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"Somebody Who Was on My Side": A Qualitative Examination of Youth Initiated Mentoring

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Abstract

Youth initiated mentoring (YIM) is an innovative approach to mentoring being implemented by the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program in which youth identify and select their mentors. There is great interest in this approach; however, there has been little study of YIM or its implementation in ChalleNGe. Retrospective in-depth qualitative interviews with former ChalleNGe participants (*n* = 30) were conducted to gain a descriptive understanding of the mentor selection process, the role these relationships played in participants' experiences of the ChalleNGe program and in their lives more generally, and the nature and strength of these connections. Findings indicate that youth were able to successfully enlist the participation of mentors and YIM yielded enduring and emotionally supportive relationships. That the adults came from within their communities was viewed by these participants as having expedited the development of feelings of trust and contributed to the relevancy and meaningfulness of the guidance and advice offered.

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Youth initiated mentoring (YIM) is an innovative approach to forming supportive relationships that is implemented as part of the National Guard Youth ChalleNGe Program. In YIM, youth identify and recruit caring adults from within their communities. There is great interest in this approach due to the intuitive appeal of formalizing existing connections with adults in youths' own communities. There is also the potential for YIM to eliminate the long waiting lists youth endure in many traditional assigned mentoring programs due to difficulties recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteer mentors. However, few programs currently utilize this approach, and there has been little study of YIM or of its implementation in ChalleNGe.

The purpose of ChalleNGe is to reengage youth 16 to 18 years of age who have dropped out of school and thus are at a high risk for a host of negative occupational and psychosocial outcomes later in life (Millenky, Bloom, Muller-Ravett, & Broadus, 2011). An initial 5-month intensive Residential Phase (RP) is followed by 12 months of mentoring as the youth return to their home communities. The YIM component is intended to address the erosion of positive effects observed in many programs serving high-risk youth (Bloom, 2010), by providing participants with the support of an adult mentor for a year. The mentors, selected by the youth and screened and trained by the ChalleNGe program, are charged with supporting the youth in their efforts to meet the educational and vocational goals they have set for themselves. There is some evidence that YIM relationships may indeed play an important role in helping the youth sustain gains made in the program. A randomized evaluation of the overall program showed several positive outcomes for youth participants (Bloom, Gardenhire-Crooks, & Mandsager, 2009; Millenky, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2013). However, as with most interventions targeting youth who have dropped out of high school (Bloom, 2010), many of these effects eroded over time. Drawing on data from this evaluation, Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, and Grossman (2013) found that at the 38-month follow-up, youth in the longest-lasting mentoring relationships showed the greatest improvements in the outcomes examined (i.e., GED/HS diploma, college credit, months employed, earnings, months idle, and convictions).The youth in the shortest relationships showed no significant differences from those in the control group.

The structure of the YIM relationships, as implemented in ChalleNGe, is similar to that prescribed by many traditional community-based mentoring programs; mentors and youth are expected to meet regularly over an extended period of time, typically for an academic or calendar year, with the meetings scheduled by the participants and structured in whatever way they see fit. What distinguishes YIM from traditional programs is the youth self-selection of the mentor, carried out with guidance from the ChalleNGe program. Most

traditional mentoring programs recruit a pool of mentors and select the adult with whom the youth is matched from among that pool. These mentors and youth typically have no prior connection, tend to be from different communities, and often have different racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006). In contrast, YIM mentors are more likely to be adults from within the youth's own communities and even ones with whom the youth have existing close ties.

The YIM selection process is likely to shape the nature and course of the mentoring relationships in a number of ways. Formalizing a relationship with an adult, already known to the young person, may quicken the development of the relationship and increase its durability. Close productive connections between the youth and the mentors who have been selected by the mentoring program can take some time to develop, in some cases as much as a year or more (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Spencer, 2006, 2007). Many relationships never take hold and as many as a third to a half of all relationships established through formal programs end prematurely (Bernstein, Dun Rappaport, Olsho, Hunt, & Levin, 2009; Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Most mentors enter into these relationships hoping to make a significant difference in a young person's life, but when faced with the realities of building a meaningful connection, some become dejected and bow out. Others simply disappear, abandoning their mentees altogether (Spencer, 2007). Mentors who have been selected by the youth and have existing connections with them, whether directly or through another adult in the young person's life, may start out with a higher level of investment in their protégés. They may also be less prone to the disappointments and dashed expectations experienced by some mentors in more traditional programs.

