistically significant direct effects for mentor assessments of relationship satisfaction and relationship commitment. However, the paths from staff-reported practices to mentoring relationship interactions characterized by security and negativity were not statistically significant. Standardized estimates of these pathways are presented in Table 3.

3.3 | H2: Mediated effects

3.3.1 | Mentor-reported program practices

A third multilevel path model evaluated the hypothesized mediation by the mentor-staff working alliance of the association between mentor-reported program practices and mentoring relationship outcomes. As shown in Figure 2, which presents the standardized estimates for the model, mentor-reported program practices were

TABLE 3 Standardized direct effects of mentor and staff reported practices on relationship outcomes¹.

| | Satisfaction β | Commitment β | Security β | Negativity ² β |
|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| <u>Model 1:</u> | | | | |
| Mentor-reported program practices (Level-1) | 0.476*** | 0.277*** | 0.298*** | 0.083* |
| <u>Model 2:</u> | | | | |
| Staff-reported program practices (Level-2) | 0.391* | 0.662** | 0.015 | -0.311 |

¹Control variables on relevant outcomes include mentor age, youth age, paid mentor, community-based mentoring.

²Inverse transformation means higher score indicates more positive relationship (less negativity).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

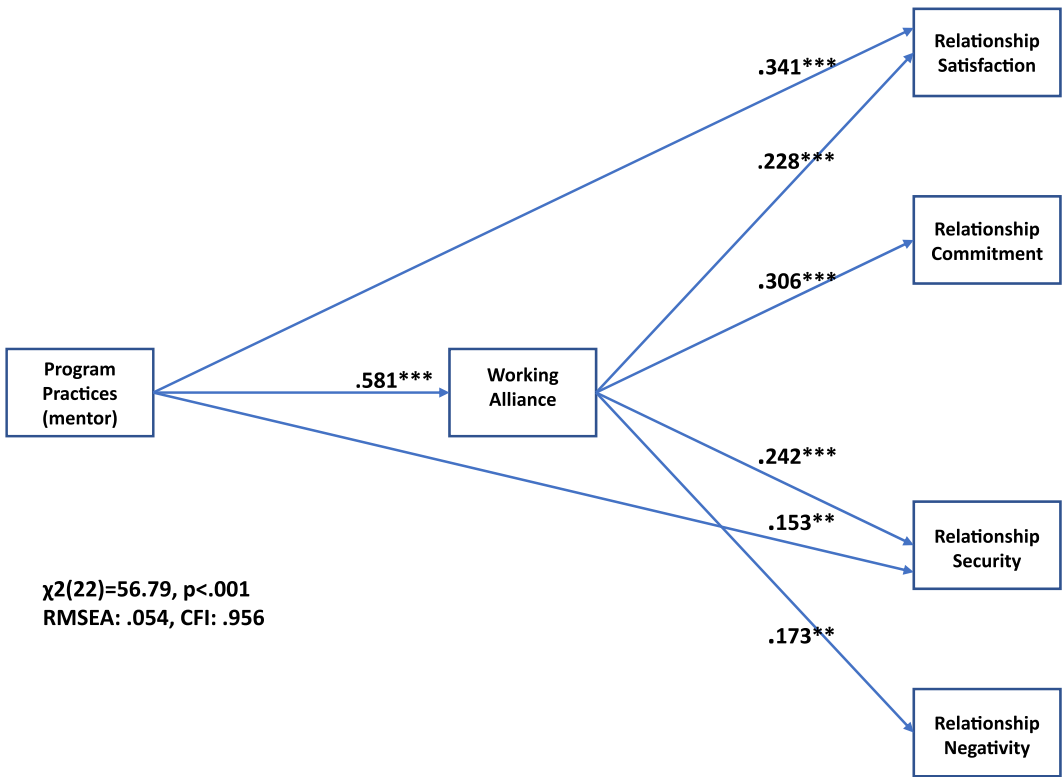


FIGURE 2 Mediated path model for mentor-reported program practices with standardized coefficients. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. 1. Control variables on relevant outcomes include mentor age, youth age, paid mentor, community-based mentoring. 2. Inverse transformation means higher score indicates more positive relationship (less negativity).

strongly associated with ratings for the mentor-staff working alliance. In turn, the mentor-staff working alliance was associated with each mentoring relationship outcome. The results indicate notably diminished but still statistically significant paths from mentor-reported program practices to relationship satisfaction and to relationship security, suggesting partial mediation by the mentor-staff working alliance. However, the associations of mentor-reported program practices with relationship commitment and with relationship negativity were no longer statistically significant, suggesting these paths (not shown) were fully mediated by the working alliance.

