

Natural Mentors in the Lives of African American Adolescent Mothers: Tracking Relationships Over Time

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In this study, we focused on the academic attainment of African American adolescents as they made the transition from pregnancy or recent delivery to 2 years postpartum. We examined the duration, characteristics, and effects of relationships that endured over 2 years postpartum, and the role of adolescents' mentor versus maternal support. Compared to participants who did not identify mentors at either time point, participants whose mentor relationships endured over the course of the 2-year study were more likely to have remained in school or graduated. Subsequent analyses revealed that long-term mentor relationships were characterized by weekly and, in many instances, daily interactions. Additionally, participants in long-term mentor relationships reported deriving more emotional support from their mentors than from their mothers, were more satisfied with mentor support, and indicated that this support was more important to them than maternal support.

KEY WORDS: adolescent pregnancy; adolescent parenting; school drop-out; mentoring.

INTRODUCTION

African American adolescent mothers face a host of extremely difficult life stressors (Hayes, 1987). In addition to the ongoing demands of early parenthood, many young African American mothers must cope with racial oppression, economic hardship, and substandard child-care options (Edin, 2000; Musick, 1993). In light of these stressors, pregnant and parenting adolescent women are at heightened risk for a variety of negative life outcomes,

including reduced educational attainment, unemployment, economic hardship, and loss of hope (Blechman and Culhane, 1993; Child Trends, 1995, 1996, 1997; Prater, 1995; Upchurch, 1993; Zabin and Hayward, 1993). Although much of the research on this topic has focused on the problems that African American teen mothers experience, some researchers have focused on factors that might help young African American mothers to complete school and achieve positive outcomes after the birth of a child (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1993). Within this context, there has been growing interest in the protective influence natural mentors, such as special aunts, neighbors, or teachers (Beam *et al.*, 2002; Panzarine, 1986; Sullivan, 1996; Taylor *et al.*, 1993). Natural mentoring relationships typically arise within adolescents' social networks, and are characterized by bonds between an older, more experienced adult and younger protégés. The adult typically provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement, facilitating the protégés' transition into adulthood (Rhodes and Davis, 1996). Klaw and Rhodes (1995), for example, found that adolescent mothers' involvement with natural mentors was associated with greater optimism about the future, and heightened involvement in career-related activities. In this study, we will examine adolescent mothers' relationships with natural mentors over time and

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explore the influence of such relationships on educational achievement.

Background

Natural mentor relationships play an important role in the lives of many adolescent girls (Taylor *et al.*, 1995). From childhood, girls are more likely than boys to participate in an intergenerational world with their mothers, including their grandmothers, aunts, and other female kin (Rhodes *et al.*, 1992). Within this context, caring older women allow adolescent girls to gain some autonomy from their mothers while simultaneously obtaining needed emotional support and advice about child care and their futures (Contreras, *et al.*, 1995; Rhodes and Davis, 1996; Sullivan, 1996; Unger and Cooley, 1992). In doing so, mentor relationships may compensate for the loss of maternal support during this crucial developmental stage. In addition, by helping adolescents cope with everyday stressors, and providing a model for effective coping, mentor relationships can facilitate improvements in a broad array of outcomes, including school attendance and educational achievement (Jekielek *et al.*, 2002; Rhodes *et al.*, 2000; Scales and Gibbons, 1996). Intergenerational relationships have long been recognized as an important resource to youth in African American communities (McAdoo, 1987; Stack, 1974; Wakschlag *et al.*, 1996). Collins (1987), for example, has described the protective influence of African American women, referring to them as “other mothers.” Older women often provide guidance to younger members of the African American community, acting as surrogate parents (McAdoo, 1987). Mentor relationships that arise from within African American adolescents’ informal social networks may play an important role in helping young mothers to stay in school throughout the postpartum transition. By underscoring the importance of education, praising achievement, and helping secure child care, mentors may directly stimulate improvements in young mothers’ academic attitudes and behaviors (Blechman, 1992; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2002).

