



“Who Knows Me the Best and Can Encourage Me the Most?”: Matching and Early Relationship Development in Youth-Initiated Mentoring Relationships with System-Involved Youth

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Renée Spencer¹, Grace Gowdy¹, Alison L. Drew¹,
and Jean E. Rhodes²

Abstract

Youth-initiated mentoring (YIM), in which youth select adults from within their communities to serve as mentors in relationships that are formalized through mentoring programs, has the potential to redress problems faced by many mentoring programs that could adversely affect system-involved youth, such as volunteer attrition and premature match closures. However, only a few programs have implemented YIM, and there is little research on this approach. This qualitative interview study examines the formation of YIM relationships and how they are experienced by mentors ($n = 14$), youth ($n = 17$), and the youths' parent/guardian ($n = 6$). Youth tended to select adults whom they had encountered through school or social services. Findings indicate that the YIM selection process contributed to mentor, youth, and parent/guardian investment in the mentoring relationship and

¹Boston University, MA, USA

²University of Massachusetts Boston, USA

Corresponding Author:

Renée Spencer, Boston University, 264 Bay State Rd., Boston, MA 02215, USA.

Email: rspenc@bu.edu

to the youth's rapid development of feelings of closeness and trust in the mentor. Knowing that mentors would be nonjudgmental, trustworthy, and dedicated appeared to facilitate positive relationship development, which is important given the difficulty of engaging and serving system-involved youth in mentoring programs.

Keywords

youth-initiated mentoring, volunteer retention, relationship development, foster care, juvenile justice, qualitative research

Youth-initiated mentoring (YIM) is an innovative approach in which youth select adults from within their existing social networks to serve as mentors in formalized mentoring relationships. Like natural mentoring relationships, youth connect with adults they have encountered in their daily lives; however, YIM formalizes these connections by recruiting the adult identified by the youth to serve as that youth's mentor under the auspices of a formal mentoring program. The adult is screened and trained, and there are programmatic expectations for meetings and regular monitoring of the relationship. Although only a handful of programs have implemented this approach, it has the potential to redress some long-standing problems faced by many mentoring programs, such as volunteer attrition, premature match closures, and low to modest effect sizes, particularly for higher risk youth (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013). It is also an approach that may be particularly well-suited to the needs of system-involved youth, namely, those in the foster care and juvenile justice systems. Recruiting adults who are embedded within youth's existing social networks and already known to the youth to serve as formal mentors may increase the likelihood that these youth will participate in a mentoring program and may contribute to the more rapid development of close, meaningful, and effective mentoring relationships. However, little research on YIM exists (see Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer, Tugenberg, Ocean, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2016, for exceptions), and no research to date captures participants' experiences of these relationships from multiple perspectives (i.e., mentor, youth, and youth's parent/guardian).

YIM represents a significant departure from how formal mentoring typically has been conceptualized and carried out, most notably by having youth identify their own potential mentors. Mentoring programs have traditionally recruited a pool of adults from which to match interested youth. However, youth and family interest in mentoring far outpaces volunteer recruitment

efforts, and as a consequence, youth can be faced with long (1-2 years) waits for a mentor. This is problematic for any youth but may be especially so for system-involved youth.

Furthermore, when youth are matched through formal mentoring programs, they are typically paired with adults from outside their own communities (Garringer, McQuillin, & McDaniel, 2017) and with whom they have no prior relationship. This has been identified as a significant drawback to the potential effectiveness of formal mentoring programs for system-involved youth, given the potential for these relationships to end prematurely and not offer youth the consistent and enduring support needed (Greeson, 2013; Taussig & Weiler, 2017). Indeed, a robust literature has been developing on the benefits of natural mentoring relationships for foster care youth, which are developed outside of formal mentoring programs (Ahrens et al., 2011; Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Courtney & Lyons, 2009; Munson & McMillen, 2009; Munson, Smalling, Spencer, Scott, & Tracy, 2010; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). However, as not all system-involved youth have the access or ability to seek out natural mentoring relationships, we need alternative means of facilitating these relationships more formally. By working with youth to identify adults with whom they already have some familiarity, YIM has the potential to address some of the significant barriers to formal mentoring relationships for system-involved youth while also capitalizing on the potential benefits, such as scaffolding of help-seeking behavior, screening and training of mentors, and monitoring of these relationships.