3.3.2 | Staff-reported program practices

A fourth multilevel path model with the program-level mean of staff-reported program practices indicated an association with the mentor-staff working alliance (Figure 3). However, the direct pathways from staff-reported practices to relationship satisfaction and commitment remained statistically significant, and these associations actually increased slightly with the working alliance in the model. These results indicate the working alliance does not mediate the association between staff-reported program practices and mentoring relationship outcomes.

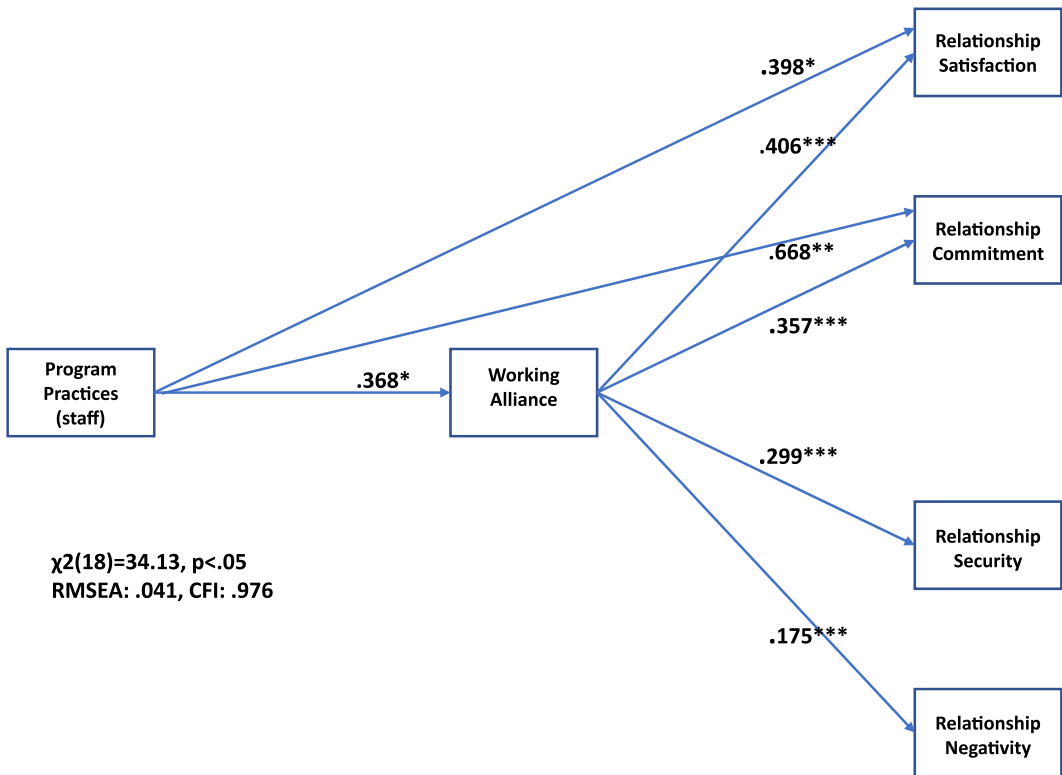


FIGURE 3 Mediated path model for staff-reported program practices with standardized coefficients. $^{***}p < 0.001$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^*p < 0.05$. 1. Control variables on relevant outcomes include mentor age, youth age, paid mentor, community-based mentoring. 2. Inverse transformation means higher score indicates more positive relationship (less negativity).

