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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Claudia A. Maxie

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Child Protection Workers' Experiences in Implementing Natural Mentoring with Older Foster Youth

by

Claudia A. Maxie

MA, Rutgers University, 2012

BS, Rutgers University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

November 2020

Abstract

Emancipated foster youth are at risk for increased rates of unemployment, low educational attainment, reliance on public assistance, substance abuse, behavioral issues, homelessness, unplanned pregnancies, and illegal activities. Lack of connection to a caring adult when exiting foster care and emancipated foster youth's inadequate independent living skills are critical factors that could place young people at risk. Prior studies have shown that mentoring is a means of providing foster youth with protection against psychological stress and promoting well-being; however, mentoring is not a widely used intervention in the child welfare system. There is limited research on the process of implementing natural mentoring in child welfare agencies. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies and to explore the types of support or organizational climates beneficial to natural mentoring intervention. Keller's systemic model of youth mentoring and social convoy theory provided the theoretical framework for this study. Participants were 10 child protection workers in New Jersey recruited through purposeful sampling who participated in face-to-face, semistructured interviews to produce qualitative data, subsequently analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis. Four significant themes emerged: (a) natural mentoring is beneficial, (b) implementing natural mentoring occurs formally and informally, (c) supervisory support is dominant, and (d) challenges and strategies surface. The findings of this study have the potential to provide child welfare workers and policy makers with support in implementing natural mentoring practices for older foster youth at risk of aging out of foster care, resulting in positive social change.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Bryant Maxie, who has never stopped supporting me in all my endeavors. I dedicate this dissertation to the one who made me a mother: my firstborn child, Ashley. I dedicate this dissertation to my ambitious, fun-loving sons, Jermaine and Jeremy. I dedicate this dissertation to my two youngest daughters, the amazing and hard-working, Acacia and the creative, Malayah. I dedicate this dissertation to my one and only sister, Carolyn Burke. I dedicate this dissertation to the woman who brought me into this world: my mother, Angela Patricia Maragh. I dedicate this dissertation to my grandchildren, Samiyah, Ja'Brea, Maxine, Zora, and Jurnee (who earned her heavenly wings but never forgotten). Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to every foster youth that struggled through the foster care system.

Acknowledgments

When I was 17 years old, I wanted to be a high school English teacher. That never happened because God had other plans for my life. After graduating from high school, I immediately got married and started a family. College was not even a thought in my mind, and my dreams of becoming an English teacher became a fantasy. Over the years, I felt a desire to return to the classroom. By this time, I had already been out of high school for 7 years; I had birthed three children, and I was raising my husband's son. To help me find a job, I decided to take an adult typing class at a local high school. Returning to the classroom lit a fire inside me that made me want to do more, so I decided to apply to a local community college. I had a few haters and discouraging moments, but I decided to continue and earn a bachelor's degree. Years later, I received the opportunity to earn a Master's degree. Over the recent years, I toyed with the idea of returning to school for a PhD but I never pursued it. I thought I was finished with school, but as God would have it, He reunited me with my longtime friend, Chalice, who had earned her way to be Dr. Chalice Rhodes. I was so impressed and encouraged by her accomplishments that I decided to earn my PhD as well. I thank God for purposely bringing us back together again and reuniting our friendship.

To the love of my life, Bryant Maxie, your support has been paramount in this journey. It takes a special person to be married to someone who has been in school nearly the entire marriage. To my only sister, Carolyn Burke, thank you for taking care of my kids when they were little and I needed to study, type papers, and attend classes. I could not have made it this far without your support in my early years. To my chair, Dr. Susana

Verdinelli, I thank you for your knowledge and expertise. It has been an honor to complete this dissertation journey under your guidance. To my pastor, Dr. Cory L. Jones, I thank you for your continuous spiritual guidance and emotional support. To my church family, Tabernacle Baptist Church of Burlington, thank you for all of your prayers and always believing in me. To my mother-in-law, Kathryn Mitchell, thank you for recognizing my milestones and cheering me on. To my sister-in-law, Tamika Maxie, thank you for considering me to be your “Shero.” To my best friend, Nicky Harrison, and my three girlies, Christiana Roland, Rhonda Peterson, and Charlene Edwards, thank you for your constancy in my life. To my dear Camden North friends, Ebelyn Rolen, Gina G. Ray, and Reverend Heyward Wiggins, thank you for your encouragement. And Ebelyn, thank you for those encouraging yellow stickies entitled, “Dr. Maxie” before I was actually Dr. Maxie! To Salene and Weldon Powell, thank you for 30 years of love and unfailing support. Lastly, I thank God for renewing my strength when I felt defeated.

The journey has not been easy and there were many times when I wanted to quit this program. There were times when I questioned why I was doing it. There were times when I was sleep-deprived and other times where I felt emotionally defeated. This journey requires sacrifices of personal time, work time, and time with friends and family. I am pleased to report that I always finish what I start. I leave you with two Bible verses that encouraged me to finish what I started. First verse: The race is not given to the swift nor the strong but he who endures until the end (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Second verse: Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). Thank you all!

Table of Contents

List of Tables vi

List of Figures vii

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study 1

- Introduction 1
- Background 2
- Problem Statement 4
- Purpose 5
- Significance 6
- Theoretical Framework 7
- Nature of the Study 7
  - Qualitative Study 7
  - Possible Types and Sources of Data 8
- Definitions of Terms 9
- Assumptions 10
- Scope 11
- Delimitations 11
- Limitations 11
- Chapter Summary 12

Chapter 2: Literature Review 13

- Introduction 13
- Literature Search Strategy 15

Theoretical Framework 16

Literature Review 19

A Deeper Understanding of Aging Out 21

The Need for Natural Mentors for Aging out Foster Youth 24

Efforts to Implement Mentoring Programs 26

Natural Mentors With Younger Children 31

Foster Youth Voices 32

Barriers in Implementing Natural Mentoring 34

Continued Relationships After Out-of-Home Care 36

The Perspective of Child Welfare Workers on Natural Mentoring 37

Chapter Summary 39

Chapter 3: Research Method 40

Introduction 40

Research Design and Rationale 40

Role of the Researcher 42

Methodology 43

Population 43

Instrument 45

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection 46

Data Analysis Plan 47

Issues of Trustworthiness 50

Credibility 50

    Transferability 50
    Dependability 51
    Confirmability 52
    Ethical Considerations 53
  Chapter Summary 53
Chapter 4: Results 55
  Introduction 55
  Setting 55
  Demographics 57
  Data Collection 58
  Data Analysis 60
  Evidence of Trustworthiness 65
    Credibility 65
    Transferability 66
    Dependability 66
    Confirmability 67
  Results 67
    Theme 1: Natural Mentoring is Beneficial 68
    Theme 2: Implementing Natural Mentoring 69
        Subtheme: Formal Implementation 69
        Subheading: Challenges Concerning Formal Implementation 70
        Subheading: Mismatch Between Mentor and Foster Youth 71

Subheading: Foster Youth Do Not Accept Mentors ……………..……. 71

Subheading: Lack of Mentors with Specific Features …..…………….. 72

Subtheme: Informal Implementation ………………………………….. 74

Subheading: Challenges Concerning Informal Implementation ……….. 76

Subheading: Workers' Inexperience and Busy Schedule ………………. 77

Subheading: Natural Mentors not Prepared to Handle Youth Problems and Needs ……………………………………………………………. 77

Subheading: Child Protection Workers as Informal Mentors ………….. 79

Theme 3: Supervisory Support is Dominant.. 81

Theme 4: Challenges and Strategies Surface.. 83

Subtheme: Challenges with the Policy ………………………………… 84

Subtheme: Engagement as a Strategy …………………………………… 86

Addressing Research Questions..88

Summary 91

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations...93

Introduction...93

Interpretation of the Findings...93

Theme 1: Natural Mentoring is Beneficial 94

Theme 2: Implementing Natural Mentoring.. 95

Theme 3: Supervisory Support is Dominant... 101

Theme 4: Challenges and Strategies Surface.. 102

Theoretical Framework 105

Limitations of the Study..108

    Recommendations....109

    Implications....110

    Conclusion 113

References....114

Appendix A: Screening Form for Interested Participants....121

Appendix B: Research Question and Interview Questions....122

Appendix C: Letter to Participants 124

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form 125

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics 58

Table 2. Years of Service 58

Table 3. Example of Transcription Code Book 64

Table 4. Themes and Subthemes 68

List of Figures

Figure 1. Sample memo 63

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Young people in foster care who grow into adulthood without natural mentors encounter social and emotional issues (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016), such as involvement in criminal activities, homelessness, and drug and alcohol addiction (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Thompson et al., 2016). Older foster youth have relatively low levels of educational attainment, employment difficulties, housing issues, and poverty compared to their nonfoster youth peers (Muller-Ravett & Jacobs, 2012). Young people who have left foster care are more likely to not finish high school, be unemployed, and be dependent on public assistance (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Despite being a promising intervention for resolving these concerns, natural mentoring has not been widely implemented in the child welfare system (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase, & Ali, 2015). There is a need for further research to understand the barriers to implementing natural mentoring programs within child protection agencies (Thompson et al., 2016).

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of natural mentoring in child protective services and understand the challenges child protection workers may face when implementing natural mentor programs. The findings of this study have the potential to provide support to stakeholders and child protection workers to implement natural mentoring for older foster youth and individuals at risk of aging out of foster care (Thompson et al., 2016). This chapter provides a general understanding of the connection between the implementation of natural mentoring and child protection agencies. This chapter also presents the study's assumptions, delimitations, and limitations.

Background

There have been positive outcomes for young people who have had natural mentors during their time in foster care (Greeson, Weiler, Thompson, & Taussig, 2016; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014; Lane, 2016). Singer, Berzin, and Hokanson (2013) showed the importance of social support for young people in foster care, as these youth often lack emotional support and guidance as they transition to adulthood (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014) and struggle with independent living across all life areas (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Older children in foster care benefit emotionally and socially from having natural mentors in their lives. Hurd and Zimmerman (2014) explored how the co-occurrence of differing relationship characteristics correlated to mentees' outcomes and found that frequent contact between the natural mentor and mentee produced improvements in the mentee's psychological well-being.

Child welfare workers must secure permanent relationships for youth in foster care and have an obligation to address the needs of young people aging out of foster care (Greeson & Thompson, 2017; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). However, child welfare workers do not have theoretically supported, research-supported interventions for establishing permanent adult relationships for young people aging out of foster care (Greeson & Thompson, 2017). Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) identified a need for further research to understand who supports foster youth and how to nurture and expand supportive relationships. Such findings could contribute to program and policy development for better outcomes for foster youth (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Scannapieco and Painter (2014) theorized that insufficient empirical evidence on natural mentoring leads to a lack of precise protocols for effective mentorship. There is limited research specific to mentoring for foster youth (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Johnson and Gastic (2015) explained that the quality of mentoring is important, as poor mentoring experiences produce negative outcomes for youth.

Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al. (2015) explored how child welfare professionals feel about implementing natural mentors to young people in foster care transitioning into adulthood. Greeson, Thompson, Ali, and Wenger (2015) examined older foster care youth's attitudes and beliefs about child welfare–based natural mentoring. Although Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al. (2015) centered on child welfare professionals' challenges and strategies of implementing natural mentoring, they identified their study as a small step toward examining mentoring challenges and strategies.

Young people in foster care aging out of the foster system are a vulnerable group susceptible to poor well-being outcomes (Thompson et al., 2016). There is a need for further research on topics such as natural mentors—specifically, studies that include stakeholder insight on natural mentors (Thompson et al., 2016). Researchers should include natural mentors' voices to expand the understanding of the evolution of the relationships between natural mentors and foster youth (Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2016).

Problem Statement

Young people in foster care who have aged out of the child welfare system are the most at-risk youth in the United States (Muller-Ravett & Jacobs, 2012). Emancipated youth who leave foster care face the dangers of increased rates of unemployment, low educational attainment, reliance on public assistance, substance abuse, behavioral and health issues, homelessness, unplanned pregnancies, and criminal involvement (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Thompson et al., 2016). The lack of connection to a caring adult after leaving foster care coupled with inadequate independent living skills are the main factors contributing to at-risk situations for emancipated youth (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015). Natural mentoring is a promising tool for fostering caring relationships between foster youth and nonparental adults (Greeson, 2013). Child protection workers who work closely with aging-out foster youth might be the best candidates for implementing natural mentor programs or becoming natural mentors.

A *natural mentor* is a significant, nonparental, caring adult in the child's existing social network—for example, a coach, teacher, social worker, community member, religious leader, service provider, or adult relative who provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement (Greeson et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). Child protection workers can also be natural mentors for aging-out foster youth who are clients on their caseloads. Natural mentors encourage positive psychosocial outcomes, offer protection against psychological stress, and promote well-being (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014). Although natural mentoring is an innovative and promising intervention, there has not been wide use or implementation in the child welfare system (Greeson et al., 2015).

Barriers to implementing natural mentoring interventions include liability-related issues in vetting adults for natural mentors, a lack of organizational support, time constraints, and professionals' workload requirements (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015).

Research on natural mentoring is warranted (Thompson et al., 2016). More researchers should include the voices of stakeholders, especially natural mentors, to learn how relationships between natural mentors and foster youth evolve (Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2016). Singer et al. (2013) identified a need for additional research to understand the relational networks in the lives of young people emancipating from the foster care system. Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al. (2015) explored child welfare professionals' challenges and strategies of implementing natural mentoring, this line of inquiry was a small step toward exploring these challenges and strategies. The focus of this study was on organizational and systemic contexts, including the challenges and opportunities of implementing natural mentoring for older foster children preparing for emancipation (Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies. Another purpose was to explore the types of support or organizational climates beneficial for implementing natural mentoring and understand the challenges of implementing natural mentoring from the perspectives of child protection workers who thought that natural mentoring worked well in their workplaces. Child protection workers employed at child welfare agencies with established natural mentoring programs are the best candidates to describe the organizational and systemic contexts beneficial for implementing natural mentoring.

The research questions (RQs) for this study were:

RQ1: How do child protection workers experience the phenomenon of implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

RQ2: What meaning do child protection workers make of their organizations' support and climate when implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

RQ3: What meaning do child protection workers make of the challenges experienced in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

Significance

Individuals in the human services field share the goal of upholding the well-being of vulnerable children (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2013). This study presented the strategies that child protection workers use to implement natural mentoring to promote the well-being and successful outcomes for older foster youth. The objective of the study was to understand the challenges or opportunities encountered in child protection agencies when implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth. The findings of this study have the potential to provide information to stakeholders and child protection workers on the practices beneficial for implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth and those at risk of aging out of foster care (Thompson et al., 2016). Information on how to overcome organizational challenges by implementing natural mentoring has the potential to have a positive influence on older foster youth in their transitions to adulthood.

Theoretical Framework

Keller’s (2005) systemic model of mentoring served as the theoretical framework of this study. The systemic model of mentoring shows the interdependent network of the relationships established between mentor, child, parent or guardian, and caseworker against the backdrop of agency policies and procedures (Keller, 2005). The model indicates that caseworkers can contribute to the success or failure of the mentoring intervention, with the effects of a program partially mediated through youth’s interactions with their caseworkers (Keller, 2005). In this study, the systemic model of mentoring provided a framework for investigating the multiple ways that caseworkers can contribute to youth’s outcomes through mentoring. The systemic model of mentoring also provides a means for understanding how caseworkers deal with systemic challenges when implementing natural mentoring. This model was the theory used to explore multiple caseworkers’ roles in modeling and developing natural mentoring for older foster children preparing for emancipation.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative Study

Researchers use phenomenological approaches to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals from the participants’ perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological researchers also seek to describe rather than explain, and thus start research with a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the research tradition for this study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA was the best approach for this study because researchers use IPA to explore the participants' personal and social lived experiences and define how these individuals make sense of those experiences (Smith, 2004). Creswell stated that phenomenological researchers must describe the essence of the participants' lived experiences. A phenomenological approach was the most suitable for this study because it incorporates the aspects identified by Husserl (1970) and Creswell. Young people in foster care are aging out of the system with poor mental and physical outcomes, and the implementation of natural mentoring could be a means of reducing these concerns. This study was the means of addressing the issues and strategies of natural mentoring implementation through the experiences and perceptions of child protection workers. The child protection workers described what they experienced while working with older foster youth (see Moustakas, 1994). The data collection included interviews with child protection workers who had implemented natural mentoring with older foster youth at their workplaces. The participants shared their strategies and real-life experiences of implementing natural mentoring.

Possible Types and Sources of Data

The participants of this phenomenological study were child protection workers who had implemented natural mentoring at their workplace and thought that natural mentoring was an effective intervention. Criterion sampling was a suitable method for ensuring that the participants met the criteria for this study, providing responses that answered the research questions (Creswell, 2013). The data source was face-to-face interviews with child protection workers. Ten individuals who met the following criteria were the chosen participants for this exploratory study:

- Current child protection workers who have experience working with older or aging-out foster youth.
- Currently work in child protection agencies.
- Have experience with implementing natural mentoring or acting as natural mentors and acknowledge that natural mentoring is an effective intervention at their workplaces.

Definitions of Terms

Aging out: Stott (2012) described aging out as young adults who have turned 18 years old while still in the legal custody of Child Protective Services. Aging out is also referred to as emancipation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Formal networks and informal networks: Formal networks are those in the professional field, such as caseworkers or therapists, and informal networks are family members or friends, such as grandparents or peers (Singer, Berzin, & Hokanson, 2013).

Foster care: Foster care is a system in which adults care for minor children who cannot live with their biological parents because the parents are unable, unwilling, or unfit to care for their children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

Natural mentor: A natural mentor is a significant nonparental, caring adult identified in the child's existing social network—for example, a coach, teacher, social worker, community member, religious leader, service provider, or adult relative who provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement (Greeson et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2016).