It is likely that YIM results in higher proportions of youth being matched with adults who share similar racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds. Not surprisingly, research on natural mentoring relationships finds that most youth report having mentors with backgrounds similar to their own (e.g., Haddad, Chen, & Greenberger, 2011). Successful adults with more similar backgrounds may offer a particularly potent form of role modeling for youth during a time of heightened focus on identity development. Zirkel (2002) has suggested that role models with similar backgrounds provide adolescents clear messages about the opportunities for "people like me" rather than simply for people in general. Adolescents are keenly aware that "some people" have high status jobs, but role models with backgrounds more like their own make it easier for youth to imagine such a future for themselves (Zirkel, 2002, p. 358). Consequently, having a mentor whose background is more similar may result in the youth experiencing enough discrepancy between their present state and their desired goals to feel motivated to reach their

goals. In contrast, a mentor whose life circumstances appear profoundly different from the youth's own may not have the same effect or possibly even decrease their motivation (Pinquart, Silbereisen, & Wiesner, 2004). Moreover, matches made on the basis of shared interests tend to be significantly more effective in achieving positive outcomes for youth in mentoring programs more generally (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Shared backgrounds may, in some cases, provide common ground on which to build a relationship and facilitate the mentoring process. YIM may also influence the nature of other forms of support provided through mentoring. Sterrett, Jones, McKee, and Kincaid (2011) have argued that supportive non-parental adults provide the youth with various forms of social support, which in turn promote positive youth development. YIM mentors may be more attuned to the constraints and opportunities in the youth's social ecologies, potentially making their affirmation, advice, and guidance more meaningful than that from an adult whose circumstances are markedly different from the youth's own and whose experiences may seem a world away.

Despite its potential benefits, there may also be some challenges to implementing a YIM approach and limits to its effectiveness. Some youth, especially high-risk youth, may lack appropriate role models, or may be too shy or hesitant to reach out to adults in their communities (Rhodes, 2002; Rogers & Taylor, 1997). Time constraints and competing demands may hinder the ability of adults in at-risk or low-resource communities to serve as mentors (Rhodes, 2002; Scales, 2003). Furthermore, because adults in more impoverished communities tend to have limited access to educational, vocational, and economic opportunities (Brisson, 2009), they may offer fewer connections to the kinds of opportunities that could significantly improve the youth's educational and vocational trajectories. Strengthening ties with adults within young people's existing social networks may increase what has been called "bonding social capital" but may not offer much in the way of "bridging social capital," or connections with adults in other, more resource-rich communities (Putnam, 2000; Vidal, 2004). Along these lines, de Souza Briggs (1998, 2004) has conceptualized social support as a kind of social capital that supports people in their efforts to "get by" largely through emotional and instrumental support (e.g., rides, small loans) that is exchanged between people whose backgrounds are more similar. In contrast, ties that offer social leverage help people "get ahead" through connections with people and resources that can improve their life circumstances (e.g., putting in a good word for employment, help accessing a school scholarship).

To our knowledge, there is no other literature on this kind of a youth nomination approach to the establishment of formal mentoring relationships. Almost two decades ago, Balcazar and colleagues set out to improve what

they called "help-recruiting competencies" among university students with disabilities (Balcazar, Fawcett, & Seekins, 1991), African American students who were preparing to graduate from high school (Balcazar, Majors, et al., 1991), and adjudicated youth with disabilities (Balcazar, Keys, & Garate, 1995). Their results indicated that teaching adolescents to recruit help from adults can increase their social support networks and facilitate goal attainment. However, this idea of training youth to effectively enlist adult support and seek out self-identified mentors has neither been taken up by the mentoring movement in a formal way nor does it appear to be represented in the positive youth development literature more broadly. In the latter literature, there has been greater attention to the nature and quality of adult–youth relationships within youth serving programs (e.g., Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011). However, there has been no treatment of youth nomination of adults in these settings.

In the absence of a focused study of YIM, we know little about the influence or even the nature of mentoring relationships established using this distinctive approach. Although presently few programs appear to employ YIM, ChalleNGe has a long history doing so. It has served more than 110,000 youth since the early 1990s and the program has continued to grow. A better understanding of YIM is needed in light of the large number of youth being engaged in these relationships, the critical role they may play in the retention of positive effects associated with ChalleNGe, and the potential of YIM to address some of the challenges faced by programs utilizing more traditional recruiting and matching procedures. The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to develop descriptive accounts of the youth's experiences with YIM within the ChalleNGe program by documenting whom the participants selected as mentors and how, their perceptions of the nature and quality of the relationships formed, and whether and how these relationships were perceived by the participants as having contributed to their psychological, educational, emotional, and vocational functioning.