Further, mentors may serve as concrete examples of educational and occupational achievement, demonstrating qualities that adolescents might wish to imitate. By observing and comparing their own performance to that of their mentors, adolescents can begin to adopt new behaviors. This modeling process is thought to be reinforced through mentors’ emotional support and verbal feedback. Freud (1914/1962) described this as an identification process in which individuals internalize the traits, attitudes, and behaviors of those they wish to emulate. Similarly, Kohut (1984) described the ways in which children and adolescents attach themselves to an idealized parental

“imago” whose qualities they integrate into their own personalities. Through the process of identifying with mentors, youths’ early internalizations often shift, bringing about changes in how they perceive themselves and their social roles (Musick, 1993; Rhodes *et al.*, 2002).

Even when mentors do not serve as direct models, they can be influential in helping adolescents focus on a brighter future (Klaw and Rhodes, 1995). They can advocate on behalf of their protégés, opening doors to new opportunities and helping them to establish and make use of connections in the community, such as neighborhood associations, religious programs, sororities, and parent-teacher organizations. These sources of support, encouragement, and trust comprise the “social capital” contained within a young person’s community. Social capital has been associated with school success above and beyond the contribution of family income, parents’ education, or household composition (Putnam and Bowling, 2000).

Mentors can serve as a valued source of attention and approval, and they can also help adolescents to define other beneficial reference groups (Darling *et al.*, 2002; Jekielek *et al.*, 2002). For example, mentors can encourage adolescents to become part of high achieving peer groups (such as students in honors classes) and may help protégés to avoid becoming influenced by peers who disengage from school or engage in destructive behavior. Researchers have found that adolescents with natural mentors are less likely to engage in problem behaviors, regardless of the behaviors of their close friends and family members (Ensher *et al.*, 2001). Mentors can hold their protégés to higher standards of behavior or introduce new visions of what adolescents can achieve. Thus, through role modeling, social comparison and reinforcement, skill building, and shaping norms and values, mentors can be a positive force in the lives of youth.

Despite their promise, there is some evidence to suggest the benefits of mentoring emerge over a relatively long period of time (Dubois *et al.*, 2002). In their qualitative investigation of mentoring relationships, for example, Styles and Morrow (1995) concluded that youth needed to be engaged with their mentors for at least 6 months before the relationships began to take hold. Similarly, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) studied Big Brothers Big Sisters relationships that varied in length from less than 3 months to over 1 year. Adolescents in relationships that lasted 1 year or longer reported the largest number of improvements, with progressively fewer effects emerging among youth who were in relationships that terminated earlier. Despite this variation, the term “mentor” has been used to describe relationships ranging from intensive, lifelong bonds to extremely circumscribed, short-term relationships. Although it is reasonable to assume that the more enduring

natural mentoring relationships would have greater influence on academic outcomes, few studies have attempted to track the course and effects of adolescents' natural mentor relationships over time.

Current Study

In this study, we focused on the academic achievement of African American adolescents as they made the transition from pregnancy or recent delivery to 2 years postpartum. Although a relatively large proportion of the participants nominated mentors at Time 1, we were particularly interested in relationships that endured the crucially important first 2 years postpartum. This is generally considered to be the most challenging period of adjustment for young mothers, during which they struggle to balance between the demands of their young children with their own educational, occupational, and relationship needs (Musick, 1993). Within this context, several research questions were addressed.

First, we examined the issue of duration in natural mentoring relationships. Most research has examined natural mentors at only 1 time point, despite mounting evidence that positive effects of mentoring accrue over a relatively long period of time. The few studies that have included more than 1 wave of data have focused on volunteer mentoring and have tracked relationships over shorter periods of time (e.g., Grossman and Tierney, 1998; LoSciuto *et al.*, 1996). Thus, our goal was to examine the effects of enduring relationships, comparing young mothers whose relationships were still intact after 2 years with those relationships who had no mentoring relationships or whose relationships had terminated. It was expected that young women in ongoing relationships would have the most positive academic outcomes.