Safety, permanency, and well-being: Ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being is the primary responsibility of the public child welfare system. Child welfare workers must maintain children safely in their own homes, return children to their families when possible, and provide services to family members to promote their abilities to meet the needs of their children (Perlman & Fantuzzo, 2013).

Transitioning to adulthood: Foster children transition to adulthood when they leave the foster care system and experience life on their own (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016). Transitioning to adulthood is a complex period of changes in living arrangements, love relationships, employment, education, increased independence, and decreased parental support (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016).

Assumptions

Because the intent of this study was to obtain clear and accurate information, this study had five assumptions. One assumption was that all candidates would answer the criterion questionnaires truthfully. Another assumption was that all participants would listen carefully to the interview questions and answer them honestly to the best of their abilities. It was assumed that the participants had a genuine interest in and knowledge of implementing natural mentoring, which they believed to be an important intervention for children in foster care. Another assumption was that participants could adequately state what has worked well or any of the challenges experienced while implementing natural mentoring in a child protection agency. A final assumption was that study participants were not motivated by attention or the desire to impress their coworkers, friends, or family members.

Scope

This study was the means to explore how child protection workers implement natural mentoring within their child protection agency and the supports or organizational challenges of implementing natural mentoring. This study produced data through face-to-face, semistructured interviews in which child protection workers shared their lived experiences of implementing natural mentoring in their workplace. A child protection agency in Central New Jersey was the area of interest for this study.

Delimitations

There were five delimitations in this study. The first delimitation was that all participants must have been child protection workers with experience working with older or aging-out foster youth. Second, participants had to be currently working in child protection agencies. Third, participants needed to have experience implementing natural mentoring or serving as a natural mentor themselves. Fourth, they needed to believe that natural mentoring is an effective intervention at their workplaces. Finally, participants could not work in the researcher's office to prevent the provision of information from benefiting any personal relationships between the participants and the researcher.

Limitations

A goal of this study was to understand the organizational challenges of implementing natural mentors in a child protection agency. Disclosing organizational challenges could show the agency as insufficiently providing services for foster youth. To protect their agency, the participants could have withheld information that would have negatively presented their coworkers or management.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided the background information on previous investigations and the need for future research on the implementation of natural mentoring within a child protection agency. The absence of a caring adult in a foster child's life could cause issues when the child transitions into adulthood. Because child protection workers manage caseloads with young people in foster care, they are the best candidates to implement natural mentoring. This chapter presented the limitations such as sample size and response rate as well as the boundaries set for the study, including the location where participants worked. The next chapter will provide a literature review on the topic of study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Foster care is a system in which adults care for minor children who cannot live with their biological parents because the parents are unable, unwilling, or unfit to care for their children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Placements are intended to be temporary situations until the child reunifies with the parents; however, in some cases, there is little or no chance that a child can return to their parents' custody (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Many children end up moving from foster home to foster home, never finding a permanent family, and in this regard, foster care is an imperfect system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). For the teens who age out of the foster care system, the only thing they receive for their 18th birthday is a plastic bag for their belongings and a bus pass to find a new place to live (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Stott (2012) described aging out as a young adult who has turned 18 years old while still in the legal custody of Child Protective Services.

Children who enter foster care had been abandoned, abused, or neglected in some capacity (Stott, 2012). When this occurs, someone calls the Child Abuse Hotline and reports the alleged abuse or neglect. A child protection worker arrives at the child's home and investigates. If child abuse or neglect is present, the child may be removed from the home and placed in a foster home, with a family member or family friend, or in a facility. According to Stott, children who enter foster care might have experienced poverty, domestic violence, and parental issues, such as mental health problems, incarceration, and substance abuse. Lin (2012) found abused or neglected children are often removed from their homes and placed in foster care. Stott stated that unstable placements are problematic, as they cause educational barriers, low self-esteem, identity issues, problems with the law, challenges forming trusting relationships, and a loss of friends.

Over 400,000 American children are in foster care (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). In 2014, 22,392 youth emancipated or aged out of the foster care system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Young people in foster care often do not get the help they need for completing high school, gaining employment, accessing health care, achieving continued educational opportunities, and securing housing and transitional living arrangements (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Young people who have left foster care are more likely than youth in the general population to fail to finish high school, be unemployed, and depend on public assistance (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Many aged-out young people find themselves in prison, homeless, or parents at an early age (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

The outcomes for these aging-out youth might vary depending on if they had consistent and reliable mentors who guided them during their years in placement. Hurd and Zimmerman (2014) identified positive effects of natural mentoring relationships that last into early adulthood. Natural mentors promote positive psychosocial outcomes, offer protection against psychological stress, and promote the well-being of children in foster care (Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014). Although natural mentoring is an innovative and promising intervention, it has not received wide use or implementation in the child welfare system (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015). Barriers to implementing natural mentoring interventions include liability-related issues in vetting adults for natural mentors, a lack of full organizational support, time constraints, and professionals' workload requirements (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015). The purpose of this study was to obtain knowledge of how child protection workers implement natural mentoring. The goal of the study was to share the strategies that child protection workers used to implement natural mentoring and to show how natural mentoring is a means of promoting well-being and successful outcomes for older foster youth. The objective was to understand any challenges or opportunities for implementing natural mentoring for older foster children in a child protection agency.

This chapter includes the literature search strategy, theoretical framework, and literature review. The information reviewed in this chapter is specific to youth in foster care for a significant time and the natural mentors who support them during their foster care placements. This chapter also includes a discussion of the outcomes for young people who have had and maintained natural mentors while in foster care. The final section of this chapter shows the efforts used to implement natural mentoring and the need for additional strategies for implementation, as barriers remain.

Literature Search Strategy

Researching the literature for this study required reviewing several online sources. First, I conducted a search for data through the PsycINFO database. The words or phrases used to search for literature were *child protection workers, children in placement, youth supports, transitional youth, aging out youth, older foster youth, older foster children, children in foster care, risk assessment, child protection service, child welfare agency, child welfare workers, multiple foster homes, multiple placements, mentor for foster* *youth, natural mentor for foster youth, support for foster youth, foster youth, transitioning youth in care, aging out of foster care, supports for foster youth, aging out youth,* and *youth in care.* I conducted an additional search through the SocINDEX database, using the following words and phrases: *child protection workers, transitioning youth, mentors, children in foster care, foster youth, support, aging-out youth, child welfare, natural mentor, foster youth, social work, foster youth, mentor, older foster youth,* and *support for foster youth.* CINAHL provided additional literature on the research topic, with results returned for searches of the keywords and combination of keywords *mentors for youth, natural mentors, foster youth, placement instability,* and *multiple placements*. Finally, the words and phrases used to search for literature in PsycArticles were *support, foster youth,* and *foster care*.

Theoretical Framework

Keller's (2005) systemic model of youth mentoring is a theory that provides a conceptual framework for exploring the multiple ways in which a mentor, parent, and caseworker contribute to child outcomes through mentoring. The systemic model of youth mentoring indicates the importance of the relationships established between the child, the parent, the caseworker, and the mentor against the backdrop of agency policies and procedures (Keller, 2005). The model indicates that caseworkers may contribute to the success or failure of the mentoring intervention and that the program's effects could be partially mediated through youth's interactions with their caseworkers (Keller, 2005).

Keller's (2005) model is a heuristic model in which the mentor–child relationship is positioned within a network of relationships: the parent or guardian, mentor, and agency caseworker. The model shows the importance of a holistic model, presenting the interdependent web of relationships between all of the participants in the mentoring intervention (Keller, 2005). Keller explained that interactions between the child and parent or the child and caseworker could be either a help or a hindrance to the relationship between the child and the mentor. The interactions between the mentor, parent, and caseworker might serve as a means of support or inhibit the success of the intervention. The model indicates that these interactions are set against the backdrop of the agency's policies and practices.

The goal of this study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies. The intent of the study was also to identify child protection workers who thought that natural mentoring is a successful intervention in their workplace and the types of support or organizational climate beneficial to natural mentoring and explore the challenges usually faced when implementing natural mentoring. Keller's (2005) systemic model of mentoring was the theoretical foundation for the study. Because the backdrop of the model is an agency's policies and practices, this falls into the scope of the study since the goal of the study was to explore the supports or organizational objectives beneficial for a mentoring intervention.

Keller's (2005) systemic model of youth mentoring consists of the child, the parent, the caseworker, and the mentor—the same sequence of participants in a child protection agency when a child is in foster care. The model indicates that a successful mentoring intervention within an agency occurs when the four participants interact constructively. For example, the child may tell the foster parent or the caseworker that he would like to learn to ride a bike. The parent or caseworker discloses this information to the mentor, and the mentor takes the child out for bike riding lessons. According to Keller, this example shows the expansion of a simple mentor-child relationship to the four-person model (child, parent, caseworker, and mentor). According to Keller, agency policies and procedures provide a structure in which children, parents, caseworkers, and mentors can make initial contact and maintain their ongoing contacts. How well the agency guidelines support the coordinated and cohesive function of the system, which is the child, parent, caseworker, and mentor, indicates the outcome of the mentor intervention (Keller, 2005).

Several authors have applied Keller's (2005) model in similar ways to this study. Suffrin, Todd, and Sánchez (2016) studied family systems, social networks, and ecological and systems theory to explore the effects of other relationships and systems on the mentoring dyad. Keller's systemic model of youth mentoring indicates that relationships do not necessarily occur in isolation (child-mentor only) but as a part of a more extensive social system. Mentors should build relationships with their mentees' parents or caregivers (Suffrin et al., 2016). Similar to the current study, the dyad of the foster youth's network is a social system that includes the child, parent, caseworker, and mentor.

Weiler, Zimmerman, Haddock, and Krafchick (2014) also used Keller's systemic model of youth mentoring to explore successful youth mentoring relationships. Weiler et al. (2014) stated that half of all mentoring relationships dissolve before the end of the commitment and that there is a higher rate of relationship failure for vulnerable youth.

Keller accounted for the system-oriented youth mentoring program; instead of having a youth and mentor dyad, the dyad is nested within a network of support called the mentor family. The mentor family includes three or four other mentors and mentees and a trained relationship instructor who leads the group in structured activities. Although the mentor family dyad differs from the child-parent-mentor-caseworker dyad, it still aligns with Keller's theory of a network-structured mentor intervention for youth. Marsh, Evans, and Williams (2010) understood this theory and stated that helping relationships are dyadic; however, seeking assistance from just one partner will most likely result in incomplete outcomes.

Literature Review

The literature review presents the findings and perceptions of various researchers on aging-out foster youth, child protection workers, and natural mentors. A natural mentor is a significant, non-parental, caring adult identified in the child's existing social network; for example, a coach, teacher, social worker, community member, religious leader, service provider, or adult relative who provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement (Greeson et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2016). When child protection workers step into children's lives and remove them from the families that they have always known, certain emotions in the children surface; it is helpful for children to have supports in place, especially as they grow older while in foster care. For some children, adoption or reunification with their families may no longer be options, and they must learn how to survive independently. As children grow older in the foster care system, they gradually lose contact with members of their biological family, reducing the number of supports available. There have been several quantitative studies, qualitative studies, mixed method studies, systemic reviews, and program evaluations of relational supports and mentoring for foster youth. Aging out while in foster care and natural mentoring are important topics that require further investigation to understand the dynamics of the process. It is helpful to have supports available to guide these young adults as they grow older in foster care. Young people with natural mentors are more likely to achieve positive educational and health outcomes, improved behavioral outcomes, and reduced youth delinquency (Johnson & Gastic, 2015).

Several unfavorable outcomes could occur for young people who age out of foster care. Older foster children are at risk of poor outcomes, such as poor physical and mental health, unemployment, low educational attainment, reliance on public assistance, substance abuse issues, behavioral issues, homelessness, unplanned pregnancies, and criminal involvement (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Scannapieco & Painter, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016). Young people in foster care are susceptible to such outcomes not because of a lack of relational network members, but because of their actual utilization and the quality of their support networks (Singer et al., 2013). These hardships might be the outcomes for young people who age out of foster care. Several things could negate the quality of the support network. Scannapieco and Painter (2014) identified a disruption between foster youth and mentors when young people in foster care moved from one placement to another. The effects of trauma, limited ability to trust others, and severed family relationships could also cause young people in foster care to struggle to build and maintain lasting relationships (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Many young people retain relationships with child welfare professionals beyond the age of 18 years (Singer et al., 2013). Although young people in foster care might struggle to build and maintain bonds, these connections are still possible.

Hurd and Zimmerman (2014) quantitatively investigated how the co-occurrence of differing relationship characteristics correlated with mentees' outcomes. The participants were 396 young adults, the majority of whom were young Black women. Participants completed structured 50- to 60-minute interviews with Black and White male and female interviewers in the participants' schools or homes or over the telephone. Hurd and Zimmerman used the mixture model Mplus software to conduct a latent profile analysis, also computing a chi-square distribution statistic. The participants reported that their natural mentors became significant parts of their lives when the mentees were between 20 and 26 years old. Frequent contacts between the natural mentor and mentee indicated improved psychological well-being for the mentees. Lin (2012) stated that older foster children should receive services to help build support networks for when they age out of the child welfare system.

A Deeper Understanding of Aging Out

Young people in foster care face many difficulties while transitioning into adulthood (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Contending that most qualitative studies are not grounded in trust-based relationships between researchers and youth, Cunningham and Diversi (2012) joined an Independent Living Skills Program as volunteers to obtain young people's perspectives on aging out of the foster care system. Their purposive sample included six participants from the program aged 15 to 21 years with whom they established close relationships. Data came from responses to open-ended questions in semistructured interviews that lasted from 20 minutes to 1 hour (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Cunningham and Diversi digitally audio-recorded the ongoing, one-on-one private conversations between the researchers and the participants, transcribing and analyzing the narratives for patterns to understand the foster youth's experiences of aging out. To increase reliability, the researchers examined each transcript multiple times and contrasted and compared emerging themes across narratives to achieve triangulation (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

Cunningham and Diversi (2012) discovered several themes from this study, the first being anxiety over economic insecurity. The young people reported that they struggled to meet their basic needs, and they felt that securing jobs would be the difference between housing and homelessness. The loss of social support was the second theme. Most of the youth explained having experienced high levels of social network disruption from frequent moves and separation from siblings. The perceived pressure of high levels of self-reliance was the third theme, with the participants relating fears of becoming homeless and living on the streets (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

Muller-Ravett and Jacobs (2012) contended that many young people who leave foster care or the juvenile justice system struggle to transition into adulthood and independent living successfully. Among their findings were that, compared to other young people their age, foster children have relatively low levels of educational attainment and experience employment issues, housing issues, and poverty. Policymakers and practitioners are looking for ways to reduce the issues that foster children face, and although there are programs designed to help, there is little evidence on which services are effective and for whom (Muller-Ravett & Jacobs, 2012). Muller-Ravett and Jacobs evaluated and examined the benefits of the Transitional Living Program for aging-out youth, seeking to identify ways to improve outcomes for aging-out youth and fill the knowledge gap. Participants were individuals in the Youth Village Transitional Living program in Tennessee who had been in foster care and the juvenile justice systems between the ages of 14 to 17 years; at the time of the investigation, participants were between the ages of 18 and 24. Of the approximately 1,300 participants, 50% were White, 39% were Black, and 16% were Hispanic. These individuals eligible for transitional living services were randomly assigned to either a program group offered at the Youth Villages Transitional Living program services or to a control group. Muller-Ravett and Jacobs simultaneously tracked the program and control groups using data from state agencies to measure the impacts on the participants' employment, educational attainment, public assistance, criminal justice involvement, and other outcomes.

Lane (2016) examined aging-out foster youth from a different perspective, stating that children in foster care face educational obstacles that could have negative effects on their aspirations to go to college. However, Lane contended that there are few studies on the educational experiences of former foster care youth from a racial perspective. The purpose of Lane's qualitative descriptive study was to explore the influences on the college enrollment of Black young people who aged out of foster care. The population comprised 10 Black individuals—two men, eight women—19 to 25 years old who had aged out of foster care and either attended college or were recent college graduates.

Recruitment letters went to social service agencies for foster youth, community-based organizations, and universities and colleges in a metropolitan area in the Mid-Atlantic United States. Interviews were face-to-face, semistructured, and audio-recorded, with follow-up telephone interviews 2 to 7 days after the face-to-face interviews. The researcher analyzed the interview data through constant comparisons of data and the explicit coding of data (Lane, 2016).

The findings of this study showed the effects of professional and social supports on Black young adults who had aged out from foster care and decided to enroll in college (Lane, 2016). The participants reported that they did not have their biological families or foster families as constant supports, but they made connections with other social supports before aging out. The social support comprised of professionals in the helping field, including social workers, caseworkers, ministers, and teachers (Lane, 2016). Seven of the participants stated that their social workers or caseworkers played significant roles in their decisions to enroll in college (Lane, 2016).

The Need for Natural Mentors for Aging out Foster Youth

Singer, Berzin, and Hokanson (2013) specified the importance of social supports for foster youth transitioning into adulthood. They sought to gain a better understanding of the types of relationships in former foster youth's lives, the forms of support that they received, and the quality of those supports. Singer et al. found that older foster children felt that both formal networks, such as caseworkers and therapists, and informal networks, such as grandparents and peers, were important components in their lives as they aged. Although the participants valued these relationships, they did not necessarily receive support during the transition to adulthood (Singer et al., 2013). The young people stated that their informal supports did not provide them with the information and skills they needed to succeed as they aged. The foster youth had the presence of support networks, but some supports lacked quality. This finding showed practitioners and others in the helping field there was a need for appropriate implementation of natural mentoring. Implementing a mentoring program could be a means of mitigating unsupportive social supports and providing the necessary support that young people need when they leave the foster care system (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Emerging adults tend to look to their parents and other adults in their lives to guide them through the transition into adulthood; however, many young people in foster care disconnect with their parents and other adults and look to peers, support groups, and caseworkers for support (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Child welfare workers are responsible for securing permanent relationships for young people in foster care and addressing the needs of young people aging out of foster care (Greeson & Thompson, 2017; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). However, child welfare workers do not have theoretically supported, research-supported interventions for establishing permanent adult relationships for aging-out foster youth (Greeson & Thompson, 2017).

Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) reported former foster children’s perspectives on their informal supports, the differences these supports caused, and what they believed would be useful in their transitions to adulthood. The population comprised of 43 former foster youth between the ages of 19 and 26 years. Twenty-one participants were from the Link program and 22 were from foster care and had not accessed the Link program. The

Link program is a program in British Columbia designed to provide individualized support for former foster youth aged 19 or older (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). Most of the young people identified friends and family as their informal support. About 25% of the participants identified their former foster parents and youth-driven organization workers as their informal support, and nine percent identified former social workers as their informal support. These findings showed that child protection workers could also act as natural mentors, as they spend significant time with the young people in their caseloads. Rutman and Hubberstey identified a need for further research on to whom young people in foster care turn for support and how to nurture and expand these supportive relationships. There is a need for such findings to contribute to program and policy development and, ultimately, to the well-being of foster youth (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016).

Efforts to Implement Mentoring Programs

There have been attempts to implement natural mentors using informal supports, as indicated in the discussed literature. An example of a typical mentoring program is Big Brothers Big Sisters, a formal service agency for pairing young people with mentors (Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010). The type of mentoring conducted at Big Brothers Big Sisters occurs purposefully, whereas natural mentoring happens on its own or sometimes with assistance. Young people in foster care lack social and emotional support and guidance for their transitions to adulthood; however, little research has shown effective programs for building support and countering poor outcomes (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) assessed the effectiveness of the foster care model called Creating Ongoing Relationships Effectively (CORE), provides for the socioemotional needs of older children in foster care who are transitioning to adulthood and training for youth relationship-building skills. According to CORE, agency workers serving youth removed from their families should recognize and value the importance of relationships. Nesmith and Christophersen agreed that foster parents and biological family members could be unreliable for various reasons and that foster youth often struggle to form relationships.

Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) used a population comprised of 88 participants, 58 of whom received help from CORE and 30 who received traditional foster care services. This inquiry was a mixed methods, 3-year study conducted to examine the changes that occurred over time for young people who experienced the CORE model compared to young people who received services from a comparison foster care agency. As a pretest and posttest, participants from both groups completed the motivation subscale of the Relationship Competency Assessment using a 5-point, Likert-type scale (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). The CORE model showed promising results, as the older foster children developed relationship-building skills to identify a broad range of supportive adults; however, there was a need for a more extensive follow-up study because of the small sample size (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Although Nesmith and Christopherson produced encouraging results, their findings were not definitive because of the sample size and because other researchers had not replicated the CORE model. As such, it was unknown if the model would have worked in different agencies or geographic locations or how long the effects lasted (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Young people aging out of foster care struggle to transition into independent living across life areas (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). The employees of the Department of Family and Protective Services needed address these issues by facilitating the establishment of a youth mentoring pilot program to match young people in foster care with volunteer adult mentors to help them transition into adulthood (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Members of the local Big Brothers Big Sisters organization implemented the program. Three participants remained in the mentoring program for a year and one stayed for 13 months. Sixty percent of the youth participated for 6 months or had minimal contact with their mentors. About 45 of the youth did not spend the required 8 hours of face-to-face time with their mentors, so the researchers could not draw any conclusions on the effectiveness of the program. Other findings showed Black, Hispanic, and mixed-race youth whose race did not match their mentors were more likely to fall into the low-service category. If agency members wish to implement a natural mentoring program, they should match young people with mentors of the same or similar race. Scannapieco and Painter (2014) found insufficient empirical evidence on mentoring that does not provide precise protocols for effective mentorship. There is limited research specific to mentoring foster youth, and while the rates of mentorship continue to rise, poor programs could cause harm to this vulnerable group (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Johnson and Gastic (2015) indicated that the quality of mentoring is important and that bad mentoring experiences produce negative outcomes for youth.

Greeson, Thompson, and Ali et al. (2015) examined older foster children's attitudes and beliefs about implementing a child welfare–based natural mentoring program. The researchers also sought to gain an understanding of how older foster children conceptualized and defined natural mentors and explored older foster children's experiences with having natural mentors in their lives. The researchers recruited 17 participants from an urban charter high school in the Northeast United States with an exclusive enrollment of students active in the city's child welfare foster care system. Nonprobability, purposive sampling ensured that participants met the study's criteria. Most of the participants were male, with six focus groups. The sample comprised individuals between the ages of 15 and 21 years who were at risk of aging out of the foster care system and were available to participate in the natural mentoring intervention called Caring Adults 'R' Everywhere (CARE). CARE is a 12-week, child-welfare-based natural mentoring intervention created by Johanna K. P. Greeson (Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015). Participating young adults believed that permanent relationships with caring adults were important. The young people considered a natural mentor as a trustworthy individual similar to a family member who acted as a role model.

Young people have emphasized that they viewed mentors as parental figures: positive, understanding, responsible, and trustworthy individuals (Johnson & Gastic, 2015). Although many youths had limited exposure to their birth families, they still asserted that their natural mentors felt like real family members (Johnson & Gastic, 2015). Because some of the young people struggled to find natural mentors and feared that the mentors would be judgmental of their behaviors, they might not have felt comfortable expressing their feelings to natural mentors with another person overseeing the program (Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015). Some young adults in foster care did not want anyone else to know what they disclosed to their mentors.

In a mixed-methods study, Greeson and Thompson (2017) implemented the CARE model, which they defined as a child welfare–based intervention for facilitating natural mentor relationships for young people at risk of aging out of foster care. The population consisted of 24 individuals in foster care between the ages of 18 to 20 years. Also participating in the intervention and study were 10 natural mentors who were at least 5 years older than the young people they mentored, not parents or caregivers, and not paid providers. The young people identified the mentors as supportive and helpful. The purpose of this study was to test the feasibility of implementing the CARE intervention (Greeson & Thompson, 2017). The researchers conducted individual, semistructured interviews, conducted evaluations, and administered online surveys. Greeson and Thompson randomly assigned participants to the two groups for the intervention (12 participants in the control group and 12 participants in the intervention group). Half of the participants were female and all were Black. The data analysis included a deductively applied set of a priori research questions for the qualitative data. The researchers identified the themes and patterns that emerged from the data and conducted descriptive statistics, *t*-tests, and chi-square distribution tests for the quantitative analysis. Greeson and Thompson found that the recruitment and retention of natural mentors was the most challenging part of the study and that the CARE intervention might not be the most suitable mentoring intervention for all aging-out young people who lack social supports or have fractured support systems (Greeson & Thompson, 2017). The researchers further indicated that the intervention needed more refinement, testing, and delivery to implement natural mentoring programs. Greeson and Thompson (2017) were the first researches to study and test an intervention designed to cultivate and encourage natural mentoring relationships for older foster children. Child welfare practitioners are responsible for securing permanent relationships for young people in foster care; however, practitioners do not have theoretically supported, research-informed interventions for establishing permanent adult relationships for aging-out foster youth (Greeson & Thompson, 2017).

Natural Mentors With Younger Children

Greeson et al. (2016) found no studies on whether natural mentorship was available for younger foster children who have not undergone the level of emotional stress and biological, cognitive, and social-emotional changes as older foster youth. Greeson et al. studied the relationships between natural mentors and preadolescent children in foster care. The researchers also investigated whether the pattern of findings was the same for foster children who had natural mentors in the past and for children who stayed in contact with their natural mentors, comparing both groups to a set of foster children who had never had natural mentors. The participants were 263 children and their out-of-home caregivers were from a large, urban Western U.S. city. Caregivers took part in interviews about the children’s social skills; the children answered questions about their perceived opportunities; support from peers, adults, and natural mentors; and their natural mentoring relationships. Greeson et al. used the Maltreatment Classification

System; the Social Skills Rating System, a 3-point Likert-type scale; and the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment-Short Form. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) facilitated examination of the descriptive statistics (Greeson et al., 2016).

The results showed that half of the children in the sample already had natural mentors in their social networks, and some of their natural mentors were extended family members, school staff members, or service providers (Greeson et al., 2016). This finding indicated that it is possible to implement natural mentoring unknowingly (i.e., naturally). Additionally, the presence of a natural mentor correlated with better attachment to friends, although natural mentoring did not significantly correlate with improved psychosocial functioning among preadolescents in this study (Greeson et al., 2016). The children who had been in out-of-home care longer were less likely to report ever having mentors (Greeson et al., 2016).

Foster Youth Voices

Young people in foster care have expressed their thoughts and feelings about the supportive individuals in their lives. Singer et al. (2013) spoke with 20 former foster young people (14 male, five female) between the ages of 18 to 21 years from two community-based programs who had recently transitioned from the foster care system or were preparing for emancipation. Forty-seven percent of the participants identified as Black, 11% White, 16% Hispanic, 21% multiracial, and 5% as another race. The foster youth identified the individuals related to the Department of Children and Family Services, such as caseworkers, as their formal supports (Singer et al., 2013). Eighteen young people reported that they received significant emotional support, mostly from child welfare workers (Singer et al., 2013). Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015 stated that older foster children reported that their caseworkers became their natural mentors. In Singer et al.'s study, the young people who had aged out of foster care said their child welfare professionals helped them to pay for school, spent time helping them to learn how to live on their own by showing them how to wash clothes and cook, and assisted them in finding employment. Additionally, those who had left foster care said that child welfare professionals often provided them with a sense of self-worth and enhanced their self-esteem; in addition, they shared that some caseworkers went beyond their typical responsibilities by offering the unconditional support usually provided by biological family members (Singer et al., 2013). Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015 reported that several young people expressed that their natural mentors were like family members and that they based their concepts of a natural mentor's qualities on their experiences with extended family members.

According to Singer et al. (2013), previous studies had shown that older foster youth had networks of relational supports, which caused scholars to question why young people aging out of foster care still suffered from poor mental and physical outcomes while emerging into adulthood (Singer et al., 2013). Singer et al. contended that there might be a discrepancy between the supportive person and the support that the person provides. Informal supports might provide emotional support but lack instrumental and appraisal support. Additionally, young people aging out of foster care and transitioning into adulthood might still suffer from poor outcomes because they rely on impermanent or former supports, which indicates a disconnect between their perceptions and their actual utilization of these supports (Singer et al., 2013). Perlman and Fantuzzo (2013) stated that human service professionals have the responsibility to connect the systems for serving young people in foster care to ensure their permanency, safety, and well-being. Foster support systems can include members of the foster youth's social support network, such as teachers, counselors, social workers, and their mentors. Singer et al. indicated that mentors might not provide young people with the specific support that they require. In such situations, there must be a bridge created to link the youth's social support networks for stable support systems.

Barriers in Implementing Natural Mentoring

Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015 stated that child welfare professionals are supportive of implementing natural mentoring; however, they must determine how to incorporate natural mentoring to service older foster youth. Although a child protection worker can become a natural mentor, the reality is that child protection workers are temporary figures in a child's life. Child protection workers receive transfers to different offices, get promotions within their agencies, move away, and go on extended leaves; sometimes, another worker is reassigned the young person's case. Youth want to have people in their lives who will consistently be present for them (Greeson, Thompson, Ali et al., 2015). If the child protection worker becomes the natural mentor, it can be a challenge to achieve a long-lasting relationship with the foster child. Child welfare professionals must stay transparent and honest about the impermanency of their relationships (Singer et al., 2013). Caseworkers play critical roles when working with foster children by facilitating relationships, and caseworkers are in better positions to help maintain stability for older foster youth (Lin, 2012).

Other researchers have found barriers to mentoring. Scannapieco and Painter (2014) evaluated 200 young people in foster care aged 14 years or older who were referred by the Department of Family and Protective Services and matched with mentors in a mentoring program. Of the 200 youth, 46 young people matched with mentors; however, one dropped out, which left 45. On average, all the young people experienced at least seven placements following removal from their homes between the ages of 5 and 16. The researchers used a nonexperimental survey design, collecting data that included referral, demographic, and contact information between the young people and their mentors. Scholars from Big Brothers Big Sisters collected data from young people with the Youth Satisfaction Survey and mentors with the Mentor Satisfaction Survey. The surveys had 5-point Likert scales, and the researchers conducted chi-square distribution. For this analysis, researchers assigned a numeric value from one to five, with much better assigned a score of five and much worse assigned a score of one (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). There is a need for ongoing evaluation for this program because the researchers could not assess the program accurately due to certain barriers, one being conflicts with the mentors' and the foster parents' schedules (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Additionally, some young people in foster care moved, which caused difficulties when scheduling meetings with mentors. Some of the youth did not meet with their mentors because of their schedules. Other barriers were that the mentors were unprepared for the foster youth’s unique issues and that foster parents lacked an understanding of the mentoring program’s purpose and importance (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014).

Continued Relationships After Out-of-Home Care

As foster youth remain under the care of a child protection worker, the workers and the youth build relationships. Once young people age out of the foster care system, they move on to another stage of their lives. Some young people may keep in contact with their workers after they leave care, and others may not. Sulimani-Aidan (2016) studied youth–staff relationships after aging out of foster care as well as the young people’s needs in contacting staff after emancipation. The sample consisted of 60 participants emancipated from residential settings (youth villages) in Israel, ranging in age from 21 to 26 years (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016). The researcher conducted a mixed-methods study to examine staff and youth relationships and the meaningful roles that the staff members had in the young people’s lives while they were in foster care (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016). Sulimani-Aidan conducted telephone interviews, each lasting an average of 25 minutes. The researcher administered a comprehensive questionnaire with closed questions and conducted semistructured interviews using open-ended questions. Sulimani-Aidan analyzed the data from the in-depth interviews using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data, used the frequency counts, and integrated the participant feedback into the final data analysis for further validity. The findings indicated that despite the young people’s departures from the facilities, staff members’ relationships with continued informally years later (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016). Also shown was the need for an integrative approach where residential settings and staff are meaningful parts in the continuity from care to independent living by supporting aged-out youth’s transition to adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan, 2016).

The Perspective of Child Welfare Workers on Natural Mentoring

Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al. (2015) explored how child welfare professionals felt about implementing a child welfare-based natural mentor program for older foster children transitioning into adulthood. According to Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase, et al. (2015), they built their study on previous literature about natural mentoring and foster youth. They conducted the study to provide child welfare managers with assistance in implementing suitable natural mentoring programs.

The sample comprised 20 child welfare professionals from a Department of Human Services in a large urban city center in the Northeastern United States (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015). The participants were workers and supervisors, most of them Black women. Eligibility criteria included having served at least one young person aged 15 years or older in the past 3 years who had emancipated or was likely to emancipate. Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al. (2015) conducted five focus groups over 4 months, with each digitally recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The researchers conducted a constant comparative analysis and compared the themes using Dedoose, a web-based qualitative data management program, and Microsoft Excel to analyze the data. Four primary factors emerged from the study. The first factor was issues related to young people aging out of foster care, such as challenges developing relationships with youth in foster care. The second factor was challenges related to natural mentors for aging-out youth, such as having an authentic connection and commitment to the relationship. The third was the conceptualization of natural mentoring, such as a program for foster youth and a program both needed and acceptable to child welfare professionals. The fourth theme was the concerns related to the involvement of a child welfare agency in the delivery of a natural mentoring program for older foster youth, such as issues of liability in vetting adults for natural mentors (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015).

Although there is prior research on natural mentoring, the need remains for further research (Thompson et al., 2016). Future studies on natural mentors should include the insight of stakeholders, particularly natural mentors (Thompson et al., 2016). Researchers should incorporate the voices of natural mentors to understand how the relationships between natural mentors and foster youth evolve (Greeson, Thompson, Al, et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2016). Singer et al. (2013) identified a need for more research to deepen the understanding of the relational networks in the lives of young people emancipating from the foster care system. Greeson et al. (2015) explored child welfare professionals' challenges and strategies for implementing natural mentoring; however, the authors indicated that this was a small step toward examining these challenges and strategies. Therefore, the goal of this study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies. The intent was also to identify child protection workers who think that natural mentoring is a beneficial intervention in their workplace and the types of support or organizational climate beneficial for this intervention and explore the challenges of implementing natural mentoring.

Chapter Summary

When abuse or neglect occurs in a home, a child protection worker may remove the child from home and place the child in foster care. A considerable number of young people who age out of foster care do not return to the familial home. Some young people move between foster homes and residential facilities during their time in foster care, which poses barriers to building long-lasting relationships. Some youth in foster care have consistent, supportive adults in their lives during their time in foster care, also known as natural mentors. Because some older children spend a considerable amount of time in foster care, the child protection caseworkers sometimes become natural mentors, guiding foster youth to better future outcomes once they exit the foster care system.

Although some older foster children maintain natural mentor relationships during their time in foster care, others do not have natural mentors to guide them. Young people without natural mentors sometimes face poor future outcomes. Considering that child protection workers are usually the first to come into contact with young people when they enter foster care and may spend years providing services to these youth, child protection workers are in a position to act as natural mentors. However, some young people who age out of foster care still suffer from poor outcomes. There is a need for additional research to strategize how to implement natural mentoring for older foster youth. The purpose of this study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies. The next chapter presents the methodology and research design.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies and the types of support or organizational climates beneficial for this intervention. A secondary intent was to explore what challenges usually occur when implementing natural mentoring. Child protection workers employed at child welfare agencies with established natural mentoring interventions are the best candidates to describe the organizational and systemic contexts beneficial to implementing natural mentoring. This chapter presents the rationale of the research design and sampling strategy, and the data collection, data recording, and data analysis processes. Chapter 3 also includes the trustworthiness and ethical procedures of the study.