Method

Participants

The interviewed youth were recruited from among the participants in a randomized, longitudinal national evaluation of ChalleNGe (Bloom et al., 2009; Millenky et al., 2011) who were also included in a study of the role of YIM in the retention of program effects (Schwartz et al., 2013). ChalleNGe targets youth at high risk for substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquency, and criminal activity. Eligible youth are those 16 to 18 years of age, who are drug

free, not in trouble with the law, and who have dropped out or been expelled from school. During the program's initial 5-month RP, participants are immersed in a structured military-like lifestyle, work toward their high school diploma or GED, and participate in life skills, jobs skills, health, leadership activities, and classes. A Post-Residential Action Plan (PRAP) is developed, which outlines the youth's goals and post-residential placements, including educational, vocational, and/or military pursuits, to be carried out in the subsequent 12-month Post-Residential Phase (PRP) with the support of their selected mentor.

As part of the application to ChalleNGe, youth nominate one to three potential mentors who must be same-sex adults, at least 21 years of age, and reside within the same geographic area as the youth but not members of the youth's immediate family or household. ChalleNGe staff interview and screen the nominees, run background checks, and obtain references. Youth who are unable to identify a suitable mentor may select from a pool of volunteer mentors made available by the programs. Mentors come to the program site to meet their mentees and participate in "co-training" to foster trust and establish expectations for the relationship. During the PRP, mentors are expected to meet their mentees a minimum of 4 times per month and conduct at least two of these in person. Mentors serve voluntarily and receive no compensation.

Interviews were conducted with 30 participants (27 male). The high proportion of male participants is in keeping with the higher rate of male participants in the ChalleNGe programs nationwide (80%) and of the participants in the evaluation study from which these participants were drawn (88% male). All had been 16 to 18 years of age when the evaluation study began and were 20 to 23 years at the time of the interview. Sixty percent identified as White, 20% Latino, 7% African American, and 10% biracial (see Table 1 for more detailed information on each participant). Twenty-seven of the 30 participants had completed the RP of the ChalleNGe program, 1 dropped out (Victor), and 2 were asked to leave (Ryan, Ted). Participants who were asked to leave indicated that this was due to their repeatedly talking back to program staff.

Procedures

Calls were placed to 232 youth who had completed the program at one of three evaluation sites (California, Michigan, and Mississippi) and who had been contacted at the time of the 38-month follow-up. Contact information was functional for only 94 participants. Messages were left for all who could be reached or had voicemail. Only three people with whom direct contact was

Table I. Summary Information for Participants.

Name[a] (youth)	Gender (youth)	Race (youth)	Mentor race	Relationship with mentor	In contact with mentor?	Educational and vocational status
Adam	Male	White	Unknown	Family friend	No	Did not complete GED, unemployed
Alex	Male	Latino	Latino[c]	Family friend	Yes	Educational attainment unknown, recently laid off
Ana	Female	Latino	Latino[c]	Extended family—Stepmother's brother's wife	Yes	Graduated high school, nearing completion BA, plans to seek MA, employed part-time
Ben	Male	White	White[b]	Family friend	Yes	Did not complete GED, unemployed
Brian	Male	White	White[c]	Sunday school teacher	No	Completed high school, attending college, employed
Chuck	Male	White; American Indian	White[c]	Extended family—Cousin	Yes	Neither employed or in school—Suffered traumatic brain injury from car accident shortly after program ended
Daniel	Male	Latino	Latino[b]	Extended family	Yes	Completed GED, some college, recently laid off
David	Male	White	White[b]	Extended family—Cousin-in-law	Yes	Completed high school, plans to attend college, employed
Dylan	Male	White	White[c]	Family friend—Father's best friend	Yes	Completed GED, employed
Douglas	Male	White	White[c]	Scout leader	Yes	Educational attainment unknown, employed in construction
Evan	Male	White	White[b]	Godfather	Yes	Did not complete high school, employment status unknown
Fred	Male	White	White[b]	Football coach	No	Completed high school, wants to attend college, employed
Gabriel	Male	Latino	Latino[c]	Teacher	Yes	Completed high school, employed full-time
Isaac	Male	White	White[c]	Family friend	No	Did not complete GED, employment status unknown
James	Male	White	White[c]	Family friend—Sister's boyfriend	Yes	Completed GED, some college, employed as a pipe welder
Jesse	Male	White; Latino	Unknown	ChalleNGe mentor pool (after first mentor was unresponsive)	No	Working on GED, completed technical school degree, unemployed
Jillian	Female	Black	Black[c]	Extended family—Aunt	Yes	Did not complete GED, employment status unknown
Joe	Male	White	White[c]	Extended family—Uncle	Yes	Completed high school, wants to attend college, employed
John	Male	White	White[c]	Family friend	No	Completed GED, unemployed
Jordan	Male	White	White[c]	Godfather	Yes	Completed GED, employed
Lindsey	Female	White	White[b]	Family friend	No	Completed high school, attending nursing school, employment status unknown