In light of our interest in enduring relationships, a major goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of these ties, including the characteristics and roles of long-term mentors, their proximity to adolescents, frequency of contact, range of support, and so forth. Within this context, we paid particular attention to how mentors compared with mothers, who typically provide adolescents' with the highest levels of postpartum support (Davis and Rhodes, 1996; Unger and Cooley, 1992).

METHOD

Procedure

As part of a larger study on risk and protective factors, all students attending an alternative school for pre-

gnant and parenting adolescents, located in a large Midwestern city, were invited to participate in the study. A research associate met with the students and their parent(s) and explained the procedures of the study, including the fact that participation was voluntary and confidential. Informed consent of the students and parents was obtained and participants received \$10 vouchers to the school-based baby boutique. Interviews were conducted by a trained, female, African American research associate who was a life-long resident of the community in which the school was located. The interviews were individually administered via a laptop computer from which the interviewer read the questions as participants viewed the screen.

Participants

The focus of this study is on the 198 African American adolescent mothers, ranging in age from 11 to 19 (Mean = 15.94, SD = 1.40), who were followed for 2 years postpartum. Most of these participants were either pregnant (73.2%) or had recently given birth to their first child (26.8%) at the time of the first interview. All were unmarried, 64% were receiving public assistance benefits, and 5% of the participants had 2 or more children. Eighty-four percent of the participants lived with their mothers or mother figures and no fathers. All of the participants were enrolled in the alternative school.

Measures

Background Information

A set of fixed-format questions was used to obtain information on participants' age, marital status, number of children, and living arrangements.

Social Support and Strain

The Social Support Network Questionnaire (SSNQ; Rhodes *et al.*, 2002) was used to assess social support and social strain. The SSNQ is a modification and extension of the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (ASSIS; Barrera *et al.*, 1981). The SSNQ was used to examine 7 support functions: emotional support, tangible assistance, cognitive guidance, positive feedback, social participation, pregnancy-related assistance, and child care. Participants were asked to nominate individuals from whom each type of support was perceived to be available and to indicate on a 4-point scale (from 0 = *never*

to 3 = *more than once a week*) how frequently in the past month they had actually derived each type of support from each provider. Overall amounts of support utilized by each individual were computed by summing across all 7 types of support. The SSNQ has demonstrated relatively high internal consistency for total utilized support ($\alpha = 0.88$) and social strain ($\alpha = 0.73$) (Rhodes *et al.*, 2000).

Natural Mentor. The literature on mentoring (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Levinson *et al.*, 1978) served as a basis for our definition and support functions of mentoring relationships. As part of the standardized interview process, participants were first asked, "Other than your parents or whoever raised you, do you have a role model or mentor who you go to for support and guidance? A mentor is not someone around your age or a boyfriend. He or she is an adult who is older than you, who has had more experience than you, and who has taken a special interest in you. This person may be a teacher, a relative, a neighbor, or someone else whom you look up to for support and guidance." Four characteristics of the relationship were then listed as criteria for persons to be nominated as mentors: (1) you can count on this person to be there for you, (2) he or she believes in and cares deeply about you, (3) he or she inspires you to do your best, and (4) knowing him or her has really affected what you do and the choices you make. The verbal nature of the interviews allowed the interviewer to clarify that the definition of mentor did not include peers or romantic partners, but nonparental relatives could serve as mentors. Care was taken to ensure that each student understood the criteria for mentoring. Mentors who were nominated in response to this question, but who were not later nominated on the SSNQ as sources of support were eliminated from further analyses. This definitional criteria, which is consistent with previous research (Dubois *et al.*, 2002; Rhodes *et al.*, 1992; Rhodes and Woods, 1995; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2002) was employed to ensure that the natural mentors examined in this study were adults that participants saw as actually available or perceived to provide support on a regular basis (as opposed to celebrities, deceased relatives etc.). Participants with mentors at Time 1 were approximately 6 months younger than those without mentors ($t(343) = -3.65, p < 0.01$), but there were no other mentor versus no-mentor differences.