Research Design and Rationale

Young people in foster care aging out of the system face poor mental and physical outcomes. Emancipated young people are at risk for increased rates of unemployment, low educational attainment, reliance on public assistance, substance abuse, behavioral and health issues, homelessness, unplanned pregnancies, and criminal involvement (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Thompson et al., 2016). The lack of connection to a caring adult and inadequate independent living skills upon exiting foster care are the main factors of at-risk situations for youth (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015). Natural mentoring is a means for alleviating some of these concerns. This study presented the issues and strategies used to implement natural mentoring from the perspectives of child protection workers. The child protection workers described what they experienced and how (Moustakas, 1994). The research questions for this study were:

RQ1. How do child protection workers experience the phenomenon of implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

RQ2. What meaning do child protection workers make of their organizations' support and climate when implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

RQ3. What meaning do child protection workers make of the challenges experienced in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

The research tradition for this study was IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Researchers use phenomenological methods to bring forth information on the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals from their perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological researchers seek to describe rather than explain and start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Creswell (2013) stated that phenomenological researchers must describe the essence of the lived experience. A phenomenological approach was the most suitable research method because this study had the aspects identified by Husserl (1970) and Creswell. IPA was the best method for exploring the participants' personal and social lived experiences and how the participants make sense of those experiences (Smith, 2004). I sought to comprehend the participants trying to make sense of their personal and social experiences (cf. Smith, 2004). The child protection workers in this study explained how they implemented natural mentoring and identified the challenges and opportunities they encountered. I simultaneously tried to make sense of the child protection workers who were, in turn, trying to make sense of their experiences in implementing natural mentoring.

Role of the Researcher

I conducted personal, semistructured interviews with participants. I offered to conduct the interviews in a safe, private location in which the participant felt comfortable. Participants had options for interview locations so they could choose locations of their choice. After recording all interviews with the participants' permission, I transcribed and analyzed the data.

I had no personal relationships with the participants. A professional relationship existed because I am also employed as a child protection worker but at a location different from the participants and in a different capacity. I was not a supervisor or instructor for any of the participants.

Child protection offices are located throughout the United States, with several offices in each county. Recruiting participants in the same office where I was employed could have caused the individuals to feel obligated to participate in the study. To prevent this possibility, I presented the study to workers in a child protection office in another office within my county or an office outside of my county. To clarify, my county has two offices; therefore, I did not seek participants from the office where I worked. I also identified the criteria for participation and only chose participants who fit the criteria.

Methodology

Population

The participants for this study were child protection workers who had implemented natural mentoring at their workplace and had found it effective. Criterion sampling was the method used to ensure that the participants met the criteria for this study and could provide responses sufficient to answer the research questions (cf. Creswell, 2013). In phenomenological studies, criterion sampling requires that all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

The specific criteria for participating in the study were:

1. Current child protection workers who have experience working with older or aging-out foster youth.
2. Currently work in child protection agencies.
3. Have experience with implementing natural mentoring or acting as natural mentors and acknowledge that natural mentoring is an effective intervention at their workplaces.

I contacted the office supervisor of the organization by telephone and explained my study. I asked the supervisor to distribute the invitations (letter to participant) to the staff with the request that interested individuals reach out to me within 3 days. Only the individuals who met the criteria and expressed a desire to take part in the study became participants. I used snowball or chain sampling as a second sampling strategy. With snowball or chain sampling, participants who completed the interview could inform other individuals who met the criteria of the study and ask them to contact the researcher (Patton, 2002).

The number of participants and the rationale. IPA was the chosen research tradition for this study. Smith (2004) stated that most IPA scholars use smaller sample sizes because they can only conduct the detailed analysis associated with IPA on a small sample. I recruited, selected, and interviewed participants from a pool of 36 people, eight of whom contacted me and expressed their interest in participating in the study. None of the eight participants withdrew from the study or stated that they could not take part for any reason; therefore, I did not need to return to the recruitment pool. I used snowball sampling to recruit three additional participants who met the criteria; however, only two participants followed through with the interviews.

Recruitment procedures. Recruitment began when I contacted the office supervisor of the organization by telephone to explain my study and request the distribution of the invitations to participate. Interested individuals were to contact me within 3 days. Eight child protection workers contacted me and indicated that they wanted to participate in the study. Once the participants contacted me, I reviewed their screening forms to ensure they met the criteria; next, I e-mailed the consent form to each individual, which they were to read and reply “I Consent” to indicate that they agreed to participate in the study. In snowball or chain sampling, the participants who completed the interviews could inform other individuals who meet the criteria and ask them to contact the researcher (Patton, 2002). I used snowball sampling as a second sampling strategy and obtained three additional participants, two of whom completed their interviews.

Relationship between saturation and sample size. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) explained that qualitative researchers could achieve data saturation with a sample size of 12 participants because most changes in the codes occur between the first and 12th interviews. Smith (2004) noted that most IPA studies have a smaller sample size (five to 10 participants) because it is only possible to conduct the detailed analysis associated with IPA on a small sample. Creswell (2013) recommended that samples for a phenomenological study range from three to 10 individuals. In reviewing the information provided by Creswell, Guest et al., and Smith, I used 10 participants.

I also chose my sample size based on previous research. In a study of the CARE program, which provided natural mentors for young people at risk of aging out of foster care, Greeson and Thompson (2017) used 10 natural mentors. Cunningham and Diversi (2012) conducted a critical ethnographic study to discover young people's perspectives of aging out of the foster care system; the purposive sample included six participants. Lane (2016) executed a qualitative descriptive study to explore the influences that caused Black young people who aged out of foster care to enroll in college, with a sample of 10 individuals who currently attended college or were recent college graduates.

Instrument

Data methods and data collection instruments. I used a screening form to identify eligible participants (see Appendix A). I preserved the semistructured interviews using two audio recorders in case one device malfunctioned. I also took physical notes with a pencil and paper. A semistructured interview protocol allowed me to explain the study and ensure each participant received the same basic questions.

Data instrument source. Smith (2004) suggested that the ideal way to collect data for an IPA study is through semistructured interviews (see Appendix B). Semistructured interviews provide opportunities for the researcher and the participant to engage in dialogue; in addition, the researcher can modify the initial questions depending on the participant's responses to probe for additional information (Smith, 2004). I developed the interview questions based on the literature review. Before I began the interviews, I collected demographic information to understand the participants' context.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Data collection source. The participating child protection workers provided the data for the study. I conducted interviews in neutral locations—private rooms of libraries—where the participants felt comfortable. I clarified that the interview spaces would be distraction-free locations. All participants could physically meet in person at a public library; therefore, I did not need to use an Internet-based interviewing tool to conduct any interviews. Each individual took part in one 25- to 50-minute, face-to-face interview. I contacted the participant via e-mail or telephone if I needed clarification while reviewing the interview data.

Plan in the event of too few participants. If there had been an insufficient number of participants, I had planned to contact a child protection office in another county; however, I had sufficient participants for the study.

Data Analysis Plan

I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to interpret the data. Researchers can use the thematic approach within different theoretical frameworks and different processes because they are not attached to any preexisting theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a means for exploring the richness of data without the interference of the author's conceptions of previously established theories (Dahan-Oliel, Shikako-Thomas, & Majnemer, 2012). Thematic analysis is a process in which researchers qualitatively synthesize data through the extraction of themes and subthemes (Dahan-Oliel et al., 2012). Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) stated that thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the perspectives of research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights. Thematic analysis does not require detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of other qualitative approaches (Nowell et al., 2017).

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis comprises six phases, the first of which is familiarizing oneself with the data. In this step, researchers repeatedly read the interviews to fully understand the depth and breadth of the content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke suggested reading the entire data content before coding to identify possible patterns while reading the material. During this phase, the researcher should take notes of the patterns and write down coding ideas.

The second phase in thematic analysis is generating initial codes that reflect important areas of the data the researcher could use to answer the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding is part of the analysis as the researcher organizes the data into meaningful groups. The coded data differ from the units of analysis, which are themes the researcher begins to develop in Phase 3, when the interpretative analysis of the data occurs (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 3 begins when the researcher has initially coded and organized all of the data and has identified a list of the different codes across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In Phase 3, the researcher searches for themes among the codes, refocusing the analysis on the broader level of themes rather than codes, sorting the different codes into potential themes, and organizing relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The third phase also entails analyzing the codes and considering how to combine different codes to form an overarching theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher can use visual aids, such as tables or mind maps, to sort the different codes into themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Another possibility is to record the name of each code and a brief description on a separate piece of paper, organizing the paper into piles according to the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A researcher should think about the relationships between codes, themes, and the different levels of themes, such as the main overarching themes and subthemes. If the codes do not fit into the main themes, a miscellaneous theme pile might be needed to house those codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 4 comprises two levels of reviewing and refining the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this phase, the themes unsupported by the data become evident; two separate themes may form one theme, or the researcher may be able to break down themes into separate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are two review levels in this phase, the first being to read all of the collated extracts for each theme and determine if they form a clear pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the second level, the researcher rereads the entire data set to determine if the themes coincide with the data set and code any additional missed data within the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After completing the second phase, the different themes and the complete story told about the data should become clear.

Phase 5 begins when there is a satisfactory thematic map of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher defines and further refines the themes presented in the analyses by pinpointing the core of each theme and determining what interesting aspect of the data each theme shows (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher defines any subthemes during the refinement process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Dahan-Oliel et al. (2012) stated that thematic analysis is a valuable methodology for exploring studies with different designs to capture common themes.

The sixth phase is writing up the report of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher narrates a story of the data to ensure the reader of the quality and validity of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The write-up includes data extracts that provide concise, coherent, logical, nonrepetitive, and interesting accounts of the data with sufficient evidence of the themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Nowell et al. (2017) stated that to be trustworthy, qualitative researchers must establish which data analysis they have conducted in a precise, consistent, exhaustive manner by recording, systemizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to allow the reader to determine the credibility of the analysis.

Plan for discrepancies during data analysis. Some evidence will fit the pattern of the code or theme (Creswell, 2013). If I had encountered this discrepancy, I would have documented the negative data to provide a realistic and valid assessment of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013). Discussing conflicting information provides credibility to the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

A study has credibility when co-researchers or readers confronted by the experience can recognize the experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Researchers can establish credibility through reflexivity and reflection of their perspectives (Noble & Smith, 2015). I maintained a reflective journal to document my thoughts, experiences, and feelings and used the information to document the research (Ortlipp, 2009). Keeping a self-reflective journal is a means of creating transparency in the research process so the researcher can examine personal assumptions and goals (Ortlipp, 2009). I also used peer debriefing, a strategy by which the researcher engages a colleague with nothing to gain from the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I chose a colleague who had a vested interest in the topic and shared the desire to implement natural mentors. The peer reviewed the study and asked questions to ensure the account resonated in people other than the researcher, providing validity to the study (Creswell, 2013).

Transferability

A researcher must show evidence that the study findings can apply to other situations or populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher should incorporate a thick description, providing details about the participants or setting, case, or theme (Creswell, 2013). Creswell explained thick description as a means of helping the readers apply the information to other settings and determine if the study has transferable findings because of the shared characteristics. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that providing details is a way to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. I investigated the setting or the participant's workplace to determine if the workplace was in an inner-city or rural area because the characteristics of the clients they served could have differed depending on the environment. I provided a rich account of descriptive data, such as the context in which I conducted the research, setting, sample size, sample strategy, and demographics (cf. Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Dependability

A study has dependability when the findings are well-documented, consistent with the collected data, and repeatable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One way to mitigate bias and inaccuracy is by triangulating the data sources (Patton, 2002). Researchers conduct triangulation to confirm the results of the research (Virginia, 2016). There are four types of triangulation; data, investigator, theory, and methodological (Virginia, 2016). I used data triangulation to establish dependability. I compared information from the interviews to find similarities and corroborate evidence (cf. Creswell, 2013). Once researchers establish similarities in the data, they considerably reduce their biases, providing a greater understanding of the themes or perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

Dependability includes the aspect of consistency and the understanding that the interpretation is grounded in the data and not the researcher's interpretations (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I used audit trails to achieve dependability. The audit trail is a needed strategy for ensuring dependability and confirmability (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I provided all notes on the decisions made during the research process, reflective thoughts, sampling, findings, and information on the management of the data (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). The audit trail is a way to allow other researchers to understand the research path.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I asked the participants to answer the questions based on their own experiences and to avoid answering questions in ways they thought would benefit the researcher and the project. This technique ensured that the participants shaped the findings.

I used member checking to attain confirmability. In one way of member checking, the researcher can send the participants their interview transcripts to provide feedback (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Researchers can also conduct member checking during the interview process (Harper & Cole, 2012). During each interview, I repeated the participant's responses and asked if I had an accurate understanding of what the participant said (cf. Harper & Cole, 2012). The participant can agree or disagree, thus providing the researcher with the ability to make corrections. Member checking is a means of decreasing the chances of reporting incorrect data and increasing the chances of attaining authentic and original findings (Moustakas, 1994). Member checking is an excellent strategy for achieving credibility because it provides the participant with the opportunity to challenge any possible incorrect interpretations (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

I provided individuals interested in the study with a screening form (see Appendix A) to locate appropriate individuals who met the inclusion criteria. All of the participants received letters containing the details of the study (see Appendix C). After I completed the interviews, I created backup copies of data and computer files. I kept the copies, the originals, and the audio recordings in two places— at my work location in a locked drawer and the other set of data in a locked drawer at my house—to avoid compromising or losing the data.

I used pseudonyms in the write-up to protect the participants' identities (cf. Creswell, 2013), labeling participants' data with their pseudonyms. Only I have access to the data, which I will destroy in 5 years per Walden University's IRB requirements. If the participant had wanted to withdraw from the study, I would not have encouraged or forced the participant to continue. If the participants had withdrawn from the study, I would have revisited the list of the participants eligible to take part.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the step-by-step process of the study. The central focus of the study was to explore the child protection workers' strategies of implementing natural mentoring and to understand any challenges or opportunities within the child protection agency for implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth. The qualitative tradition used in this study was IPA. I collected the data from interviews with child protection workers. I used criterion sampling because it was the appropriate method for ensuring that the participants met the criteria and answering the research questions. IPA requires a small sample; therefore, I obtained 10 participants. I did not use participants employed in my office for ethical reasons.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies and understand the types of support or organizational climate beneficial for this intervention. A secondary intent was to explore the challenges usually faced when implementing natural mentoring. Child protection workers who worked at child welfare agencies with established natural mentoring interventions described the organizational and systemic contexts beneficial for implementing natural mentoring. The research questions were:

RQ1: How do child protection workers experience the phenomenon of implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

RQ2: What meaning do child protection workers make of the support and climate of their organization when implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

RQ3: What meaning do child protection workers make of the challenges experienced in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

This chapter presents the participants and the process used for data collection. This chapter also includes the data analysis process and the protocol used to obtain trustworthiness. This chapter also discusses the results and summary of the study.

Setting

I obtained the telephone number of a child protection office in Central New Jersey through a Google search. To minimize bias, I chose a child protection office where the workers were neither acquaintances nor individuals I knew personally or professionally. I contacted the office supervisor of the child protection office by phone and explained my study. I next asked the supervisor to distribute the invitations (letter to participant) and screening forms to the staff members who worked with older foster youth, and the supervisor agreed. I met with the supervisor at a local library and provided copies of the invitations and the screening forms.

Two potential participants contacted me within 1 week and expressed interest in taking part in the study. At that point, I reviewed their screening forms with them to ensure they met the participation criteria. Upon confirming their qualification, I e-mailed the consent form to participants and asked them to reply “I Consent” to indicate that they understood the contents of the consent form and agreed to participate in the study. Once I received this confirmation, I scheduled interview times and places convenient for the participants. I asked that they continue to communicate with me via their personal e-mail accounts and personal telephones, not their work contacts.

Because I was not receiving additional responses, I called again to ensure the supervisor had distributed the invitations. The supervisor informed me that some of the individuals who worked with aging-out foster youth were on vacation or leave but scheduled to return soon. The supervisor assured me that the staff members would receive the invitations when they returned. Eight additional potential participants contacted me via telephone, text message, or e-mail the following month. I reviewed their screening forms with them and determined they all met the criteria; however, only seven of the individuals scheduled interviews. I obtained one more participant using snowballing however this participant did not schedule an interview. Despite having to reschedule some interviews because of the participants' schedules, I completed all of the interviews within 2 weeks of the original interview times.

As indicated in my data collection plan, I conducted all of the face-to-face interviews in a private room located in a public library. I called the library before the interview to reserve a room. Once I completed transcribing the interviews, I provided participants with a copy of their transcript to review, asking them to notify me immediately if I had misconstrued any of their words. None of the participants contacted me with revisions.