4 | DISCUSSION

Using data from a large multi-program study, the current analysis examined how the implementation of multiple recommended mentoring program practices was associated with youth mentoring relationship quality, specifically testing the hypothesis that the mentor-staff working alliance would mediate this anticipated association. Mentors who reported experiencing greater exposure to EEPM program practices also rated their mentoring relationships more positively on multiple indicators. The measurement of program practices involved the aggregation of multiple practices relevant for the preparation and support of participants who were in active matches. Associations between mentor-reported program practices and specific mentoring relationship quality measures were either partially or fully mediated by the strength of the mentor-staff working alliance. However, the pattern of findings was different for assessments of program-level practices derived from staff surveys. The cross-reporter, cross-level analyses confirmed associations between program practices and two indicators of relationship quality, reflecting mentor satisfaction and commitment, but no associations were found with relationship quality measures focusing on security and negativity in interactions between the mentor and mentee. In addition, mentor perceptions of the working alliance were only modestly associated with staff-reported program practices and did not act as a mediator to mentor relationship satisfaction or commitment.

The direct effects observed from the level of implementation across multiple EEPM program practices to the ratings of mentoring relationship quality align with previous research highlighting the importance of meeting EEPM

standards in supporting mentoring relationships (Kupersmidt, Stump, et al., 2017; Stelter et al., 2018). These prior studies found the extent to which a broad range of EEPM practices were implemented across different Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies predicted relationship duration obtained through agency records. The current study found that similarly assessed program-level implementation of multiple practices reported by staff was linked to mentors' ratings of relationship satisfaction and commitment, which likely contribute to match longevity (Gettings & Wilson, 2014). Likewise, the current findings are consistent with other research identifying the connection between specific program practices (e.g., matching, training, support) and match duration (McQuillin & Lyons, 2021; Raposa, Rhodes, et al., 2019) and between mentor satisfaction and persistence (Martin and Sifers, 2012; McQuillin et al., 2015). The current study bolsters this growing evidence by testing, across a large sample of programs, how a broad spectrum of EEPM practices are associated with several indicators of relationship quality from the mentor's perspective.

Including assessments of multiple dimensions of the mentoring relationship in the analysis was informative. Although mentor-reported EEPM program practices were associated with each relationship quality measure in the unmediated model, the strongest correlation was with the mentor's feeling of satisfaction with the relationship, whereas the weakest association was with negativity in the mentoring relationship. Mentors tend to indicate greater satisfaction in their mentoring relationships when they have positive perceptions regarding the organizational operations of their mentoring program (Suffrin et al., 2016). However, given the potential for conflict and criticism in almost any relationship, negative interactions between mentors and mentees are more likely determined by individual mentor and mentee characteristics and presumably are less conducive to the influence of the program practices assessed (Laursen, 1995). The findings for staff-reported program practices more clearly suggest that program operations are associated with mentor attitudes about the mentoring relationship rather than the nature of interpersonal interactions within the mentoring relationship. Mentor satisfaction and commitment, which were strongly associated with program-level practices, may encompass the volunteer experience more broadly, including affiliation with the program itself (Stukas et al., 2013). However, relationship security and negativity reflect the inner workings of the mentoring relationship and may be a function of many individual, circumstantial, and interpersonal factors less amenable to broad program supports. These findings highlight that multiple dimensions of relationship quality, including positive/negative and attitudinal/interactive, are important to assess independently (Deutsch & Spencer, 2009; Nakkula & Harris, 2013).

Findings from the current study also advance understanding of the mechanisms through which mentoring program practices may have an effect on the mentoring relationship experiences of participants. The mediated path models indicated the strength of the mentor-staff relationship, as represented by bonding and agreement in their working alliance, was associated with all indicators of mentoring relationship quality. These results accord with previous research findings that mentor perceptions of positive support from program staff correspond to satisfaction with and continuation of mentoring relationships (Aresi et al., 2021; McQuillin et al., 2015; Sass & Karcher, 2013; Weiler et al., 2019) and with research indicating the approaches employed by staff in working with mentors contribute to mentoring relationship quality (Keller & DuBois, 2021; Marshall et al., 2016). Associations between the mentor-staff working alliance and the relationship interaction outcomes, including negativity, may reflect that ongoing support through staff contacts with the mentor could be more responsive and relevant to what is actually occurring in the mentoring relationship than standard program practices (Marshall et al., 2016).