The participants were then categorized into one of several relationship groups. The "long-term mentor" group included participants who nominated the same mentor at Time 2 as they had nominated at Time 1 ($N = 36, 18.18\%$). The "terminated mentor" group included participants who nominated a mentor at Time 1, but not at Time 2 ($N = 36, 18.18\%$). The "no mentor" group included participants who had not nominated a mentor at

Time 1 or at Time 2 ($N = 53, 26.77\%$). Because we were interested in examining the effects of enduring mentor relationships over time, we followed the progression of Time 1 relationships and omitted the remaining participant groups from subsequent analyses. This included those participants with missing data (27.36%) or different mentors at Time 2 (46.87%).

Academic Outcomes

School records were used to assess each participant's school enrollment status subsequent to leaving the alternative school (dropped out versus enrolled/graduated) and highest grade levels attained. In addition, participants were asked to report their level of education attained at Times 1 and 2.

RESULTS

Sample

There were no baseline differences between young women in the different mentor groups with 1 minor exception: those with a mentor at Time 1 were approximately 6 months younger than those without a mentor ($t(343) = -3.65, p < 0.01$). Young women followed through the longitudinal study did not differ from the larger baseline sample on Time 1 demographic characteristics, life events, educational aspirations or achievement.

Mentor Relationship Groups

Because mentoring relationships can vary in a variety of ways that likely affect their quality and impact, it was considered important to take such factors into account to the degree possible. One such factor is relationship stability. To assess the degree of stability in adolescents' relationships with natural mentors, all participants were classified into "mentor relationship groups." All participants with natural mentors at Time 1 were placed into the "initial mentor group." This group consisted of 187 participants, 51.51% of the total sample. One hundred seventy-six participants, 48.49% of the total sample, had no mentor at Time 1 and were placed into the "no initial mentor group." Because we were interested in the effects of mentor relationships over time, relationship stability was examined for participants for whom both baseline and 2-year follow-up data were available ($N = 198, 54.55\%$ of the total sample). Thirty-six young women (18.18% of the follow-up sample) had a natural mentor at Time 1

and also named that person as a support provider on the Time 2 SSNQ; these were placed into the “long-term mentor group.” Young women with a mentor at Time 1 but no mentor at Time 2 were placed into the “terminated mentor group.” This group also consisted of 36 participants, 18.18% of the follow-up sample. Participants who had a mentor at neither Time 1 nor Time 2 were placed into a distinct “never mentor group,” consisting of 53 participants, 26.77% of the Time 2 sample. Because we were interested in the distinct effects of mentor relationships that endured over time, we focused this study on comparing individuals in the long-term mentor group with those who possessed no mentor relationship during the postpartum transition. Participants with missing data (27.36%) or different mentors at Time 2 (46.7%) were omitted from further analysis.

Differences in Educational Attainment as Function of Relationship Duration

At Time 2, 23% of the participants had earned a high school diploma or GED and 7% had achieved partial college education. Sixty-nine percent had not completed high school, and 2 participants had not completed their education beyond the 8th grade. Although there were no group differences in educational attainment at Time 1, chi-square analyses indicated that group membership was marginally associated with educational attainment at Time 2 ($\chi^2 = 5.18, p = 0.08$). Sixty-four percent of the participants in the “no mentor group” had dropped out of school

within the 2-year time frame, versus 48% and 35% of the participants in the “terminated” and “long-term” mentor groups, respectively. Time 2 comparisons of drop out using logistic regression revealed that participants in the “long-term” mentor group were 3.35 times less likely to have dropped out of school than participants in the no mentor group. The 95% confidence interval (1.14, 9.85) on the odds ratio indicates that this finding is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$. Total maternal support received was not significantly associated with school drop out beyond the effects of mentor group.