Demographics

The sample consisted of eight women and two men (*M*_42.1, *SD*_ 5.60). The male participants were Black and were 37 and 47 years old. Five participants were Black women between 34 and 50 years old; two participants were White women 39 and 40 years old, and one participant was a Hispanic woman 49 years of age. One participant worked as a child-specific recruiter and one participant was a resource worker. One participant worked as a permanency casework supervisor, and the other seven participants were adolescent workers. All the participants were working for a child protection agency. They had between 4 to 25 years of service working with older foster youth and 9 to 26 years of experience providing natural mentor service.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Race	Age (years)	Professional training
Ashton	Black	34	Adolescent worker
Samira	Black	50	Adolescent worker
Milly	Hispanic	49	Resource worker
Rayah	Black	39	Adolescent worker
Teena	Black	47	Adolescent worker
Lyra	White	40	Casework supervisor
Yonnie	Black	39	Child-specific recruiter
Main	Black	37	Adolescent worker
Kenny	Black	47	Adolescent worker
Darla	White	39	Abbot worker

Table 2

Years of Service

Participant	Years as a child protection worker	Years working in natural mentoring	Years working with older foster youth
Ashton	13	13	13
Samira	25	10	4
Milly	14	21	11
Rayah	16	12	12
Teena	19	26	6
Lyra	18	18	18
Yonnie	4	10	7
Main	13	13	14
Kenny	13	24	24
Darla	15	9	10

Data Collection

I collected all of the data for this study through face-to-face interviews from 10 participants. Data collection occurred over 3 months and 5 days. I conducted the first interview on June 28, 2019, and the last interview on October 3, 2019. All of the interviews occurred in a private, mini-conference room in a public library. I recommended several libraries and allowed the participant to choose one. I contacted the library in advance and scheduled a time to use a private room for 1 hour. The room was small, quiet, and free from disturbances. I allowed participants to sit first to ensure they had the opportunity to sit wherever they felt comfortable. I stated that I was placing my cell phone on “do not disturb” and the participants did the same without direction. I reminded each participant of the confidentiality of the interview and the ability to end the interview or take a break at any time.

I began each interview by collecting the participant’s demographic information. I used an electronic recording device and a microcassette recorder as a backup and took handwritten notes. For the first three interviews, I also used a cell phone for recording and transcribing at the same time. Once I listened to the interview and read through the phone transcripts, I realized that there were several mistakes in the translation and decided to transcribe the interviews by hand. This process became overwhelming after six interviews, so I hired a company to transcribe the remaining four recordings.

The first interview was the longest and lasted 49 minutes; the two shortest interviews were 16 minutes, and the other seven interviews ran between 20 to 30 minutes, for an average length of 25 minutes. I secured the interviews stored on the first electronic recording device with a passcode and locked the interviews recorded on the cassette tapes in my office desk drawer with my handwritten notes. I transferred and saved all of the interview data onto my password-protected laptop to which only I knew the password.

Data Analysis

Researchers must triangulate and analyze the data collected from the interviews in a professional, unbiased, and thorough manner to ensure the validity and reliability of the results (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). I analyzed the data for this study using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is an exhaustive, six-step process of coding to ensure the researcher has not misunderstood the data and has established meaningful patterns or themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In the first step of thematic analysis, I familiarized myself with the data by repeatedly reading the transcriptions and listening to the recorded interviews. I also reviewed the handwritten notes taken while conducting the interviews. As I read the interviews, I highlighted certain portions that I thought significant for locating emerging themes. I corrected any mistakes while listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts simultaneously. I noticed that some interviewees mentioned a specific city or town, so I removed this identifying information. There were times when I needed to revisit the audio recording of an interview to listen to how the participant made a specific statement. There were also instances when I needed to call a participant to clarify a specific statement.

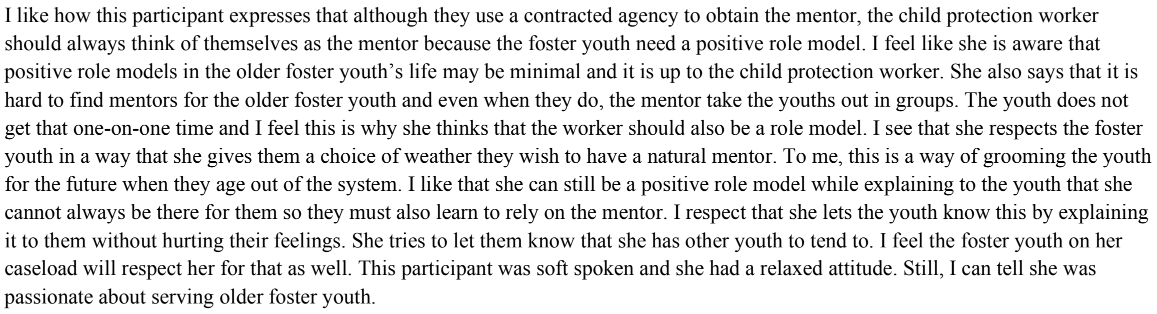
In the second phase, I generated initial codes using a three-column chart (see Table 3). The first column included the interview transcription. In the second column, I documented line-by-line coding of the data, which were the initial codes. I immersed myself in the data in the second phase by using critical thinking to ensure that I did not misunderstand the information. I paid close attention to each word the participants said.

Phase 2 was an exhausting but essential process in which I crafted in my own words the exact meaning of the participants' statements. In the third column, I documented focused coding. I implemented an inductive approach in which I coded or categorized the data for analysis without fitting the data to a predetermined coding frame (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). I ensured that the analysis was a data-driven process instead of making any analytic preconceptions (Bree & Gallagher, 2016). Saldaña (2008) stated that a code should indicate the data content, just as a title indicates the content of a poem or book. I created a codebook in which I listed and provided a meaning for each focused code. Using the codebook required me to continually revisit the transcripts to ensure that I understood the correct meaning.

In the third phase, I searched for themes among the codes by generating families of codes for each interview. The themes emerged in this phase. I color-coded each family of codes to match the thematic areas. The third phase provided me the opportunity to look deeper into the data and ensure that all of the data parts fit together. During Phase 4, I extensively reviewed all of the themes by repeatedly reading and comparing them. I printed the family of codes for all interviews, highlighted significant portions, and made notes to compare the codes and themes to create a map of the themes. I defined and named the themes in Phase 5. I also identified the subthemes during this phase. In the sixth and final phase, I produced documentation of my interpretations. According to Bree and Gallagher (2016), the report may contain partial, anonymous quotations to complement the identified findings. I included the participants' responses in the narrative of my report. In this final phase, I related to the research questions, the literature, and the analysis.

Saldaña (2009) stated that virtually every writer of a qualitative research report finds that coding data is a challenging, time-consuming, tedious, and frustrating process. I agree; however, I heeded Saldaña's advice, which was that qualitative writers should exercise perseverance, take breaks for rejuvenation, and create a workable schedule to provide time for full concentration. I followed this directive during the coding process, and I found it a helpful suggestion.

I also documented a memos section for each interview to reflect on each participant's thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated that writing memos and creating diagrams are part of the analysis and part of qualitative work. Corbin and Strauss contended that qualitative research requires complex thinking, and writing memos is just as important a process as collecting data because it provides the researcher the chance to track personal thoughts. I enjoyed writing the memos because I could put a face to each participant through the memos. My data became humanized in that the material became more than just words on the paper. See Figure 1 for an example of a memo.



I like how this participant expresses that although they use a contracted agency to obtain the mentor, the child protection worker should always think of themselves as the mentor because the foster youth need a positive role model. I feel like she is aware that positive role models in the older foster youth’s life may be minimal and it is up to the child protection worker. She also says that it is hard to find mentors for the older foster youth and even when they do, the mentor take the youths out in groups. The youth does not get that one-on-one time and I feel this is why she thinks that the worker should also be a role model. I see that she respects the foster youth in a way that she gives them a choice of weather they wish to have a natural mentor. To me, this is a way of grooming the youth for the future when they age out of the system. I like that she can still be a positive role model while explaining to the youth that she cannot always be there for them so they must also learn to rely on the mentor. I respect that she lets the youth know this by explaining it to them without hurting their feelings. She tries to let them know that she has other youth to tend to. I feel the foster youth on her caseload will respect her for that as well. This participant was soft spoken and she had a relaxed attitude. Still, I can tell she was passionate about serving older foster youth.

Figure 1. Sample memo.

Table 3

Example of Transcription Code Book

Text	Line-by-line coding	Focused coding
Speaker 1: Gotcha. Okay. So final question is, What do you think would be challenging if a child protection worker became a natural mentor to the foster youth on his or her caseload?		
Speaker 2: Again, we do it. The challenge is that we can't provide everything that maybe a contracted mentor could, maybe take the youth out once a week in terms of time constraints. We can't really do that with everybody. Take everybody out once a week. But I think it's more important because they see us in a capacity of assistance and they see us in a capacity of real support because we've probably been with them more than maybe someone who we just contract with to put them in place. So, they see us as a mentor; they see us as somebody that is almost a parental figure. They see us already as somebody that can assist them with education or with this or with that, life skills and all that.	We automatically do it We cannot do certain things; challenging The formal mentor Can do those things we cannot Take the youth out Workers are limited Cannot take all our youth out Take them out We are still important Youth see the worker as a support A true support Worker is with the youth more More than the contracted mentor The contracted mentor The youth feel the worker is a mentor Youth's view of the worker Like a parent They see workers Help them with school Life skills	Workers become natural mentors naturally But workers are limited to what they can do Workers are with the youth longer than the mentor Workers are like another parent

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Qualitative research requires various levels of assessments to ensure that the study has quality and trustworthiness. I applied credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies as forms of trustworthiness in this research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Other scholars (Harper & Cole, 2012; Moser & Korstjens, 2018; Noble & Smith, 2015; Virginia, 2016) have shown through their research that these strategies are effective for promoting trustworthiness in qualitative studies.

Credibility

I kept a reflective journal from the beginning of my study. It was nearly impossible for me to keep track of all of the aspects of my study without writing down information. I maintained a reflective journal to document my thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Keeping a consistent record provided me with the opportunity to use the information to make documentation in my research and to review my steps during the research process. I did not need to guess or assume anything about my information or goals because I had appropriately documented everything. I also conducted peer debriefing, in which I asked a trusted colleague to review the study. I chose a colleague passionate about ensuring positive outcomes for older foster youth who thought that implementing natural mentoring was a helpful intervention for these youth. Once my colleague reviewed the study, I asked if she thought the study would be significant to people other than me. She informed me that the study was important to her, and she thought that anyone who worked with older foster youth would appreciate the efforts of this study. The confirmation from my colleague helped to provide validity to this study.

Transferability

Child protection workers, social workers, practitioners, and others in the helping field who work with aging-out foster youth can consider this study relatable. I incorporated thick descriptions to help the readers transfer information to other settings and to determine the transferability of the findings due to shared characteristics. I documented detailed steps of how I conducted this research study. I described how I obtained my participants, rationale for the sample size, sample strategy, and the demographic details of each participant. I created a table to show the demographic information to promote readers' understanding of the topic. Providing details of this information was a way to help the reader determine the transferability of the study and its outcomes to other cases, times, settings, situations, and people.

Dependability

I used data triangulation to establish dependability for this study. While listening to the interviews, reading the transcripts, and analyzing the data, I compared information across the interviews to find similarities. Finding various similarities in the data was a means of corroborating the evidence and decreasing any biases I may have had as the researcher. I also used audit trails to ensure that I had grounded the interpretation in the data and not my understanding. Other researchers will want to know the intricate details of how I conducted this study. I provided all of the notes on my research process, including the details for sampling, my reflective thoughts, the findings, and information on how I managed the data.

Confirmability

I used confirmability to strengthen the validity of the results. I informed the participants that they should answer the interview questions truthfully based on their experiences. During the recruitment process, I carefully reviewed each screening form to confirm that I did not know any of the participants. If I had known or had a relationship with any of the participants, they may have felt obligated to answer the questions to please me. I chose participants whom I did not know to ensure unbiased findings shaped by the participants' responses.

I also used member checking to achieve confirmability. I conducted member checking by providing the participants with their interview transcripts for review so they could report any mistakes or misunderstandings. While interviewing the participants, I repeated their responses to ensure that I had understood them correctly and was accurate in my interpretation of their responses. Repeating their answers provided the participants with the option to agree or disagree so I could make corrections and decrease the chances of reporting incorrect data, thus increasing the likelihood of obtaining authentic and original findings.

Results

After analyzing the data, I was able to answer all three research questions. Four significant themes and four subthemes emerged. The first major theme was that natural mentoring is beneficial. The second major theme was implementing natural mentoring. There were two subthemes: formal implementation and informal implementation. The third major theme was that supervisory support is dominant. The fourth major theme was that challenges and strategies surface; the subthemes were challenges with policy and engagement as a strategy. Table 4 shows the themes and subthemes.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
Natural mentoring is beneficial	
Implementing natural mentoring	Formal implementation Informal implementation
Supervisory support is dominant	
Challenges and strategies surface	Challenges with policy Engagement as a strategy

Theme 1: Natural Mentoring is Beneficial

The child protection workers in this study believe in the natural mentor service whether it occurs in a formal or informal setting. Older foster youth are able to turn to their natural mentor for guidance that will help them make healthier life decisions. Natural mentors are able to assist the youth in learning general life skills which aids in obtaining a successful future. Since some older foster youth do not have the support of a parent or family member, a natural mentor can advocate for the youth in times of need.

Participants expressed their philosophies on natural mentoring. All 10 child protection workers thought that implementing a natural mentoring service was an important intervention and that young people in foster care benefit from this service. Young people in foster care are often involved with different agencies for services. With these services, the youth may have other caring adults in their social circles, such as therapists, counselors, or behavioral assistants, who eventually take on the roles of natural mentors. Darla stated, “I feel like it’s extremely important . . . for development toward the aging-out [young people] when they're on their own. If they don't have that, they have less of a chance of being successful." Natural mentoring is particularly essential in providing guidance for youth who are in and out of the foster care system. Workers believe that providing natural mentoring to older foster youth is how connections between the youth and a support person is built. Considering that foster youth need guidance more so than an average youth outside the foster care system, workers expressed that it is especially vital that older foster youth receive natural mentor services.

Overall, the participants are on one accord in their belief of the benefits of older foster youth having a natural mentor. The workers feel that a natural mentor relationship can evolve in different settings. The natural mentor could be the parent of the youth's friend, a teacher, or another person in the youth's social circle. The child protection worker and the older foster youth have the power to encourage and shape these relationships.

Theme 2: Implementing Natural Mentoring

There are two major ways that child protection workers implement a natural mentor service: A formal and an informal way. The first way is to implement a natural mentor service by obtaining a mentor through a formal agency. There are specific mentor agencies that are contracted with the child protection agency. The worker will complete a referral form and submit it to the mentor agency. Then the mentor agency will match the youth with a natural mentor. The second way is an informal procedure. The workers will fuel the relationship between the youth and someone who is already in the youth's social circle. The natural mentor could be a person the youth identified or someone the worker has observed to have a vested interest in the youth. The child protection worker sometimes becomes the natural mentor informally.

Formal implementation. One way of implementing natural mentoring is via a formal approach, which implies using contracted agencies as a source of mentors. Child protection agencies have contracts with several mentoring agencies. The agencies require the workers to complete a referral application and submit it to the mentor agency. If the agency is able to connect the youth with a mentor, they do so. Workers include information in the referral about the youth such as the youth's behaviors, dislikes, goals, or any issues that the youth may have that the worker feels is important to include in the referral. Workers provide detailed information about the youth so they can be matched with an appropriate mentor.

The use of a contracted agency is not solely the worker's decision. The young people in foster care must also agree to and understand the purpose of the mentor service. Although one of the participants, Lyra, is agreeable in using contracted agencies to obtain natural mentors, she expressed that she felt that this was not "completely natural" because the relationship was intentionally initiated. She stated, "when you have those agencies that are identified specifically for mentoring, I think that it has potential to be [natural mentoring], but I don't really look at it as being natural mentoring." In other words, there is potential that an implemented natural mentor can breed a genuine bond between the youth and the natural mentor even though the two were purposely placed together. If the youth is willing to accept a formal natural mentor, the worker does not hesitate to submit a referral to a contracted agency.

Ashton stated that they use community mentor agencies such as Robin's Nest or Oaks. The workers will talk to the mentor agencies about the youth, and they try to match up the youth's strengths and needs with a mentor whose skills aligns with the youth's needs. Workers do not have control over the process the contracted agencies use to match the youth to a natural mentor. Connecting the older foster youth with a natural mentor is the contracted mentor agency's task once the worker submits the referral. The most common means of acquiring a natural mentor is through a contracted agency.

In sum, all of the child protection workers indicated that they use an agency that is contracted through the child protection office to provide natural mentors to the foster youth. The contracted agencies are responsible to hire natural mentors so they are available when the worker submits a request for a natural mentor. The child protection office provides payment to the contracted agency to match the older children in foster care with natural mentors. Older foster youth are positioned to decline mentor services therefore they must be willing to engage in the natural mentor service. The workers must explain the expectations of having a natural mentor to ensure that the youth are clear about the mentor service.

Challenges concerning formal implementation. As noted, child protection workers use contracted mentor agencies to supply the older foster youth with mentors. There are some challenges and problems that arise in this process. Some agencies stop providing the young people with mentors because of the youth's behaviors. This is concerning because most young people in foster care have behavioral issues, which is why they need mentorship. Other issues involve low pay rate to mentors, inexperienced mentors, and lack of mentors.

Mismatch between mentor and foster youth. There are times when the agency provides a natural mentor, but the mentor is not a good match for the youth. In the past, workers had the opportunity to choose the mentors and consider their age and gender, however this has changed. Formal mentors tend to be young, which may be good because they can relate to the young people. However, younger mentors do not always have full wisdom from age to appropriately guide foster youth. Kenny reported that the mentors tend to be with the foster youth for finite periods of time because it's usually a starting position for them and they are sometimes more focused on school or obtaining a better job. Longevity is sometimes minimal in the formal mentorship because the natural mentor tends to have other priorities. Additionally, since the payment to mentors tends to be low, mentors quit mentoring as they obtain higher payment jobs. This situation leaves foster youth with a recurring change of mentors and lack of trust in the system.

Foster youth do not accept mentors. Several participants expressed that older kids do not usually take well to mentors. Kenny stated that older youth feel they have been "serviced out" because they have had so many other services that most feel like they do not need a mentor. There were not always successful foster youth–natural mentor relationships because the young person may not have respected a mentor who did not appear successful or if the mentor was close to the youth's age. In other words, the youth did not have a reason to look up to the formal natural mentor.