Mentor perceptions of the working alliance closely corresponded to their reported exposure to EEPM practices, fully mediating the association of program practices with relationship commitment and negativity and partially mediating the association with relationship satisfaction and security. This support for the hypothesized model of mediation suggests point-of-service interactions between the staff person and mentor serve as a conduit through which the mentor receives (or fails to receive) the benefits of the organizational supports and resources provided in the program context (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). For example, the staff person's approach may reflect strong (or weak) staff training and supervision, the program's requirements regarding the frequency and mode of supervision, as well as the program's focus or lack of focus on targeted outcomes. In addition, staff can support mentors as needed with advice, problem-solving, encouragement, and referrals to other available programmatic

supports like ongoing mentor training. Previous research indicates the frequency of support contacts is associated with longer-lasting matches and more meetings between mentors and youth (Herrera et al., 2013), and the length of support contacts is associated with mentors reporting more positive volunteer experiences (Keller et al., 2020). Although the working alliance construct represents a new way of assessing the mentor-staff relationship, mentor perceptions of an effective bond and an alignment of goals and expectations with the staff member imply ongoing and collaborative interactions that facilitate a positive mentoring experience.

Although the mentor's experience of program practices may be transmitted via exchanges with staff, the lack of mediation in the final path model that incorporated staff-reported program practices suggests the potential of an independent program-level factor linked to mentor satisfaction and commitment. Staff-reported program practices, an aggregate assessment of staff indicating the number of EEPM practices delivered to all or almost all mentors in the program, does not reflect interactions with individual mentors and is instead a measure of structural capacity and overall program quality. Thus, the path model suggests that organizational structural capacity and interpersonal support through the working alliance are separate contributors to mentor satisfaction and commitment. The potential of a distinct role for organizational capacity is consistent with research showing volunteer perceptions of organizational support and positive organizational climate are associated with greater volunteer satisfaction and commitment (Malinen & Harju, 2017; Nencini et al., 2016). Organizations that foster volunteers in internalizing organizational values, developing competencies, establishing role identity as a volunteer of the organization, and having positive feelings about involvement with the organization are more effective in sustaining volunteer engagement, satisfaction, and retention (Grube & Piliavin, 2000; Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Penner, 2002).

The current study also provides insights regarding a new strategy for measuring the implementation of EEPM practices with the use of survey items for mentors to report on their experiences with practices while engaging in the program. Although some previous research has investigated mentor perceptions of program support, the current study is one of the first to define components of program support more specifically, distinguishing between implementation of program practices and features of the mentor-staff relationship. The mentor-reported assessment of practices seemed to detect a meaningful program-level signal of implementation as reflected by the magnitude of the ICC, indicating high within-program concordance and between-program differentiation. Furthermore, the reporting on practices by mentors was validated by a strong correspondence with the program-level means of staff-reported practices in a cross-level, cross-informant model. In addition, the mentor-reported assessment of program practices demonstrated concurrent validity through associations with conceptually related constructs in the model.

4.1 | Limitations

The findings reported here should be interpreted with consideration of several study limitations. First, the analyses employed cross-sectional data, which means causal influences cannot be established. Mentors who have positive mentoring relationship experiences may be more inclined to rate their impressions of interactions with staff and their mentoring program more favorably or vice versa. Longitudinal studies and experimental designs would provide more compelling evidence of the hypothesized pathways. Second, the associations observed among measures derived from a single respondent may incorporate method and response bias. However, findings implying that program practices, as reported by staff, contribute to more positive relationships, as reported by mentors, are less susceptible to these threats. Presumably mentors' perceptions of relationship quality would not affect the likelihood of staff reporting on the implementation of specific program practices. Furthermore, the staff assessment was of general program practices, and links between staff and mentor data were at the program rather than individual level. Although the cross-respondent findings are more robust from a methodological standpoint, it may be that mentors' own perceptions of program quality and support are really most relevant in sustaining or enhancing their engagement in the mentoring relationship. Third, as just noted, staff-reported program practices were aggregated