Characteristics of Long-Term Mentoring

In light of their protective benefits, long-term mentoring relationships were explored in greater detail. At Time 1, most of the 36 young women in long-term relationships were receiving some form of public assistance (69.4%). Their mean age was 15.92 (SD = 1.42) and most were living with their mothers (83.3%). There were no Time 1 or Time 2 differences among the 3 groups on any background variables, including their age, educational attainment, number of children, receipt of public assistance, or living arrangements (see Table I).

All but 1 of the 36 long-term mentors were women, all were African American, and, at Time 1, their mean age was 34.9 (SD = 10.2; range = 21–56). Most of the long-term mentors were relatives of the young women, the largest proportion of whom were aunts (41.67%) and grandmothers (27.78%) (see Table II). In fact, the

Table I. Adolescent Characteristics at Time 1

	In “no mentor” group		In “terminated mentor” group		In “long-term” mentor group	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Economic strain						
Time 1	14.09	3.89	13.97	4.5	14.14	4.87
Time 2	15.80	4.23	15.56	4.72	15.56	4.37
Life events						
Time 1	5.23	5.09	5.97	4.61	5.08	3.44
Time 2	4.47	3.35	6.17	3.84	5.71	4.78
Age						
Time 1	16.17	1.38	15.78	1.20	15.92	1.42
Time 2	18.43	1.47	17.94	1.49	18.21	1.43
Number of children						
Time 1	0.49%		0.39%		0.63%	
Time 2	1.49%		1.36%		1.38%	
Public assistance						
Time 1	64.2%		66.7%		69.4%	
Time 2	81.1%		86.1%		81.8%	
Residence with mother						
Time 1	90.6%		80.6%		83.3%	
Time 2	54.7%		62.9%		58.5%	

Table II. Stable Mentor Characteristics at Time 1

	<i>N</i>	%
Women	35	97.22
Aunt	15	41.67
Grandmothers	10	27.78
Older sisters	4	11.11
Boyfriend's relatives	2	5.56
Older friends	1	2.78
Older cousins	1	2.78
Godmother	1	2.78
Stepmother	1	2.78
Men	1	2.78
Uncle	1	2.78
Proximity to participant		
Same building	8	22.2
Same neighborhood	8	22.2
Within 1 h	18	50.0
More than 1 h away	2	5.6

Note. Average age = 34.9 years (SD = 4.5).

long-term mentors included a larger proportion of relatives, than did the terminated mentors ($\chi^2 = 3.19$, $p = 0.06$). Interestingly, half of the participants in this group considered their mentors to be most like parents, while others considered the relationships to be most like that of an older brother or sister (30%) or another provider (20%).

The long-term mentor relationships were prominent in the adolescents' lives. The majority of the participants interacted with their mentors at least once a week (91.7%) and over half (52.8%) had contact every day. On average, young women had known their mentors for 14 years (SD = 4.5; range = 2–18) and the majority (83%) expected to maintain the relationship for the rest of their lives. The mentors engaged in a wide range of activities with the young mothers. For example, all of the participants reported that their mentors helped them to stay in school or continue their schooling; spoke with them about things that were personal and private; gave or loaned them things; gave them advice or information; and taught them things related to employment. Most (97.2%) of the participants reported that their mentors provided them with opportunities to get away and have fun.

Long-Term Mentor Versus Maternal Support

A series of analyses were then conducted to examine changes in support provided by the adolescents' long-term mentors relative to the adolescents' mothers over time (see Table III). First, we set out to determine whether the long-term mentors were, in fact, serving a compensatory role, essentially filling in for less involved mothers.