Some adolescents run away right after placement in a foster home. Adolescents who run away create challenges for child protection workers looking to implement natural mentors because the youth are missing. Darla stated that many older children in foster care had been "abandoned emotionally by people in their lives." She explained, "They don't trust that somebody's there to really help them because they're getting paid for it, and sometimes, they get annoyed with people being in their business." The mentors provided by the contracted agencies are paid employees; therefore, young people have a hard time disclosing their issues and do not trust that the natural mentor genuinely cares. Older foster youth also tend to be private and are not open to share their personal thoughts and feelings with a stranger.

Lack of mentors with specific features. Natural mentors would be more advantageous to fostering successful young people if the contracted agencies would take more of a vested interest in providing quality mentors. Main expressed issues with the lack of male mentors, and Black male mentors, in particular. A significant issue was that it was more difficult to find natural mentors for older children in foster care than for the younger children. There is a longer waiting list for older foster youth, especially Black male foster youth, and there is a lack of male mentors overall. There is a time lag between the referral and finding a mentor for these youth. To clarify, the waiting list for natural mentors was longer for Black male foster youth if the goal was to link those youth with Black male mentors. This was an issue because there is a lack of Black male mentors. It is essentially difficult for the young mentor to understand what the youth needs because the mentor is also so young. Considering that foster youth are a vulnerable population, it is important to meet their social and emotional needs. If young mentors cannot pinpoint and address the youth's needs, it can present a problem to the youth's permanency, well-being and positive future outcomes. Sometimes it was a challenge when the natural mentor was not a good match with the foster youth. Participants further indicated that another barrier is when the agencies go "defunct because of lack of funds, lack of resources, and lack of personnel for our youth." Similarly, Darla noted that some mentor programs are "getting smaller by the day." Workers also utilized mentor agencies such as Boys and Girls Club and Big Brothers and Big Sisters which yielded limited natural mentors to serve their youth.

Overall, there is a shortage of mentor agencies which leads to a shortage of mentors. There is a significant lack in Black male mentors and mentors who are committed to longevity in the mentor relationship. Kenny's views were both similar to and different from some of the other participants. Some workers verbalized issues with younger mentors, but Kenny was the only participant who indicated that low pay rate was one of the reasons most of the mentors were young people. He also expressed that because the mentors were young, it was more likely that they would have friendships with the youth in foster care instead of mentor relationships. Because the natural mentor's job is low-paying, some are not vested in the position. It also becomes difficult for the worker when the mentor agency has a long wait list to provide a natural mentor.

Informal implementation. This is the second way of implementing a natural mentor service. For this process, the worker asks the youth if there is someone in their life that they are connected with and would like that person to be their natural mentor. If the youth identifies someone, the worker will speak to that individual and ask if they are interested in becoming the youth's natural mentor. If the individual is interested then the worker makes efforts to fuel that relationship. It is not uncommon for the workers to become natural mentors of some of those they provided services to. This is another avenue for informal implementation. Workers also explained that they spend quality time with their older foster youth and they informally become the natural mentor to the youth.

Child protection workers described their experiences when implementing an informal natural mentor. Workers have approaches they use to informally implement a natural mentor service in which they employ connections the youth may already have. Then the worker would obtain contact information for that individual, and reach out to them. The worker will explore that connection to see if the person is open to being a natural mentor for that youth. The worker may present a permanency pact which is an informal youth/mentor written agreement. If there was a person who was a prior form of support and is no longer working directly with the child, the worker may seek out that individual and explore their availability and willingness to be that youth's natural mentor.

Samira stated that implementation mostly occurred through contracted agencies; however, the child protection workers did use informal approaches. She described,

> Some of my colleagues have a rapport with maybe a teacher and [they] talk to a teacher or a coach and say, "Listen, can you take this young person under your wing and give them some guidance [and] kind of help them navigate?"

In this manner, there is no formal agreement and there is no monetary involvement. The worker simply communicates with the person and the youth and help maintain the connection. Ashton stated, “Most children kind of identify their own mentors—somebody who’s positive and helping them with things—and we just try to support [those] relationships in whatever ways we can.” Teena added that child protection workers will, at times, invite the individual that the young person identified to a family team meeting to encourage the relationship. The family team meeting is a gathering of individuals to discuss the youth’s needs and future plans. Anyone who has a vested interested in the youth’s life can be invited to the meeting. The worker will use the family team meeting as a platform to help strengthen the relationship between the youth and the individual. Another approach is that workers sometimes directed the older youth in foster care to turn to their foster parent for guidance on life skills because the foster parent was someone who was consistent in the young person’s life.

In sum, when using an informal process to implement a natural mentor service the worker will ask the youth to identify someone in their life that they would like to be their mentor. The worker will contact that person and explain the child’s interest in them. Some workers use an informal agreement called a Permanency Pact which describes the youth’s goals and needs. The identified person informally agrees to be the natural mentor. This individual is not paid for their mentor services. The relationship will thrive or fail depending on how vested the mentor and the youth are in the relationship.

Challenges concerning informal implementation. As mentioned, child protection workers implement an informal natural mentor by contacting a person that the youth has identified in their circle or the worker may reach out to someone that the youth looks up to. Child protection workers try to fuel those relationships but sometimes struggle with this process. Some of the issues fell with the identified natural mentor, the worker, or the foster youth.

Workers' inexperience and busy schedule. Some newer workers and younger workers may not be vested in the youth due to the worker's inexperience and busy schedule. Kenny explained that "the modality of the job is more task-oriented, so I think they're just doing it. . . It's more of a formality." Main added that "protocol is important," meaning that "most workers will implement a natural mentor, but some workers are not proactive in doing it." He explained, "It varies on the worker; some workers aren't as pressed to [provide mentors] because they feel they have other priorities to handle, and at times, some of our youth take a backseat." Regarding the natural mentor that the youth identified, the workers struggled to fuel those relationships due to constraints of managing other duties on their caseload. Lyra added that "fueling a natural mentor relationship falls at the bottom of their tasks." Those relationships are also very difficult for the worker to track after the worker closes the case. Workers mainly used a contracted agency to implement natural mentors because they could then officially track the progress of the relationships. One participant felt that a tracking unit would be a beneficial way to keep track of these types of relationships.

Natural mentors not prepared to handle youth's problems and needs. Although the young people in foster care may identify natural mentors in the youth's social circles, the relationships sometimes fail because the identified person does not know how to respond to the young people's behaviors. Lyra said, "foster youth have past trauma" and not everyone has the skills to appropriately respond to those traumas. Another issue was that many foster youths do not have relationship skills and they fall out of their mentor relationships. Sometimes the older foster youth tend to lack maturity and communication skills to sustain their relationships. The young people sometimes get busy in their daily routines and fall out of the relationships. Several participants reported that the youth "get older, and they think [that] they can do things on their own, so they do not communicate much with the person they identified." Darla added that sometimes the individual that the young person identified does not work out because "it is rare to find someone [who] is committed [in the] long [run]." Therefore, some natural mentors may remain consistent in the young person's life but not into adulthood. Sometimes the barrier is financial because workers want the mentor to do different things with the young person that may cost money. When it is not a contracted mentor, funds are not available to provide to the natural mentor. Therefore, the natural mentors might not continue because they cannot afford to do things with the young person that cost money.

Other times, the contracted mentor will reach out to the young person after the contract is over in an effort to maintain an informal natural mentor bond with the older foster child. This may not always work out because sometimes the young person moves away, but the biggest issue is that the youth has difficulty sustaining the relationship. Main observed, "[Young people in] foster [care] are accustomed to people being in and out of their lives, so it is hard for them to maintain relationships." Workers are limited because the youth do not have good relationship-building skills, and they unknowingly sabotage relationships.

Informal implementation was not as successful when the natural mentors were not clear about their roles or they were not as connected to the youth as the worker or the youth thought. The problem with the worker connecting the youth with an informal natural mentor is that the worker can only fuel an informal relationship for a limited time. Additionally, after following up with the person whom the young person identified, workers found that the young person did not remain in the relationship. The young people felt that they could do things on their own without any help and therefor they did not feel they needed a natural mentor. It was also a challenge for the child protection worker to track informal mentor relationships after the case closed.

Child protection workers as informal natural mentors. The implementation of natural mentoring can occur naturally between the child protection worker and the young people in foster care. Although the workers submitted a referral to obtain a mentor, there were not many mentors available. When there was no mentor available, the worker stepped in to teach and guide the foster youth. Teena explained, “we do have to model and act a certain way, so they know how to act when they are in different environments.” Main shared, “they reach out to us at different hours of the day [and] different hours of the night, and we end up just being their mentors informally.” At times, neither the worker’s duties nor the needs of vulnerable youth fit between the normal business hours. Workers tend to find themselves answering the late-night calls from their youth to be a listening ear or provide guidance. Darla expanded on what she and other child protection workers do with their youth which leads to the worker informally becoming the natural mentor. She said,

> Depending on the relationship we have with the adolescent and the child's needs . . . we actually get down and dirty with the child, sometimes doing laundry with them, and sometimes we have to do life skill[s] with them and teach them one-on-one, [like] take them to the DMV. I think the more one-on-one engagement that these workers are doing with their kids really makes [a] difference.

Darla considers herself and other coworkers as natural mentors. The hands-on life skills that she and the other workers taught the young people led to them informally became natural mentors. As the child protection worker continues to work closely with the youth, the workers find themselves juggling multiple roles. The workers do not set out to be the natural mentor but they become the friend and a confidante inside their professional role. Darla reflected, "often times, you don't even know that you're naturally mentoring these kids." It is almost innate for the worker to become the natural mentor to the foster youth they serve. Likewise, Milly shared that "as an adolescent worker, you are actually a mentor to these kids because you are trying to help them understand what they need to do to progress in life." Workers demonstrate life skills, job skills, and everyday living through teaching and modeling. Milly added that workers do far more than typical case management. Workers will take their youth to tour colleges and help them understand that they have career options when they transition into adulthood. Workers take the youth to the library and help them with their homework."

There are workers who are vested in the youth and they sacrifice their time regardless if they are getting paid. In turn, the youth feel comfortable because the worker has built rapport through acts of sincerity and empathy. Main explained,

> The foster youth know [that] they can reach [out to] you . . . on the clock [or] sometimes it's off the clock, and it goes a long way in their thought process and emotional development . . . because you're that consistent person in their [lives] . . . [who] they can trust and run to . . . in an emergency . . . or vent [to] if they're having a problem.

With these qualities, it was understandable that the young people in foster care bonded with the child protection workers and looked to them as their natural mentors. There is a phenomenon of child protection workers acting as natural mentors. The workers considered themselves as the natural mentors to the foster youth they served and it appears that the youth may also see the workers in a natural mentor capacity. The quality time they spent teaching life skills was a form of informal implementation. Although they are not hired to be mentors, it appears that the tasks as a natural mentor aligns with their work duties. It does not appear possible to provide permanency to foster youth by conducting minimal or basic case practice.

Theme 3: Supervisory Support is Dominant

The workers felt that their supervisors understood the importance of older foster youth having a natural mentor. If the youth agreed to receiving a natural mentor service, the supervisors did not deny any worker permission to submit a referral to a mentor agency. Supervisors also understood that the worker may become the natural mentor and they were supportive to worker when this occurs.

All participants stated that their supervisors support formal and informal natural mentor implementation. The workers contended that there were different variables of support in the office. Supervisors want to foster an environment for adolescents where they feel comfortable and feel mentored, therefore it is very rare that supervisors deny services regarding any mentoring. A supervisor may deny a mentor service if the youth is not engaged in their own services. In other words, if the young person did not expressly agree with receiving a mentor, the supervisor would not approve the service.

Supervisors are very supportive in allowing workers the freedom to work their cases where the worker acts as the natural mentor. Lyra mused, “I think [that] the office as a whole always supports mentoring for youth. I don’t think that anyone in the agency would say mentoring is a bad thing unless a relationship is toxic.” The worker may need to work late or be accessible to the youth while in the natural mentor role. Other workers who worked with older foster youth had the same experiences. Kenny stated that the supervisor gave them “the latitude to have the ability to do outside-the-box thinking.” Supervisor were noted to be seasoned adolescent supervisors and familiar with many of the mentor agencies. As such, supervisors built a rapport and a network with service providers to reach out to when workers wish to refer foster youths to mentors. This allows easier transitions at times for the youths to get mentors.

Contracted mentor agencies run criminal background checks on the mentors to ensure youth’s safety. Because some workers such as child specific recruiters did not use contracted agencies, those workers were tasked with ensuring that the individuals chosen as natural mentors by the youth were not safety risks. Supervisors supported workers by allowing them time to make phone calls and conduct background checks since those natural mentors were informal mentors. Those connections are sometimes lifelong and those mentors will be present if the foster youth should age out. Therefore, it was worth the time spent to complete the background checks on the informal natural mentors to help ensure that they would be positive role models for the older foster youth. Samira reported that workers received support from the Office of Adolescents. She explained that this office is comprised of individuals who assist workers with adolescents' needs, including mentoring services, housing, job skills, and life skills. They will handle anything concerning the youth, the youth aging out, or youth who are at any type of risk. This provided the workers with an extra leg of support.

The child protection workers were confident that their supervisors understood the importance of providing older foster youth with a natural mentor. Therefore, the supervisor approved the payment request when the worker submitted a referral to a contracted mentor agency. Supervisors would only deny this service if the youth did not want a natural mentor. Supervisors also encourage workers to speak with the youth about potential natural mentors that are in the youth's social circle and encourage those relationships. The supervisors also understood that workers become the natural mentor. Supervisors will support the worker/youth relationship by allowing workers the freedom to be the natural mentor. This may require the worker to come in to work early or work late to make themselves accessible to the youth.

Theme 4: Challenges and Strategies Surface

Many older foster youths have been in the foster care system for a number of years. Some of them have difficulty trusting others which is problematic for the child protection workers when they attempt to implement a natural mentor service. Workers also encounter challenges with the policy because it limits contacts between the worker and the youth. Workers diligently attempt to engage with the older foster youth to gain their trust. Workers strategize to ensure that the youth receive necessary mentor services.

Challenges with the policy. Participants reported feeling supported by their immediate supervisors; however, they were not as supported by those in office management. Participants felt that the policy indicated that the workers should bond with the young people, but that the policy had limits that the workers needed to abide by. The child protection workers did not seem to have an issue with following the policy guidelines; however, they felt there were double standards in the policy. The prime challenge is the administrative portion, because some office managers encourage workers to build rapport with the youth. But sometimes management does not believe in the natural mentoring process for liability reasons. Some workers saw this as “false interpretations of policy.” According to the workers, the policy indicates the limits of worker–youth involvement, yet managers advise workers to get involved. The participants felt there were discrepancies in the language of the policy. Main said, “I think sometimes they feel we get too close to our youth, and some supervisors are okay with it, some are not . . . sometimes there are no explanations given in these situations.” Main said that the policy was written as if the worker should “put out cookie-cutter . . . mentoring” because office managers did not understand the extent of what the adolescent workers do. Workers felt frustrated by the policy because it was a barrier to the worker’s effectiveness as the natural mentor. The policy limited the workers in attending events for the youth, including Saturday and after-hours events.

Maintaining boundaries was a major challenge for workers because the policy sets limits on interactions with youth. Yonnie stated, “It’s kind of the unwritten rule in the policy that we’re not supposed to be the natural mentors, but we often [are the natural mentors].” Workers naturally make connections with the foster youth they serve. At times it is challenging to bond with the youth because there are ethical issues and workers do not want to risk losing their jobs. The boundaries can get blurred at times but the workers are careful to not cross boundaries. Some of the youth may ask a worker to give them a ride, but the policy indicates that workers cannot drive clients in their personal vehicles. Older youth in foster care sometimes called their workers after work hours when the youth had a crises and certain policies limit the worker’s ability to help them. At times, those in management positions decline to sign approvals for the worker to attend an event concerning the youth due to boundaries. Thus, workers experienced difficulties with getting the managers to allow the worker to engage in certain activities with the young person.

In sum, workers struggled with the terms of professional relationships delineated in their work policy. Workers found the guidelines vague in what they are and are not permitted to do to assist their foster youth in need. The youth see workers in a capacity of assistance because workers sometimes spend more time with the youth than a contracted mentor therefore, they often see the worker as parental figure. The youth depend on their worker and the worker cannot always be present for them as the youth would like. Participants stated that administrators direct the workers to build rapport with older foster youth but building rapport leads to building a natural mentor relationship between the worker and youth. There is an imbalance because administrators are not supportive when workers become the natural mentor due to liability issues. Participants understand that there should be boundaries to limit the extent of contact they have with youth. The boundaries get difficult to decipher when the youth become dependent on the workers to be their natural mentors.

Engagement as a strategy. The participants described the strategies they used to implement natural mentoring in older foster youth. Child protection workers worked purposefully to meet the youth's needs. The workers struggled to provide mentors when the young people did not want to accept natural mentors. Participants also practiced building rapport and gained the young people's trust to help them be receptive to services.

To engage with the older foster youth, the workers needed to encourage them to understand the concept of having a natural mentor and agreeing to the service. A strategy is to have a conversation with the youth and ask them what their goals are and their interests in other services. Workers encourage the youth to think about their goals and say them out loud. Workers are careful to not force young people because that made them more resistant to receiving mentor services. Taking the young people out by themselves instead of taking them out in a group and giving them individual attention was a helpful strategy to connect. One-on-one time with the youth is a way for the worker to form a bond and build trust with the foster youth. Older youth in foster care were more willing to believe what the worker said if they trusted the worker. Workers found that the youth were more apt to receive a mentor when they understood the benefits and made plans for themselves for the future.