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Name[a] (youth)	Gender (youth)	Race (youth)	Mentor race	Relationship with mentor	In contact with mentor?	Educational and vocational status
Matt	Male	White	White[b]	Extended family—Uncle	Yes	Educational attainment unknown, employed full-time in construction
Rick	Male	White	White[c]	Extended family—Cousin	Yes	Completed high school, taking college courses, in the military
Ruben	Male	Latino	White[b]	Family friend—Mother's friend	No	Completed high school, in school full-time
Ryan	Male	Unknown	Unknown	Extended family—Uncle	No	Completed high school, enrolled to begin college, unemployed
Samuel	Male	White; Latino	White[c]	Extended family—Great uncle	Yes	Completed high school, completed some college, employment status unknown
Ted	Male	White	White[b]	Family friend	No	Educational attainment unknown, unemployed, on probation
Thomas	Male	White	White[b]	Church leader and friend	Yes	Completed GED, wants to attend college, employed
Victor	Male	Latino	Latino[b]	Family friend	No	Completed some college, unemployed
William	Male	Black	Black[c]	School principal	Yes	Completed high school, wants to attend college, employed full-time

a. All names are pseudonyms selected by the participants.
b. Mentor's race is based on mentee's report.
c. Mentor's race is based on program records.

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made declined participation. Ultimately, one-time in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 participants by telephone. Informed consent was obtained at the time of interview verbally and subsequently in written form. Participants received a US$50 gift card. Interviewers utilized a semistructured interview protocol that focused on the current status and nature of the mentoring relationship, how the mentor was selected, the role the mentor played in their experiences with the ChalleNGe program during and after the RP, and their perceptions of how the mentoring relationship had influenced their lives. The protocol served as a guide, enabling interviewers to gather information on these common topics across all interviews, while also having the freedom to follow the interviewees' own narrative about their experiences. The interviews tended to be about 1 hour in length. All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and the transcriptions were verified by listening to the audio-recording an additional time and making corrections to the transcriptions as needed.

Analysis

Three of the authors carried out the analysis of the interview transcripts, which were analyzed using an iterative thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initial themes were identified inductively by reading through and thematically coding an initial small group of interview transcripts and constructing narrative summaries (Way, 1998) of each. For the purposes of this study, narrative summaries were the condensed accounts of each participant's description of the nature and quality of the mentoring relationship. Two of the analysts constructed the summaries, which synthesized the participants' descriptions of why they entered the ChalleNGe program, who they selected for their mentor and how they made this selection, the nature of the mentoring relationship while in the ChalleNGe program and at the time of the interview, and what impact, if any, this relationship had on their experiences of the ChalleNGe program and their lives more generally. Based on these initial summaries, the three analysts identified initial themes and constructed a codebook that was then used to code all the interviews. A holistic-content approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998) to coding was taken, in which the coding was completed one interview at a time, through multiple readings of each interview and by considering the context of the full interview when coding, rather than chunking or segmenting the data from the start. This coding was conducted in Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software program, and narrative summaries were constructed for each interview as it was coded. Finally, conceptually clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the coded themes were constructed to detect patterns in the themes across the interviews.

Findings

For the most part, the participants formed long-standing and meaningful relationships with their adult mentors that served as significant sources of emotional and instrumental support, while in the program and beyond. In the sections below, we detail who the participants selected as their mentors and how, and the roles these mentors played in the participants' lives throughout the different phases of the program and beyond. Notable in these findings are the durability and meaningfulness of the connections that were built, or in some cases strengthened, between the participants and their mentors and the emotional and instrumental support they provided. Having prior connections and shared backgrounds appeared to play a significant role in the development and deepening of many of these relationships and their perceived impact on the participants' lives.

Mentor Selection

Most participants stated that they had identified a mentor with relative ease and had received some assistance, most commonly from a parent. Only 2 (David, Gabriel) reported selecting their mentors completely on their own and 2 others (Thomas, James) stated that their mentors had actually approached them about serving in this capacity. As indicated in Table 1, the majority (23) selected mentors who were extended family members, family friends, or people known through a family connection. Others selected adults with whom they had some prior connection through school or a community organization. There was also considerable consistency among these participants regarding what they looked for when selecting their mentor. Most stated that they wanted someone who would be reliable, somewhat similar in personality, trustworthy, and who could serve as a positive role model. Some sought an adult who had traveled a rough path similar to their own but successfully made it to a place of stability. As Joe said, "[my mentor] . . . really went through a lotta shit, and changed his life around, so I figured who better than that."