Table III. Changes in Maternal and Stable Mentor Support: Time 1 vs. Time 2

Variable	Time 1		Time 2		df	<i>t</i> value
	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD		
Social contact						
Mother	1.03	1.32	0.39	0.93	35	2.50*
Mentor	1.11	1.28	0.92	1.25	35	0.70
Emotional support						
Mother	1.36	1.33	0.64	0.93	35	3.33**
Mentor	1.92	1.08	1.56	1.18	35	1.47
Cognitive guidance						
Mother	1.75	1.34	1.14	1.25	35	2.79**
Mentor	1.94	1.09	1.94	1.09	35	0.00
Positive feedback						
Mother	1.61	1.32	1.22	1.31	35	1.56
Mentor	1.83	1.03	1.42	1.13	35	1.63
Tangible assistance						
Mother	1.94	1.29	1.39	1.34		2.61*
Mentor	2.14	0.90	1.67	1.07		2.40*

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

As such, the total amount of support from mothers within the three groups was examined using a 3 by 2 (Mentor Group \times Time) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the total amount of maternal support at Times 1 and 2 serving as repeated measures. No main effect was detected for group or time and, there were no significant interactions. Thus all groups can be considered equivalent in terms of the amount of maternal support that they received over time.

Next, satisfaction with maternal support was examined using a 3 by 2 (Mentor Group \times Time) mixed analysis of variance (ANOVA) with satisfaction with maternal support at Times 1 and 2 serving as repeated measures. A main effect was detected for mentor group but not for time or the interaction of group by time. Time 2 analyses revealed that, at Time 1, participants in the group who were in terminated mentor relationships were significantly more satisfied with the support that they received from their mothers than participants in the no mentor group or in the long-term mentor group. Similarly, at Time 2, the terminated mentor group reported marginally higher levels of satisfaction with maternal support than did the long-term mentor group.

Next we conducted a series of analyses to compare long-term mentor versus maternal support. A two-way within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with the amount of long-term mentor support and maternal support at Times 1 and 2 serving as repeated measures. No main effect was detected for support provider and there was no interaction between time and provider. Paired, two-tailed *t* tests were then performed to examine

Table IV. Time 1 and Time 2 Comparisons of Support Types: Mother vs. Stable Mentor

Variable	Mother		Mentor		df	<i>t</i> value
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Social contact						
Time 1	1.03	1.32	1.11	1.28	35	-0.33
Time 2	0.39	0.93	0.92	1.25	35	-2.01 [†]
Emotional support						
Time 1	1.36	1.33	1.92	1.08	35	-2.31*
Time 2	0.64	0.93	1.56	1.18	35	-4.40***
Cognitive guidance						
Time 1	1.75	1.34	1.94	1.09	35	-0.78
Time 2	1.34	1.25	1.94	1.09	35	-3.33**
Positive feedback						
Time 1	1.61	1.32	1.83	1.03	35	-1.05
Time 2	1.22	1.31	1.42	1.31	35	0.47
Tangible assistance						
Time 1	1.94	1.29	2.14	0.90	35	-0.77
Time 2	1.39	1.34	1.67	1.07	35	-1.04

[†] $p < .08$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

changes in the amount of support provided by mothers and mentors from Time 1 to Time 2 for young women in the long-term mentor group (see Table IV). Both mothers ($t(35) = 3.22$, $p < 0.01$) and mentors ($t(35) = 3.21$, $p < 0.05$) provided significantly less support (summing all types of support) to young women at Time 2 than they provided at Time 1. In addition to overall support, the various types of support were examined at Times 1 and 2 for both the mothers and mentors of the participants in the long-term mentor group. Relative to Time 1, mothers provided significantly less emotional support ($t(35) = 3.33$, $p < 0.01$), socializing support ($t(35) = 2.50$, $p < 0.05$), tangible support ($t(35) = 2.61$, $p < 0.05$), and guidance ($t(35) = 2.79$, $p < 0.01$) at Time 2. Relative to Time 1, mentors provided significantly less tangible support ($t(35) = 2.40$, $p < 0.05$) at Time 2. No differences were found in the other types of support across time.