Main explained that building rapport with the youth was a way to get them to trust his decision in applying to mentor services. He stated,

> Relating to them in their circumstance or relating to them in their crisis or . . . just their environment and lifestyle helps a lot. . . I think seeing structure, seeing discipline, seeing somebody actually care for them and their well-being initially, instead of it just being about work or [that] they're just another number or another case, is very helpful and makes for a better transition when they receive a natural mentor.

This was the same for formal mentor implementation and informal implementation as long as genuine bonds occurred. The worker's philosophy was that workers should try to understand the youth, build trust, and bond with them to improve the chances of the young person trusting the worker's judgment to receive a natural mentor.

Workers use community activities to encourage mentorship. Some workers are strategic in observing the activities that the youth participate in. In doing this, the worker can help the youth form healthy connections with others in the community. Other participants made inquiries to find local sports teams or groups to seek possible connections for the young people. Many of the youth do not have strong familial support, therefore the workers look into other avenues where they can form some of those connections. It was important to connect the youth with various groups or programs in the community so the youth could have outside resources. When the youth turns 21 years old, the worker will need to close their case and the worker may not be present to guide them. Ensuring that the youth is equipped with other sources that can serve in a natural mentor capacity is beneficial to the youth.

To summarize, participants engage with older foster youth to earn their trust and to help them agree to receiving mentor services. They allow the youth to maintain a position of control over their future by including the youth in creating their own treatment plans and future goals. Participants are descriptive when explaining to foster youth that having a natural mentor is beneficial especially after they age-out and the worker is no longer available. Participants strive to connect the youth with outside services and supportive people in the community who can possibly be a long-term natural mentor to the older foster youth.

Addressing Research Questions

The first research question was, How do child protection workers experience the phenomenon of implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth? Child protection workers mainly used a contracted mentor agency to implement natural mentoring. There were certain mentor agencies contracted by the child protection offices to provide the youth with natural mentors. The workers completed referral forms and submitted them to the mentoring agency, providing information about the young people and their needs. The workers at the mentoring agency reviewed the submitted referral and attempted to connect the foster youth with natural mentors according to the information provided on the referrals. The child protection worker ensured that the young people in foster care were open to receiving natural mentors.

The participants thought of themselves as natural mentors because they naturally developed meaningful relationships with young people while managing their caseloads. This automatic implementation of natural mentoring happened when the worker honestly and consistently engaged with the youth. Natural implementation also occurred when the workers spent one-on-one time with the young people instead of in group outings. Workers also implemented natural mentoring by teaching young people life skills. Because there was normally a waiting list for an available contracted natural mentor, the workers often fell into place and became the natural mentors.

Child protection workers asked the foster youth if they had people in their social circles whom they wanted to be their natural mentors. Some of the youth identified people, whereas others did not. The child protection worker contacted the identified individuals and strove to support those relationships. There were sometimes unsuccessful relationships because the older foster children did not maintain the connections. Many of the young people were accustomed to failed relationships and did not have strong relationship skills. Some of the youth went to school, had jobs, or moved away, which also caused the failed relationships. Alternately, sometimes the natural mentors did not commit to the young people for an extended time. Other times, mentors did not know how to deal with the foster youth's past traumas and behaviors.

The second research question was, What meaning do child protection workers make of their organizations' support and climate when implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth? I learned that it was a normal protocol for child protection workers to provide older foster children with natural mentors. The workers' immediate supervisors fully supported the workers implementing natural mentoring. The supervisor also knew about the various contracted mentor agencies and was an influential figure in helping the workers connect with these agencies. In addition, the supervisor understood that child protection workers normally became natural mentors. Therefore, when assigning new cases, supervisors made an effort to match the young person with a worker they felt would relate best with that young person.

Within each child protection office, there are individuals in management positions who oversee the supervisors. The child protection workers in this study felt that the office managers did not always support them when they became the natural mentors to the foster youth. The workers said that being natural mentors required more than completing paperwork and fitting their duties in between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. The workers who were natural mentors spent quality time with the young people, attending events after normal business hours, and possibly on the weekends. Workers expressed issues with the policy because their managers advised them to bond with the young people in their caseloads; however, the policy had guidelines limiting the workers' interactions with the youth.

The third research question was, What meaning do child protection workers make of the challenges experienced in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth? The child protection workers verbalized their various challenges. Participants related having a significant issue with long waiting lists for natural mentors. Once the workers submitted the referrals to the mentoring agency, there were usually no available mentors and the young people needed to wait. When the young person did receive the natural mentor, sometimes the youth and the mentor were not a good match. There were cases when agency workers switched out a mentor and the young person needed to go back onto the waiting list.

Another challenge was that most of the mentors were young people themselves. The mentors were mostly college students between the ages of 20 to 25. In some cases, the young mentors were good in their roles because they could relate to the older children in foster care. However, sometimes the young mentors did not have the wisdom to identify the foster youth’s needs to provide proper guidance. For some young mentors, mentoring was just a job, and they may not have been as vested as someone whose mentor job is a career. Young mentors also struggled to gain young mentees’ respect because they were close in age.

There was a shortage of mentors across the board; however, there was a specific lack of male mentors, especially those who were Black. The workers indicated that both male and female young people in foster care needed positive male figures as role models. When contracted mentor agencies merged or closed, there might be issues for child protection workers when they submit referrals. The supervisors might feel they are paying two companies for one service, as a result directing child protection workers to refrain from using that mentor agency.

Summary

This chapter provided the details of the study’s context. I obtained the contact information for an adolescent supervisor of a child protection office through a Google search. I contacted the supervisor, who agreed to distribute my invitation letter and screening form to the child protection workers. I conducted 10 face-to-face, semistructured, open-ended interviews, which I recorded on two devices. This chapter presented the data coding and analysis process and the evidence of trustworthiness. I also listed the demographics of the participants.

After careful review of the data collected, four major themes and four subthemes emerged. All of the participants agreed that older children in foster care should have natural mentors. The child protection workers utilized contracted mentor agencies to implement a natural mentoring service to older children in foster care. Using contracted mentor agencies was the formal procedure, but there was also an informal procedure. Some workers implemented themselves as natural mentors by engaging with the young people in their caseloads. The child protection workers also attempted to support the natural bonds the young people may have had with caring adults; however, some mentoring was unsuccessful because of the young people’s lack of relationship skills. Other times, the natural mentor did not commit to the longevity of the relationship. The next chapter will present the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

An extensive literature review indicated the need for further investigation of natural mentoring and older foster youth. The purpose of this study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in a child protection agency and to explore the types of support or organizational climate beneficial for this intervention. A secondary intent was to explore the challenges normally faced when implementing natural mentoring. The child protection workers employed at child welfare agencies with established natural mentoring interventions are in the best position to describe the organizational and systemic contexts beneficial for implementing natural mentoring. This chapter includes the interpretations of the findings and the limitations of the study. I will also discuss the recommendations for future studies and the implications.

The participating child protection workers provided details of their lived experiences, and four major themes emerged from the collected data. The themes were natural mentoring is beneficial, implementing natural mentoring, supervisory support is dominant, and challenges and strategies surface. All of the themes work in conjunction to encompass the core of the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Data collected from semistructured interviews provided the participants' lived experiences of the implementation of natural mentoring. From the transcripts, I identified four major themes and four corresponding subthemes. Previous studies indicated that child welfare workers do not have theoretically supported, research-informed interventions for establishing permanent adult relationships. The results of this study aligned with the findings from the reviewed literature. This study also provided new findings, lending further information to child protection workers on implementing natural mentoring services for older foster youth and contributing to the existing body of knowledge.

Theme 1: Natural Mentoring is Beneficial

The child protection workers thought natural mentoring was a beneficial intervention for older foster youth—perhaps most beneficial while young people in foster care were in placement—and could contribute to the youths' successful futures once they have aged out of foster care. Workers identified natural mentoring as a useful service for guiding young people. Park, Yoon, and Crosby (2016) indicated that nonparental adult figures are important sources of social support, mentoring, and guidance for at-risk youth. At-risk young people tend to lose relationships due to moving around, and the participants thought that consistent natural mentors in young people's lives were a way to keep them grounded. The workers agreed that natural mentor relationships lasted the longest when they occurred organically—in other words, when the relationships were unforced. Some participants thought their agencies underutilized the organic method of implementation.

Natural mentoring is a beneficial and effective intervention when implemented. Hurd and Zimmerman (2014) identified benefits of natural mentoring relationships into early adulthood. The participants in the study stated that natural mentoring had an impact on the young people's successful futures and provided benefits after they had aged out of foster care. The participants also stated that natural mentoring provided guidance while the young people were in placement, and that it was a beneficial intervention for foster youth transitioning into and out of the foster care system. The study showed that child protection workers are often natural mentors, and they help prepare young people in foster care for their futures. Similarly, Lane (2016) discovered that support from social workers or caseworkers is an influential factor in foster children's enrollment into college (Lane, 2016).

Theme 2: Implementing Natural Mentoring

One purpose of this study was to gather information to explain the process that child protection workers used to implement natural mentoring. This study showed that child protection workers used two main methods to implement a natural mentoring service. One method was submitting referrals to a natural mentoring agency that would provide natural mentors for the older children in foster care. The workers listed the young person's strengths and needs in the referral. The workers also provided some details of the young person's history and future goals in the referral to help the natural mentor in providing successful services to the older child in foster care. The process of submitting a referral was the formal method.

The second method was asking the young people to identify individuals in their lives who could act as their natural mentors. The workers reached out to the potential natural mentors, working with them and the young people to fuel those relationships. This process of identification by the young person was the informal method. Many child protection workers become natural mentors while servicing the older children in foster care who were on their caseloads, which was also an informal process. The following section presents the process and experiences of formal implementation.

Formal implementation. The child protection workers used the contracted mentor agencies to implement natural mentoring for older foster youth. Implementing natural mentoring can occur with assistance. An example of a typical mentoring program is Big Brothers Big Sisters, a formal service agency that provides young people with mentors (Spencer et al., 2010). Another formal mentor source is CARE, a 12-week, child welfare-based natural mentoring intervention created by Johanna K. P. Greeson (Greeson, Thompson, Ali, et al., 2015). The participants from the study had used the Boys and Girls Club and other contracted mentor agencies; however, they usually encountered a shortage of mentors. One participant in the current study found in his experience with formal mentoring agencies that the mentors were not vested in the job. He contended that the mentors were young people and that they considered mentor positions to be a placeholder until they could find better-paying jobs.

Nesmith and Christophersen (2014) explained that foster youth lacked the social and emotional support for guidance through their transitions to adulthood; however, little research has shown effective programs for building support and countering poor outcomes. One of the participants, Darla, spoke highly of Connecting Youth, a pilot program used in her office, which she found to be a successful means of connecting young people in foster care with caring adults for life. The Connecting Youth program ended in 2019, which Darla stated was unfortunate, because the program had successful results. Many of the other workers described mentor agencies as “unforgiving” when employees of the mentor agencies discharged young people from their programs because of behavioral issues.

The participants reported using outside agencies to implement natural mentoring services to young people to foster healthy outcomes when youth transitioned into adulthood. This finding aligned with existing literature showing that aging-out young people struggled to transition into adulthood. Scholars from the Department of Family and Protective Services attempted to facilitate the establishment of a youth mentoring pilot program for matching young people in foster care with volunteer adult mentors to help the young people transition into adulthood (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014). Individuals from the local Big Brothers Big Sisters implemented the program. The results showed that three of the participants remained in the mentoring program for a year, one youth took part in the program for 13 months, and 60% of the young people participated for 6 months or had little to no contact with their mentors. About 45 of the young people in the study did not spend the required face-to-face time with their mentors, so Scannapieco and Painter (2014) could not draw conclusions about the effectiveness of the program. Other findings in that study showed that Black, Hispanic, and mixed-race young people whose race did not match their mentors were more likely to fall into the low-service category (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014).

The findings in this study aligned with those of Scannapieco and Painter (2014). The participants stated that they struggled to find mentors who would commit to mentoring foster youth for years after they have transitioned into adulthood. In addition, sometimes the young people in foster care did not commit to the mentoring relationships.

The participants also reported a shortage of male mentors and Black male mentors. There were Black male and female older young people in foster care who needed positive male and Black male role models. Additionally, there was a long waiting list for young people in foster care who wanted male or Black male mentors.

Scannapieco and Painter (2014) reported having incomplete empirical evidence on mentoring; as such, their results did not provide a precise protocol for effective mentorship. The participants in the present study described that the normal protocol for implementing natural mentors for older foster youth was through a natural mentor service. Using such a service required the workers to complete and submit referrals to the agency, which would then provide natural mentors for young people. The mentors contacted the workers before meeting with the young people to discuss the case goals. There is limited research specific to mentoring for foster youth, and although there are rising rates of mentorship, poor programs could cause harm to this vulnerable group (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014).

The participants in this study reported that mentors obtained from the agencies were too young to provide substantial guidance for young people in foster care. Most mentors were under 25 years old, which the workers contended was not far enough removed in age to benefit the foster youth. The relationships with young mentors were more friendships than mentor relationships. The participants also said that most of the agency mentors were college students not vested in mentoring because it was a low-paying, entry-level or gateway position. Young people in foster care need quality mentoring services, and bad mentoring experiences produce negative outcomes for youth (Johnson & Gastic, 2015).

Informal implementation. Informal implementation was the second option for engaging natural mentoring. The child protection workers stated that that they normally used a contracted agency, but they also asked the young people in foster care if there were individuals in their social circles whom they wanted as natural mentors. If a young person identified someone, the worker reached out to that person and facilitated the relationship. Allowing the young people to choose their mentors was not always a successful process, however. The workers also referred to themselves as natural mentors when they described informal implementation.

Older children in foster care often reported that their caseworkers became their natural mentors (Greeson et al., 2015). All 10 of the participants in the study stated that they became natural mentors for various reasons, chief among them that they spent extended quality time with their young people. During this time, the workers helped foster life skills in the youth, such as teaching them how to fill out job applications or helping them manage their bank accounts. Workers also assisted foster youth with tasks such as homework, discussed personal issues with them, and helped them to make goals for the future. Because there was normally a long waiting list for contracted mentors, the workers fell into place, filling the gap as the natural mentors. In a sense, the workers implemented themselves as the natural mentors through service delivery, a finding that correlated with literature showing that young people in foster care reported receiving significant emotional support from child welfare workers (Singer et al., 2013).

The participants identified issues with informal implementation. In some cases, the young people moved away and did not remain in contact with the people they identified to be their natural mentors. This finding aligned with Scannapieco and Painter (2014), who showed that there are disruptions between the young people in foster care and their mentor relationships when the young people move from one placement to another. The participants stated that young people in foster care had grown accustomed to people coming in and out of their lives and thus did not have good communication and relationship skills. In addition, the older children in foster care would sometimes unknowingly sabotage their mentor relationships.

The workers reported that some of the mentors identified by the youth did not commit to the longevity of the mentor relationships. The participants also discussed situations when the identified natural mentors did not have the appropriate skills to address the young people's past traumas and behavioral issues. Youth in foster care might suffer from poor outcomes not because of a lack of relational network members, but because of the use and the quality of those support networks (Singer et al., 2013). The participants reported that some of the young people in foster care did not want help from natural mentors because they felt that they could do things on their own. The effects of trauma, limited ability to trust others, and severed family relationships could also harm the ability of a young person in foster care to build and maintain lasting relationships (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). The findings of this study align with the literature in this regard.

Theme 3: Supervisory Support is Dominant

The child protection workers felt supported by their immediate supervisors. They thought their supervisors understood that the workers' tasks to service older foster youth were beyond the scope of their job descriptions. Evidence suggests that the child welfare organization can facilitate or hinder the development of relationships between older foster youth and a natural mentor (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015). The participants contended that it was common knowledge to the supervisors that the older children in foster care looked to their workers as supportive family members. This finding aligned with a previous study showing that although many young people had limited exposure to their birth families, they still thought their natural mentors seemed like true family members (Johnson & Gastic, 2015). The only time the supervisor did not support the worker implementing a natural mentoring service was when the young person did not want the service. If the young person was cooperative and interested, the supervisor worked diligently to help the workers locate a mentoring service for the young person's transitional needs. The workers remarked that their supervisors were knowledgeable of different programs and built strong connections in the community.

Organizational support for implementation is important and it impacts the caseworker (Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase et al., 2015). The participants said their supervisors gave them the freedom to be natural mentors. The supervisors understood that young people in foster care may eventually look to their child protection workers as natural mentors and not just as caseworkers. The supervisors supported the natural mentoring bond by allowing the workers to stay late to tend to the youth and attend personal gatherings, such as graduations. In this sense, the workers resembled parental figures. This finding aligned with a that of Johnson and Gastic (2015), who discovered that young people saw mentors as mother or father figures: positive, understanding, responsible, and trustworthy individuals. Likewise, Greeson et al. (2015) reported that several young people expressed the importance of natural mentors being like family members. Overall, the strength and success of the worker/youth natural mentor relationship and formal mentor implementation are heavily weighed by the support of the supervisor.

Theme 4: Challenges and Strategies Surface

The participants described many barriers they faced while trying to implement a natural mentoring service. Sometimes the young people in foster care did not trust the workers' judgment or that the natural mentors wanted to help them. Other barriers included the shortage of mentors for older foster youth and long waiting lists for mentors. The workers experienced issues in identifying natural mentors committed to longevity in the mentoring relationships.

Participants also related challenges with adhering to the policy. The workers felt supported by their immediate supervisors; however, they did not feel the same support from upper management. The participants stated that those in management did not deliver the policy, instead directing them to build bonds with and help their foster youth while maintaining certain boundaries. The participants contended that understanding the meaning of boundaries became uncertain and difficult to sustain because each young person had unique needs. The workers also developed strategies for implementing a natural mentoring service. However, building trust with the youth was the dominating strategy.