Role of Mentors

A majority of participants had a positive feeling about the prospect of having a mentor. Some, however, were not confident that a mentor could be of much help to them or had been uncertain about what to expect ("why do I need a mentor? . . . I don't really get the point in that," Victor). Others were more concerned about how reliable a mentor would be. As Daniel said,

my biggest fear about having a mentor was that they were gonna stop, or, or like tell me that they couldn't—do any of the stuff . . . I wasn't scared about havin' a mentor, it was them like not bein' able to be there.

During the RP, mentors were viewed by many participants as critical to the successful completion of the RP of the program. They played a distinct role as an adult who was neither a parent nor a member of the ChalleNGe program staff. Some talked about how having a mentor gave them a sense of connection to home and helped maintain their motivation to stick with the program during this challenging phase. A few credited their completion of the program to having had a mentor. As William said, "It helped me . . . stay in the program, an' stick with it" and "I wouldn't 'a' probably made it, . . . through the program, without him." For youth whose relationships with their parents were more troubled, the RP could be especially isolating, and they depended on their mentors to serve as confidantes and stabilizing forces. As Ryan poignantly stated, he "needed somebody who was on my side," as at that time he felt like no one else was.

The participants' descriptions of their experiences during the PRP were more mixed, as the structure and focus of these relationships and the roles they played in the young people's lives varied considerably. Some said they had communicated with their mentors several times a week whereas others connected only a handful of times. Several participants indicated that just having someone they knew was there for them during this time was a meaningful part of the mentoring relationship. For example, Alex said, "it was good for me to have a mentor . . . 'cause you know . . . that he's right there . . . if you needed somebody."

Relationship Quality

Contact and duration. Most of these youth's mentoring relationships were long-standing. At the time of the interview for this study, 19 out of the 30 respondents were still in contact with their mentors, with 13 of these indicating they were actively so and 6 describing more incidental contact, such as seeing each other primarily at family events. Among those who had kept in touch, some communicated quite frequently whereas others, especially those who lived further apart, indicated that they were in contact every few months or so. During the PRP, the frequency of contact varied greatly, despite the program expectation for a weekly contact. Some indicated that they did have a weekly contact; others were in contact monthly or only every few months. Many participants expressed a desire for more contact with their mentors while in the program and beyond.

Participants noted a number of challenges, situational (e.g., geographic move) and relational (e.g., not wanting to burden mentor), to maintaining a consistent contact. Other reasons for limited or inconsistent communication included disinclination to reach out when "in trouble," not wanting to disappoint the mentor and uncertainty about whether or how the mentor could help. Shared ties created natural opportunities for some pairs to reconnect when they had fallen out of touch. For example, Samuel lost touch with his mentor for "about 2 years" when Samuel moved away. When he moved back, he reconnected with his mentor as a result of seeing him at family gatherings and starting to talk with him again. Since then, they had remained in close contact, speaking about every 2 weeks. Almost all the participants who were still in contact with their mentors thought they would be forever, in some cases, simply because that is the way it had always been and, in others, because of the depth of the connection that had developed as a result of the mentoring. For example, William, whose mentor was his former school principal, said, "I don't see us falling out over nothin'. So I believe I've made a lifelong friend."

Connection. Most participants described their mentoring relationships in ways that indicated that they considered them to be meaningful and, in many cases, quite close connections. Some thought that the closeness they experienced with their mentors came more readily because of their prior relationship and others indicated that similarities in backgrounds and experiences had contributed to the development of a strong connection. For example, Chuck said, "I'm sure I wouldn't have . . . opened up to him as easily . . . Would'a' took longer . . . versus right away." All but two of the participants selected a mentor whose racial background was similar to theirs and shared backgrounds resulted in immediate shared understanding for some. As Ana said, "just the way that we do things, I guess Hispanics do things. I dunno . . . it helped, believe me . . . It got us closer, and uh, it helped us understand each other better."

Formalizing the relationship through YIM further deepened some existing connections. For Alex, this had made it easier to ask for help ("it feels more comfortable"), which led him to do so more often: "I tried talking to him more, when . . . the mentor thing happened . . . I just realized . . . I can trust him an' everything." Another participant, Douglas, described how the deepening of their relationship through YIM had resulted in a desire in him to help out his mentor as well:

> He's my neighbor now . . . and I help him out in any way I can when I'm home . . .
> check on him, . . . if he needs somethin' done, an' he can't do it, I'll do it for him.