Comparisons of the support from mentors versus mothers indicated that mentors provided significantly more emotional support than mothers ($t(35) = -2.31$, $p < 0.05$) at Time 1 and, at Time 2, mentors provided significantly more socializing support ($t(35) = -2.01$, $p = 0.05$), emotional support ($t(35) = -4.40$, $p < 0.001$), and guidance ($t(35) = -3.33$, $p < 0.01$) than did mothers.

A two-way within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was then performed with importance of mentor and maternal support at Times 1 and 2 serving as repeated measures. A significant main effect was found for support provider. Time 2 analyses were conducted using paired two-tailed t tests to compare participants' ratings of the

importance of the support that they received from their mothers versus their mentors. At both Times 1 ($t(35) = 2.99$, $p < 0.01$) and 2 ($t(35) = -3.51$, $p < 0.01$), participants rated the support that they received from their mentors as more important to them than that received from mothers. Similarly, satisfaction with support from mentors and mothers was examined in the long-term mentor group using a two-way within subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) with satisfaction with mentor support and satisfaction with maternal support at Times 1 and 2 serving as repeated measures. A significant main effect was found for support provider. Time 2 analyses revealed that, although there were no changes in participants' satisfaction with maternal and mentor support over the course of 2 years, at both Time 1 ($t(35) = -2.94$, $p < 0.01$) and Time 2 ($t(35) = -3.73$, $p < 0.01$), participants reported that they were more satisfied with the support that they received from their mentors versus their mothers.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study shed light onto our understanding of natural mentor relationships and the different paths that such relationships take over the course of adolescents' transition to motherhood. Compared to adolescent mothers, who did not identify mentors at either time point, participants whose mentor relationships endured for 2-years were 3.5 times more likely to have remained in school or graduated. This finding suggests that the support of an enduring natural mentor support may help to facilitate school retention and completion among at risk youth. Levine and Nidiffer (1996, p. 65) reached similar conclusions in their study of disadvantaged youth who were "beating the odds" academically. They concluded that the most important protective factor for promoting educational attainment was the intervention by 1 person during a critical period in the life of each student. "Sometimes the mentor was a loving relative; other times it was someone paid to offer expert advice. In either case, it was the human contact that made the difference" (p. 65).

Subsequent analyses revealed that the long-term mentoring relationships were characterized by weekly and, in many instances, daily interactions. Many of the relationships were formed in early childhood and had continued into adolescence. The participants stated that they had known their mentors for an average of 14 years and over 80% expected to maintain the relationships forever. The relationships provided a wide range of support and were extremely important to the young women. Indeed, although support from both mothers and mentors decreased over 2 years postpartum, there were fewer decrements in mentor support. Particularly since they are rarely the

primary care givers, natural mentors may have a greater reserve of support to provide to young mothers during this crucial transition.

In fact, participants in the long-term mentor group reported deriving more support from their mentors than from their mothers, were more satisfied with this support, and indicated that this support was more important to them than their maternal support. Thus, it appears that guidance and support from an adult outside of the home can be extremely influential in the lives of young mothers. Although research has focused largely on young mothers' relationships with their mothers, fathers, and male partners, this research underscores the importance of examining additional providers who may be influential. Finally, at both Time 1 and Time 2, young women with enduring mentor relationships were less satisfied with the support that they received from their mothers than were young women whose mentor relationships had terminated. This suggests that long-term mentors may provide compensatory support during the postpartum transition period. Those young women with less satisfying maternal relationships may have turned to nonparent adults, whereas young women who were relatively satisfied may have drawn closer to their mothers after giving birth.

Although encouraging, the overall effects of mentoring relationships in this study were modest. In particular, the effects of long-term mentors were detectable only when contrasted with the group of adolescents who did not identify mentors at Time 1 or Time 2. This pattern is consistent with findings from previous studies, which have revealed relatively small effects for mentoring overall (Dubois *et al.*, 2002). Additionally, the findings underscore the importance of examining mentor relationships over time and of making finer distinctions among various relationships on the basis of such factors as duration and intensity. Rather than a dichotomous variable, mentor relationships might be more accurately thought of as existing on a continuum of influence. For example, it may be the case that mentor relationships that endure through particularly difficult transitions are qualitatively different from those that terminate after a relatively short time. Information of this sort is likely to lead to finer distinctions among mentoring relationships and to a typology that more accurately reflects the range of mentor relationships.