Challenges with the policy. Although the workers reported feeling supported by their immediate supervisors, they did not feel backed by those in upper management when they became natural mentors. Greeson et al. (2015) indicated that a barrier to implementing natural mentoring is not having full organizational support. The workers maintained that those in management expected them to uphold the agency's policy, but they were sometimes restricted by the policy when they became natural mentors. The workers identified this restriction as an administrative issue because those in management directed workers to build rapport with youth but did not want the workers to be the natural mentors for liability reasons. The participants said that the policy indicated that they should build bonds with the youth, but building bonds sometimes required them to go against the policy. The workers contended that there was a discrepancy in the language of the policy, which both encourages and limits youth and worker involvement.

All 10 participants thought of themselves as formal and informal natural mentors because of the quality time they spent and the trust they had built with the young people in foster care. According to the existing literature, young people in foster care identify individuals related to the Department of Children and Family Services, such as caseworkers, as their formal supports (Singer et al., 2013). Additionally, emerging adults tend to look to the grown-ups in their lives to guide them through their transitions into adulthood; however, many young people in foster care have disconnected from other adults and thus turn to their caseworkers for support (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014).

Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) found that foster youth identified their former social workers as their informal supports. Unfortunately, the child protection workers in this study said that management did not want them to become natural mentors because of ethical issues, but that they did not provide explanations of why this was so.

Engagement as a strategy. The child protection workers in this study reported building trust through engagement to help the young people understand the importance of having natural mentors. The workers stated that they spent one-on-one time with young people, explaining that they might not always be there to help and that the youth needed other people, such as mentors, for guidance. The workers told the foster youth that people would be in and out of their lives and that they would age out with limited supports if no one adopted them. Singer et al. (2013) asserted that child welfare professionals must be transparent and honest about the impermanency of their relationships. The workers mentioned that they related to the youth's crises, paid attention to their needs, discussed the benefits of having mentors, and allowed the young people to make plans for themselves while encouraging them to consider having natural mentors.

Participants in this study said that although they advocated for outside mentors, they still organically became the natural mentors by providing guidance and support. Participants stated that they did things to support their youth, such as assisting them with homework, teaching them how to do laundry, and helping them obtain their driver licenses. In a study by Singer et al. (2013), former foster youth said that their child welfare professionals helped them to pay for school and spent time helping them to learn to live on their own by showing them how to wash clothes, cook, and find employment.

The former foster youth said that child welfare professionals enhanced their self-esteem and that some caseworkers went beyond the normal caseworker responsibilities by offering them the unconditional support usually provided by biological family members (Singer et al., 2013). The participants in this study reported that the young people whom they served often returned to seek guidance from them long after the workers had closed their cases and the youth had aged out of care. Singer et al. also found that many young people retain their relationships with child welfare professionals beyond 18 years of age. Similarly, Sulimani-Aidan (2016) showed that, despite the young people's departure from the facility, the workers maintained informal relationships with the youth years later.

Theoretical Framework

The child protection workers employed by child welfare agencies with established natural mentoring services are in the best positions to describe the organizational and systemic contexts beneficial for implementing natural mentoring. All of the participants in this study worked in a child welfare agency and implemented a natural mentoring service to young people in foster care in their daily casework strategies. Child welfare workers have the responsibility of securing permanent relationships for aging-out young people in foster care (Greeson & Thompson, 2017; Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014). Keller's (2005) systemic model of youth mentoring provides a conceptual framework for exploring the multiple ways in which the mentor, parent, and caseworker contribute to child outcomes through mentoring. The systemic model of youth mentoring indicates that young people could benefit from a network-structured mentor intervention. The participants in this study worked closely with the youth, the mentors, and the foster parents. Keller’s model indicates that caseworkers could contribute to the success or failure of the mentoring intervention, and the children’s interactions with their caseworkers are a means of partially mediating the program’s effects.

The systemic model of youth mentoring was the most appropriate theory for this study because the participating child welfare workers implemented natural mentoring through an agency and also became natural mentors themselves. The participants implemented natural mentoring in a twofold manner. First, the workers needed to continuously follow up with the assigned mentors and the young people to ensure that the mentors were helping the youth. Second, the workers also needed to reflect on personal conduct to ensure that they were modeling and interacting in ways beneficial for the youth’s positive outcomes. Lin (2012) stated that caseworkers play a critical role in working with foster children by facilitating relationships, and caseworkers are in a better position to maintain stability in young people in foster care.

Another purpose of this study was to discover the types of support or organizational climates beneficial for this intervention and explore the challenges usually faced when implementing natural mentoring. According to Keller (2005), the interactions between mentor, parent, and caseworker could provide support to or obstruct the success of the intervention. In support of Keller’s theory, Perlman and Fantuzzo (2013) described human service professionals as those tasked with connecting the systems that provide services to foster youth to ensure the young people’s permanency, safety, and well-being. Keller’s model indicated that the interactions of these networks rest against the backdrop of the agencies’ policies and practices. The data from this study aligned with the systemic model of youth mentoring because the workers reported that they needed to adhere to the policy when implementing a natural mentoring intervention. The workers stated that their supervisors directed them to implement natural mentors, normally through a contracted agency. All of the participants reported having organically becoming the natural mentors to the young people they served; however, they noted that the policy presented barriers to their positions in these roles. According to the child protection agency's policy, caseworkers must form bonds with their youth; however, those in management viewed the workers unfavorably if they bonded too much. According to the workers, for liability reasons, the policy also indicated that they could provide limited support should the young people need their workers outside of normal business hours. Greeson et al. (2015) described concerns about the involvement of a child welfare agency in the delivery of a natural mentoring program for older foster youth, such as issues of liability in vetting adults identified for natural mentors. This study had consistent findings with existing research, especially with regard to young people sometimes identifying workers as their natural mentors.

According to Keller (2005), agency policies and procedures provide structured guidelines for how children, parents, caseworkers, and mentors can make initial contact and maintain ongoing interaction. How well the agency guidelines provide for coordinated and cohesive functions of the system (i.e., the child, parent, caseworker, and mentor) indicates the outcome of the mentor intervention (Keller, 2005). The data from this study supported the systemic model of youth mentoring, as workers strategized to connect all of the supportive adults in the youth's social circles. Participants presented that maintaining these connections was sometimes a challenge because of the mentors', young people's, or parents' schedules. Barriers to implementing natural mentoring stem from conflicts in schedules of the mentor, youth, or foster parent (Scannapieco & Painter, 2014).

Limitations of the Study

I made every reasonable effort to ensure the accuracy and validity of this study; therefore, I will openly present the limitations. Part of this study was to understand the organizational challenges of implementing natural mentoring in a child protection agency. As indicated in Chapter 3, the participants who disclosed organizational challenges may have feared portraying their agency as providing insufficient services to youth. To protect their agency, the participants might have withheld information that could have presented their coworkers, themselves, or managers negatively. My dual role as a researcher and a child protection worker could have influenced how the participants answered the interview questions. The difference between the participants and me was our specific roles as employees of child protection agencies. The participants in this study were all adolescent workers or those who had consistently worked with aging-out foster youth; my role in my agency is an investigator, and my experiences in the workplace differ from the participants' experiences.

This study was limited to the Central New Jersey area. There could have been different results if I had collected the data from an inner-city area such as Jersey City or a state across the country, such as California. The ethnicity and culture of the child protection offices in southern states, such as Louisiana, Alabama, or Mississippi, could also have differed significantly from the practices in New Jersey. The needs of young people in foster care and organizational policy and practices can vary from one geographical area to the next, which could have limited the transferable findings of this study.

Recommendations

There is a need for additional research to address the relationships between aging-out foster youth, natural mentors, and child protection workers. The workers expressed issues with the policy and practices in their work with older foster youth, which they contended limits their involvement with their youth, albeit with limits that lack clarity. There is a need for further research to explore the policies for child protection workers when they become natural mentors to the young people in their caseloads. It was unknown if the policy indicates that child protection workers can become natural mentors because the participants reported that those in management did not know the extent of what the workers did. The workers stated that it was an inevitable part of their jobs that they would become the natural mentors, and filling the role of a natural mentor may require spending extra time with the young people outside of their normal business hours. Workers also wished to support their older foster youth by attending weekend activities. The participants did not know in what capacity the policy was a help or hindrance for workers seeking to act as natural mentors effectively. If the policy was a hindrance, then those in management should adjust the guidelines to allow workers more freedom with their older foster youth.

Greeson et al. (2015) stated that child welfare professionals supported the implementation of natural mentoring; however, it was their responsibility to determine how to provide natural mentoring services for older foster youth. Implementing natural mentoring services could be a difficult task for the child protection worker if there are limited resources. There is a need for research to investigate the status of contracted mentor agencies in Central New Jersey used by child protection workers. The participants reported the merging or closures of mentor agencies because of a lack of resources. The participants felt burdened with sustaining their older foster youth while enduring long waiting lists for natural mentors. Another issue with the agencies was that the mentors were too young and not that far removed from the ages of the older foster youth. The participants indicated that the younger mentors lacked the maturity and knowledge needed to guide the mentee and identify the youth's needs appropriately. Singer et al. (2013) contended that there might be a discrepancy between the supportive person and the actual support provided by that person. The participants also indicated that leaders of mentor agencies should invest in their mentors and provide better pay. There is a need for further research to investigate the mentor agencies and the services that they provide.

Implications

All 10 participants indicated that young people in foster care viewed them as their natural mentors. Some of the young people in foster care did not want natural mentors because they felt comfortable with their caseworkers as their mentors. Rutman and Hubberstey (2016) identified a need for further research to understand whom young people in foster care seek for support and how to nurture and expand these supportive relationships. Such a study would contribute to program and policy development and, ultimately, to young people's well-being (Rutman & Hubberstey, 2016). The participants stated that they used outside agencies to implement natural mentors; however, there were long waiting lists, causing the workers to fill the gap and fall into place as the natural mentors. The workers spent quality time with their youth, teaching them life skills and talking about their issues. I think that the relationships between the workers and the foster youth should be nurtured and expanded. Although a level of professionalism is necessary, those in management should also provide their workers with the flexibility to build on their connections with youth without worrying about negating the policy. Enabling the workers to build connections with their youth may require changes or adjustments to the policy.

Aside from using a mentor agency to implement a natural mentoring service, the child protection workers also drew upon supportive adults already in the youth's social circles. This process also presented hindrances. Greeson et al. (2015) found that young people aging out of foster care struggle with developing relationships and having authentic connections and commitment to the relationships. The participants in this study also stated that young people in foster care sometimes unknowingly sabotage natural mentor alliances because the youth lack relationship skills. Because this is an ongoing issue, those in management could provide older children in foster care with training to build their relationship skills. One of the participants identified a specific office, the Office of Adolescents, that provided support to all youth in the foster care system. Child protection agency managers could make an inquiry to the Office of Adolescents to provide relationship-building training to the foster youth.

Presented repeatedly in this study was that child protection workers become natural mentors to their older foster youth. Workers also mentioned that some of the young people from their caseloads would return years after aging out of the foster care system to update them on their lives. Workers can receive promotions, find themselves reassigned at the agency, or retire, so when the young people return to see their former workers, the worker may not be there. The participants also mentioned they made efforts to fuel the relationships between the young people and the individuals identified by young people to be their natural mentors. The child protection workers could not continue to follow and fuel these relationships if they have closed the case when the young person has aged out. Singer et al. (2013) suggested the need to create a bridge to link the youth’s social support networks and create a solid support system for older foster youth. One of the participants identified the need for a tracking unit to follow these relationships. Child protection offices are comprised of units, and each unit has specific responsibilities. Perhaps leaders at the Office of Adolescents or agency managers could hire members for a unit to track these relationships and help the young people and the mentors stay connected. If an aged-out young person returns to the previous worker’s office and the worker has moved on, perhaps someone could direct the young person to the tracking unit for reconnection with the worker. Sulimani-Aidan (2016) identified a need for an integrative approach for staff members who have meaningful roles in the continuity from care to independent living by supporting aged-out youth’s transitions into adulthood.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies. The purpose of the study was also to explore the types of support or organizational climates beneficial for this intervention and understand the challenges typically faced when implementing natural mentoring from the perspectives of child protection workers who thought that natural mentoring was a successful intervention in their workplace. All of the participants agreed that natural mentoring was a successful intervention, and they all incorporated implementing natural mentoring into their daily casework. Immediate supervisors and managers supported workers when they implemented natural mentors through an agency. There was little organizational support, however, when the worker became the natural mentor or when the workers tried to implement people identified by the youth as potential natural mentors.

Caseworkers faced certain concerns when implementing natural mentoring through a contracted agency. Some mentor agencies had closed because of a lack of resources, which led to long waiting lists for the young people and the workers. Aging-out young people still need natural mentors to guide them into independent living. Organizing and solidifying the relationships between aging-out young people and natural mentors is not a perfect process; therefore, there is a need for further research. The limitations of this study are a means of strengthening readers’ understanding of this phenomenon and supporting scholars who will apply the findings to future research.

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Appendix A: Screening Form for Interested Participants

1. Do you have experience in working with older or aging-out foster youth?
2. Do you think that natural mentoring works well in your workplace?
3. Do you have knowledge or experience in implementing natural mentoring or acting as a natural mentor?

If you answer YES to these questions and you want to participate in this study, please leave your name and contact information, and I will get in touch with you.

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Appendix B: Research Question and Interview Questions

Demographic Questions

1. Age
2. Ethnicity
3. Gender
4. Degree
5. Professional training
6. Number of years working as a child protection worker
7. Length of time working in natural mentoring
8. Length of time working with older or aging-out foster youth

Research Questions (RQ) and Interview Questions (IQ)

RQ1: How do child protection workers experience the phenomenon of implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

IQ1. What is your view or philosophy on natural mentoring?

IQ2. Is there a specific program on natural mentoring in your workplace, or is it an informal procedure?

IQ3. What is the process you use to connect the foster youth with the mentor?

IQ4. What were your experiences in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

IQ5. How have other child protection workers implemented natural mentoring for older foster youth?

IQ6. What were their experiences?

RQ2: What meaning do child protection workers make of their organization's support and climate when implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

IQ1. In what ways were you supported in your office while implementing natural mentoring?

IQ2. Tell me about any strategies you used to implement natural mentoring in older foster youth.

RQ3: What meaning do child protection workers make of the challenges experienced in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth?

IQ2. Tell me about any challenges you experienced while implementing natural mentoring in older foster youth.

IQ3. What do you think would be challenging if a child protection worker became a natural mentor to a foster youth on his or her caseload?

Appendix C: Letter to Participants

Date:

Name of Participant
Address

Dear (Name),

My name is Claudia Maxie and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting a qualitative study to explore child protection workers' experiences in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth. Previous research has indicated that natural mentoring is a means of promoting positive psychosocial outcomes, offering protection against psychological stress, and promoting well-being. However, although natural mentoring is an innovative and promising intervention, it has not been a widely used and implemented service in the child welfare system. This study presents the issues and strategies used to implement natural mentoring through the eyes of child protection workers. The objective is to understand any challenges or opportunities within a child protection agency with established natural mentoring interventions for older foster youth. The findings of this study will have the potential to support practitioners in implementing practices of natural mentoring for older foster youth and those at risk of aging out of foster care.

Your time is important, and I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. To understand your experience, we need to meet for approximately 1 hour for an interview. I will not ask you to disclose any case record information. I can conduct the interview at a location of your choosing and will not require you to do anything you do not feel comfortable doing.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time for your interview. I look forward to hearing from you.

Claudia A. Maxie
Doctoral Candidate
Walden University

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

The Researcher

My name is Claudia Maxie and I am a PhD in Psychology student at Walden University. I am conducting a qualitative study to explore child protection workers' experiences in implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to understand the implementation of natural mentoring in child protection agencies. Additionally, the purpose of this study is also to identify child protection workers who think that natural mentoring is a successful intervention in their workplace and to learn about the types of support or organizational climate beneficial for this intervention. Child protection workers who act as natural mentors and work at child welfare agencies with established natural mentoring services established are in key positions to describe the organizational and systemic contexts beneficial for the implementation of natural mentoring.

The Benefit

Research has indicated that young people in foster care are aging out of the system with poor mental and physical outcomes, and the implementation of natural mentoring is a means of alleviating some of these concerns. This study is the means of addressing the issues and strategies used to implement natural mentoring through the eyes of child protection workers. The purpose of this study is to share the child protection workers' strategies of implementing natural mentoring to promote the well-being and successful outcomes for older foster youth. The objective is to understand any challenges or opportunities within the child protection agency experienced when implementing natural mentoring for older foster youth. The findings of this study will have the potential to support practitioners to implement practices of natural mentoring for older foster youth and those at risk of aging out of foster care. Generating information on how to overcome challenges in natural mentoring will have a potential impact on older foster youth in their transitions to adulthood.

The Risk

This study presents little to no risk to the participants. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. I will ensure that confidentiality is maintained by not citing your real name within the study. I will not ask you to disclose any case record information. You may choose to leave the study at any time and you may request that any data collected from you not to be used in the study. If you feel stressed during the interview process, you are free to ask for a break or terminate the interview.

The Process

Your participation in the study will require an interview with an estimated length of 1 hour. I will audio-record your interview and take handwritten notes for later analysis.

I will secure and eventually destroy the researcher data. I will not use the data for any purpose other than research.

Confidentiality

I will audio-record the interview; however, I will not record your name on the tape. Your name and identifying information will not be associated with any part of the written report of the research. I will keep all of your information and interview responses confidential. I will not share your responses with anyone other than the research supervisor.

By signing below, you agree that you have read and understood the above information and are interested in participating in this study. Or, if you received this letter via e-mail and you respond by saying, "I consent," you have read and understood the above information and are interested in participating in this study.

______________________ ______________________ ______________

Signature of participant Name Date

______________________ ______________________ ______________

Signature of researcher Name Date