A few relationships remained seemingly unchanged. These tended to be relationships in which the young person felt quite close to the mentor going in to this experience and retained these feelings, or ones in which the youth did not see any need for a mentor. For example, in John's case, a relatively distant relationship remained so: "we wasn't close or nothin', it's just I picked him so I could go ahead an' get that over with."

In one case, a previously positive connection was ruptured. Fred had selected his football coach, an adult he felt had "always been there" for him: "we talked all the time . . . he was one of those like, grown-ups, you know, you could talk to him about anything." The mentor wrote letters to Fred but then did not show up for the Mentor Day held toward the end of the RP: "I had no idea, . . . one of the uh, counselors there, . . . told me that he wasn't coming." Fred recalled feeling "really upset at the time" and was then left without a mentor. Once he returned home, he stopped playing football and he and his mentor "just never really talked after that."

Nature and Quality of Support

The mentors were described as providing various forms of emotional and instrumental support. For many, just knowing the mentor was someone they could count on to be there for them was meaningful and some relied heavily on their mentors' emotional availability. As Thomas said, "he's very helpful, and I can depend on him he's like my own personal counselor." Participants also talked about feeling understood by their mentors. For example, Thomas said, "sometimes I think he knows more about me than I do." Talking with their mentors provided an emotional release for some like Brian who said, "'Cause when I would talk about my feelings it would be like a relief for them, so they wouldn't have any power." For Evan, simply spending time with his mentor provided relief, as he said talking and throwing a ball around with his mentor "just made everything a little bit better."

The mentors were also described as having provided encouragement to the participants and as being invested in their success, which helped motivate some of the youth to achieve their goals. William said that he felt his mentor "cared" about him, wanted him to strive to do better, and "drilled it into [his] head" that he could, which he said made him try to do so. In some cases, just knowing the mentor believed in them provided motivation: "I just really needed a little motivation . . . Somebody just . . . believin'" (William). For Ana, her mentor's belief in her ability to achieve her goals was especially meaningful because at that time she felt no one else did:

When everybody else was tellin' me that I was gonna be a whore . . . on drugs, or . . . at the age of 15 I was gonna be pregnant . . . she was there, like, "No, you have the wrong idea . . . don't listen to what they say . . . just do the things that you have to do to make yourself better," and I didn't have anybody like that. She was that person for me.

Others indicated that their mentors had actively monitored their progress toward their goals and pushed for the achievement of them.

Receiving advice from their mentors was another form of support that seemed particularly welcomed and several youth talked about how helpful the advice had been. Jesse said,

his advice really is the right advice . . . His point of view is incredible . . . just like the way he talks about things, it's, it seems like he's really smart, an' he knows and understands the way things work.

Mentors were also perceived as guiding youth in what they thought was the "right" direction. As Isaac said, "[my mentor] would guide me the right way, in things to do, and then what not to do." Participants also viewed their mentors as powerful role models. Samuel indicated that he was actively trying to emulate his mentor: "he take care of his wife. That's one thing I feel like I should do. Like take, make sure my kids get through school . . . Take care of them, put them first before anything."

In addition to the emotional support, encouragement, and role modeling they experienced, the majority of the participants also described receiving various forms of instrumental support from the mentors, such as helping with transportation or giving them small amounts of money. The mentors also assisted the youth with employment, by serving as a broker and connecting them with people they knew who could help in a variety of ways, including providing networking and job opportunities. In a few cases, participants also described ways that mentors stepped in to help them achieve their goals, such as connecting them with a tutor or helping them access information about what was needed to apply for college.

Impact of Mentoring

Participants were asked whether and how their participation in the ChalleNGe program had made a difference in their lives and about the impact of the mentoring component on their program experience. Mentors were described as having pushed the youth to continue to make progress toward their goals, bolstered their self-esteem and self-confidence, and encouraged them to see alternative perspectives. Some participants described how having a mentor

had resulted in them seeing themselves in a new light, making statements such as "it showed me the potential I could have" and "it made me a better person." Both Douglas and William stated that they were a "better man" as a result of their relationship with their mentor. Douglas said that when he was younger he "didn't really care" about himself but now he "hold(s) [his] head up," is more apt to do what he has set out to do, and strives to be the "highest person [he] can be."

Some participants also thought that their relationships with their mentors had improved their relationships with other people. Jesse said that engaging with his mentor helped him develop greater respect for others: "Because out of the respect that I had for him, helped me to respect other people." David described how his mentor had taught him to take other people's perspectives into account a bit more and to not be so quick to take a negative view of people: "he . . . helped me understand where people are comin' from . . . instead of . . . thinkin' people are either arrogant, or negative." Matt said his mentor taught him about "honor" and integrity" and that he had "gained a whole lot of patience" and "just had more respect for other people," which he thought changed the way others viewed him by allowing them to see how they could be "close" with him.