into a program-level variable, which meant that analyses using this Level-2 construct were effectively limited to the number of programs ($n = 55$). Thus, reduced statistical power may be a factor in finding fewer associations for the staff-reported variable. Fourth, this study relied on several novel measures, including the mentor-staff working alliance and the assessment of EEPM practices through mentor and staff surveys. However, the mentor-staff working alliance scale was based on the well-established Working Alliance Inventory (Horvath & Greenberg, 1989) and demonstrated associations with other variables consistent with expectations. Also, as previously noted, the new mentor assessment of program practices gave positive indications of its measurement properties, that is, a high ICC as well as convergent and concurrent validity. Fifth, because the sample of mentors was drawn from participants in active matches, the study does not address the possible implications of program practices for matches that may have ended. Furthermore, given the random sampling of mentors in active matches, the length of their relationships at the time of assessment presumably reflects the distribution of active match duration within the program. The program-level delivery of practices was the focus of investigation in the current study. However, timing and opportunity for exposure to practices would vary according to match length, and future individual-level research could investigate how the effects of practices may vary with the stage of the relationship. Finally, a limitation of the current study was that the assessment of mentoring relationship quality reflected only the mentor's perspective. Mentees may have very different perceptions of their mentoring relationships, as suggested by relatively modest concordance between mentor and mentee measures of relationship quality (Ferro et al., 2014; Rhodes et al., 2017). Future research should consider the effects of program practices on youth assessments of mentoring relationship quality.

4.2 | Implications

The findings of the current study highlight the importance of organizational capacity and infrastructure, reflected by the implementation of recommended program practices, in fostering mentoring relationships that serve as positive contexts for youth development. In particular, the results support the use of the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (Garringer et al., 2015) as a framework for assessing and promoting the quality of mentoring program service delivery. Programs motivated to enhance their implementation of EEPM practices can engage in structured quality improvement interventions that provide training and technical assistance based on workplans tailored to their own needs and priorities (Spencer et al., 2022). Even in the absence of a formal process involving external assessment and assistance, the current study suggests the potential feasibility and utility of surveying mentors regarding their impressions of program practices and their contribution to positive mentoring relationship experiences. Staff assessments of program practices, which could be easier to collect, also may yield valuable insights about organizational capacity that promotes volunteer satisfaction and commitment.

The study findings also underscore the vital role of program staff in supporting mentors through point-of-service interactions. Staff are responsible for implementing program practices and are representatives of the program to participants. Although very little research has investigated the mentor-staff relationship, the working alliance identifies central constructs involved in effectively supervising and collaborating with mentors, namely building an interpersonal bond and establishing agreement on goals and tasks. Mentoring relationships are influenced not only by the approaches staff employ when working with mentors but also by the engagement and enthusiasm staff bring to their work (Keller & DuBois, 2021). Consequently, the organizational setting could have an important bearing on the quality of the mentor-staff working alliance. To promote positive experiences for program participants, mentoring programs should give considerable attention to staff qualifications, training, compensation, and retention (Keller, 2007b). A focus on organizational resources as well as staff training and preparation is considered central to enhancing the effectiveness of mentoring programs and the quality of youth mentoring relationships (Stoeger et al., 2021).

5 | CONCLUSION

The goal of formal youth mentoring programs is to create and support positive relationships that promote the healthy development of youth. The program context, through the implementation of program practices, plays a crucial role in facilitating the development of successful mentoring relationships. A framework for analyzing youth program settings suggests that program practices provide structure guiding the interactions between staff and participants at the point of service, and in turn these point-of-service interactions with staff influence the experiences and outcomes of program participants. The findings of the current study lend support to this model linking program infrastructure and capacity to the quality of mentoring relationships. From the mentor perspective, greater exposure to program practices was associated with higher ratings of mentoring relationship satisfaction and commitment as well as more positive interactions within the mentoring relationship. Furthermore, greater exposure to program practices translated to a stronger mentor-staff working alliance, which also was associated with higher mentoring relationship quality. Program practices as reported by staff also demonstrated a strong connection to mentor relationship satisfaction and commitment and suggested a contribution to relationship quality distinct from the mentor-staff working alliance. Overall, the findings reinforce the importance of attention to program factors in the mentoring intervention. Organizational quality improvement efforts emphasizing the adoption and implementation of recommended program practices may result in stronger mentoring relationships to promote healthy youth development. In addition, programs should emphasize a positive working alliance between mentors and the program staff who provide support and guidance in the development of mentoring relationships.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors have served as consultants to MENTOR. TEK, CH, and RS serve on the Research Board of MENTOR's National Mentoring Resource Center. MENTOR has sponsored the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring directed by TEK.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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