The results of this study must also be viewed within the context of a relatively small sample. Our interest in long-term mentoring relationships led to a focus on a small subset, greatly reducing the power of the analyses. Nonetheless, our approach is consistent with other researchers who have tracked the positive developmental trajectories of selected subsets over time (e.g., Luthar *et al.*, 1993; Werner and Smith, 1982). It is possible that

this subgroup differed in important, unmeasured ways from the larger sample that enabled them both to maintain long-term mentor relationship and to exhibit improved educational outcomes. Nonetheless, it is important to note that there were no Time 1 differences on any background or outcome variables (including educational variables) between young women with long-term mentors versus those who fell into the other groups. Finally, our inclusion of only 2 data points, and subsequent computation of pre- to posttest difference scores, limits our capacity to capture the complex relationships that evolved between support and outcomes among the participants. Techniques such as growth modeling, which use multiple waves of data, can more effectively capture the intricacies of such ongoing change (Willett *et al.*, 1991). Also, our small sample prohibited us from examining subgroups of young women facing different levels of risk (for example based on level of maternal support). It is important to note, however, that as pregnant and parenting inner-city adolescents, all of the young women in our sample were at substantial risk for such hazardous outcomes as school drop-out (Cutrona *et al.*, 1998). Building on current literature, this study suggests that for African American pregnant and parenting adolescents, mothers and other mothers serve as primary sources of support during the postpartum transition.

Recent studies also suggest that sustained postpartum involvement by adolescent fathers (Gee and Rhodes, 1999) is rare. Much of the available literature indicates (Doherty *et al.*, 1996) that nonresident fathers tend to have limited relationships with their children and their contact tends to decrease over time. African American unmarried fathers, however, are more likely to live close to their children and see them more frequently as compared to White and Hispanic fathers. Further research is needed to explore the role that nonresidential unmarried low-income fathers play in the lives of their children (Coley, 2001). Current research indicates that fathers are more likely to provide postpartum support when they remain involved in a romantic relationship with the adolescent mother (Cutrona *et al.*, 1998). The child's paternal grandmother may, in fact, serve as a significant resource to an adolescent mother, and may encourage paternal involvement (Mott and Maxwell, 1981). In this vein, research (Cooley and Unger, 1991; Cutrona *et al.*, 1998; Spieker and Bensley, 1994; Unger and Cooley, 1992) indicates that an adolescent mother's parenting stress may be significantly reduced when the child's grandparents contribute tangible (e.g., money, child care) and emotional (e.g., encouragement, praise) support.

The results of the longitudinal study must be considered in the context of limitations related to sampling and methodology. Although the current study does not

entirely address the question as to how natural mentor relationships differ from adolescent mothers' parental relationships, findings suggest that enduring mentor relationships may provide crucial support during a critical period in which support from mothers tends to decrease. Further, despite our finding that maternal support does not contribute to educational outcomes beyond the effects of mentor support, it is difficult to discern whether mentor support is compensating for inadequate maternal care. Further longitudinal studies, employing large samples, are needed to examine both the unique and interacting roles of mentor and maternal support on adolescent mothers' lives.

Although the results of this study are promising for those adolescent mothers with enduring natural mentors, a large proportion of mothers had no such support in their lives. This is not surprising, given that the institutions that have historically been sources of intergenerational contact in African American communities—extended families, schools, and neighborhoods—have changed in ways that have dramatically reduced the availability of caring adults (Wilson, 1996). In light of these changes, however, it may be possible to provide young mothers with needed support by pairing them with volunteer mentors. Skillful, persistent volunteers could potentially earn the trust of adolescent mothers and offer adolescents some of the benefits that natural mentors seem to afford.

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