However, five youth stated that they experienced little to no benefit from the mentoring. Ted remembered little about his mentoring relationship, which ended shortly after he was asked to leave the ChalleNGe program, and four participants indicated that they simply did not feel the need for the kind of support the mentoring provided. Finally, two participants had negative experiences with the mentoring program. As discussed previously, Fred experienced a rupture in his relationship with his mentor due to the mentor not following through on his agreement to serve in this role. For Jesse, although his second mentoring relationship endured, his first mentor's failure to follow-through had been distressing:

> I told him I was going to make him be a mentor to me, and . . . he's like, "That's fine," you know, "I'll help you out," you know, every time I tried to call him or anything, he didn't pick up the frickin' phone . . . It was horrible. It was like getting your back stabbed.

Jesse informed the ChalleNGe staff that the relationship was not working and was connected with some other adults "to talk to," one of whom subsequently became his mentor.

Discussion

This study provides an in-depth examination of the nature and quality of YIM relationships and offers important insights into the potential contributions that

mentors selected in this way may make to adolescents' educational and vocational progress. The narratives of these participants indicate that, with guidance and support from a structured program, high-risk youth can successfully identify supportive adults within their own communities and enlist them to serve as more formal mentors. Furthermore, most of the participants indicated that the relationships established were enduring and provided significant sources of emotional and, in some cases, instrumental support. Prior connections and shared backgrounds were experienced by many of these participants as contributing to their feeling comfortable with their mentors almost from the start and as facilitating feelings of trust relatively early in the relationship. These participants also indicated that their relationships with their mentors had motivated them to stick with the program during difficult times and to stay on course toward achieving their goals once they had returned to their communities. A smaller number of youth did, however, experience failed or ruptured relationships or ones of little to no significance to them.

For the most part, these youth were able to identify positive role models for themselves from among the adults in their communities. The ease with which the participants in this study identified and enlisted the support of supportive adults suggests that the availability of positive role models in their communities may pose less of a barrier for high-risk youth than the potential lack of knowledge, skills, internal motivation, or confidence to seek out such adults. This speaks not only to the promise of YIM but also to the potential for mentoring field more generally to do more to help young people develop their skills in effectively enlisting the support of others in the attainment of their personal and vocational goals throughout their lives. As the work of Balcazar and colleagues (Balcazar et al., 1995; Balcazar, Fawcett, et al., 1991; Balcazar, Majors, et al., 1991) indicates, training can improve the help-recruiting skills of youth, including adjudicated youth.

The findings here also speak to the potential durability of YIM relationships. Although there were substantial differences in the amount, frequency, and nature of the contacts between these participants and their mentors, most of these relationships endured through the completion of the formal program and in many cases well beyond. Obstacles to connecting identified by participants in traditional formal mentoring programs, such as difficulty communicating, scheduling time to meet, and disruptions in either the youth's or the mentor's life circumstances (Spencer, 2007), were noted but seemed to pose less of a threat. Having natural opportunities to reconnect when they had fallen out of touch may have contributed to the longevity of these relationships. Mentors and youth from different communities who have no previous connection are less likely to naturally cross paths, which may heighten the risk of relationship dissolution when consistent contact is not maintained.

Many of the participants described feeling strongly that their mentors believed in them and were invested in their success, and some described how valuable it was to them to feel like the mentor was "there" for them or "on their side." For some, the mentor was their only source of this kind of support. Studies of natural mentoring relationships have found strong associations between the presence of an invested and encouraging nonparental adult and a wide range of positive youth outcomes, including stronger beliefs in the importance of school for future success and a greater likelihood of completing high school and attending college (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Haddad et al., 2011; Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman, & Caldwell, 2012). YIM may thus serve to foster these kinds of connections for youth who might otherwise go without this valuable resource while in the program and beyond.

Having a mentor appeared to have heightened many of the participants' perceived social support or the sense that quality support is available when needed. This type of support had been found to be strongly associated with well-being among children and adolescents and this association is strongest for older adolescents (Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010; Taylor et al., 2004). Having a mentor also helped many participants' feelings of confidence and motivation to persist in the pursuit of their goals, even when faced with significant challenges. In some cases, having a mentor who had faced similar challenges provided participants with the sense that a productive adulthood was possible for them and served as a model for how to achieve this (Nurmi, 2004).

The YIM mentors were described by these participants as largely offering social support with only a few appearing to provide access to leveraging social capital (de Souza Briggs, 1998) that relationships with adults outside of the youth's own communities may offer. There were some cases in which the mentors were college educated and had provided the youth with information about how to go about pursuing a college degree and some participants reported feeling motivated by their mentors to stay in school or were assisted by them in landing a job, thereby improving their circumstances. But examples of mentors connecting the youth with resources that have the potential to change their opportunity structure in some way were not as prevalent. Matching the youth with adults from higher resource communities may offer greater opportunities for social leveraging. Abelev (2009), in a qualitative interview study with college students who had grown up in poverty, found that most had middle-class mentors who helped them access resources that had markedly changed their pathway to higher education, such as getting them out of low-performing into high-performing schools by helping them access scholarships or even paying the tuition themselves and instilling a sense of entitlement to such resources. However, it is unclear how much the

potential for social leveraging is realized in many traditional mentoring programs. Community-based mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters have tended to conceptualize the mentoring relationship as akin to a friendship and emphasized emotionally supportive role such relationships can play. Mentors may even be discouraged from the kind of involvement in the young person's life leveraging their resources would entail out of concern that if such efforts did not have a favorable outcome, the emotional connection could be compromised.

These participants' narratives indicate that program support—from initial screening through program completion—is likely critical for YIM as it is for traditional mentoring programs (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). Some participants did not know what to expect from a mentoring relationship or how a mentor could help them and a few were even quite certain that a mentor would not be of any real use to them. Ongoing program support could potentially help youth to understand the roles a mentor can play in their lives and learn how best to seek assistance from them. Despite the general program expectation of four contacts per month, great variability in the amount and frequency of contact with the mentors was reported by these participants. Especially, perhaps among those pairs with previous personal connections, the need for regular and frequent contacts may not be readily apparent to participants. A number of youth thought that more frequent contacts with their mentors would have been helpful and a couple thought the program could have done more to help on that front. Close monitoring of these relationships by program staff may be needed to reinforce the importance of regular meetings and maintain a focus on the explicit goals identified by the youth in the program. There were also a few cases in which changes in the mentors' life circumstances and competing demands contributed to inconsistencies and even the dissolution of some of these relationships. In such cases, program staff may be able to take steps to reengage the mentor or bring closure to the failed relationships and assist the youth with securing a new mentor.

There are a number of limitations of the present study that are important to keep in mind when interpreting the findings and considering their implications. The accounts of these relationships were gathered retrospectively and a considerable amount of time had passed since program completion. Only the mentees' perspectives on these relationships were examined and thus no insights into the mentors' perspectives were obtained. Although the participants were randomly selected from among those who had participated in three of the sites in the large-scale program evaluation (Millenky et al., 2011), the perspectives of only those whose contact information was functional and who responded to our attempts to reach them are included here. This small group of youth is likely to be different from the full group of

ChalleNGe program participants. For example, the sample may be biased toward those who had more favorable experiences. Therefore, the experiences of these participants represented here cannot be construed as being characteristic of the program participants more generally. Prospective study of the initiation and development of YIM relationships is needed to more fully explicate the processes at work in these relationships and the contributions they may make to youth outcomes. Random assignment of youth to different mentor-selection conditions is needed to identify whether and how YIM influences youth outcomes and to identify potential risks associated with this selection process.

Possible differences in the nature and influence of YIM relationships and relationships formed through more traditional means could also be attributed to other factors aside from the mentor selection process. The ChalleNGe YIM program is different from most other volunteer mentoring programs in several ways. It is embedded within a larger, more comprehensive intervention with the explicit goal of getting the youth on track and headed toward a more productive adulthood by reengaging them in education and preparing them for employment or enlistment in the military. The mentoring relationships were more explicitly focused on supporting the youth in their attainment of the specific goals they had established for themselves in the program, unlike many mentoring programs in which the greatest emphasis is placed on the development of the emotional connection between the mentor and the youth. Finally, the RP in which the youth are taken out of their community may also contribute significantly to the importance of the mentor in the youth's life when the relationship begins.

The study's limitations notwithstanding, the findings indicate that YIM is worth a closer look and that it may have some benefits over traditional matching procedures. YIM may address some of the long-standing problems faced by more traditional programs, such as the difficulty recruiting sufficient numbers of mentors and the high rate of premature endings. Adolescents and families who are less inclined to seek out mentors through traditional mentoring programs in which the youth is matched with an adult previously unknown to them may be more open to formalizing existing ties with adults they already know. It may also serve to build new or strengthen the youth's existing ties with prosocial adults in their own communities and offer them critical forms of support as they navigate the transition to adulthood.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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