YIM and the Relational and Developmental Needs of System-Involved Youth

Mentoring has been identified as a promising strategy for promoting more positive outcomes for youth involved in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems (Chan & Henry, 2013; Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010; Taussig & Weiler, 2017; Tolan et al., 2013). By offering the kind of social support that all youth need (Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011), mentoring may be a particularly valuable resource for system-involved youth, who tend to have unstable living circumstances that contribute to significant disruptions in their social networks (Osgood, Foster, & Courtney, 2010; Zinn, Palmer, & Nam, 2017).

However, access to continuous relationships is just one factor that influences the development of a support network; youth also have to be open to engaging in new relationships. Many system-involved youth have experienced maltreatment and other significant disruptions in their caregiving

relationships, which can contribute to feelings of mistrust and interfere with the development of new connections (Geenen & Powers, 2007). Moreover, developing trust takes time, especially for more relationally vulnerable youth (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005), and requires opportunities for the person to be observed, so that their trustworthiness may be assessed (Levin, Whitener, & Cross, 2006; Lewicki, Tomlinson, & Gillespie, 2006). Levine (2016) has defined trust in mentor-youth relationships as “the willingness of a youth to rely on and confide in a mentor . . . formed through the relational experiences of reliability in word and deed, honesty, and emotional sensitivity and protection from emotional harm” (pp. 1-2). Although some youth do indeed appear to develop trust in mentors they are matched with through formal programs (Levine, 2016), relationships that end prematurely may never make it to this stage of development (DeWit et al., 2016; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Kupersmidt, Stump, Stelter, & Rhodes, 2017; Spencer, 2007; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, Walsh, & Drew, 2017). Such relationships tend to have little to no effect and may even serve to make matters worse for already vulnerable youth by introducing yet another disappointing relationship with an adult into their lives (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). By having system-involved youth select their own mentors, ostensibly choosing adults in whom they already have some degree of trust, YIM may bypass some early, fragile stages of relationship development, potentially setting these relationships up for greater likelihood of success.

YIM and Mentor Recruitment and Retention

Despite concerted outreach efforts over the past decade, recruiting enough volunteers to meet the demand for mentoring remains a significant problem (Raposa, Dietz, & Rhodes, 2017). In a recent national survey, mentor recruitment was identified as the top challenge faced by programs (Garringer et al., 2017). The research on volunteerism more broadly has shown that people who are directly asked are more likely to volunteer than those reached through less personal campaigns (Musick & Wilson, 2008), and there may be something particularly potent and motivating about being invited by the direct recipient rather than by a service organization.

Mentor retention is another significant challenge in the promotion of close and enduring formal youth mentoring relationships. Many adults enter into mentoring with high expectations for the experience and the difference they will be able to make in the life of a child (Spencer, 2007; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, et al., 2017; Spencer, Drew, Walsh, & Kanchewa, 2017). The reality of mentoring, however, can be much more mundane and challenging,

particularly in the early stages when mentors and youth may struggle to find common ground (Spencer, 2007). Unrealistic expectations on the part of mentors and feeling overwhelmed and/or underappreciated can lead to early match endings (Herrera, DuBois, & Grossman, 2013; Kupersmidt et al., 2017; Spencer, 2007; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, et al., 2017). The relational vulnerabilities of system-involved youth—namely, the negative beliefs about their worth as a person and about the intentions and dependability of others—can make forging meaningful connections with these youth challenging for adult mentors (Spencer et al., 2010; Taussig & Weiler, 2017).

A recent stage model of the volunteering process more generally highlights multiple stages and transitions volunteers go through before feeling proficient at, and rewarded by, the activity (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008)—a process that takes time. Mentors who volunteer because they are selected by a youth may bypass what has been called the “new volunteer” stage, marked by ambiguity about one’s role and relationships with the recipient(s) of the service and instead begin the mentoring relationship closer to the “established volunteer” stage, at which point there tends to be greater role clarity and emotional involvement and investment (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Adults who agree to serve as mentors in a YIM program, where they already have some knowledge of the young person with whom they are matched, may also enter into these relationships with more realistic expectations that are based on their own previous experiences of the youth rather than on general and potentially more romanticized ideas of helping a young person they have not yet met or negative preconceived notions about the attitudes, behaviors, and needs of system-involved youth.

Furthermore, recent research on interpersonal relationships more generally has found that adults are more likely to feel committed to, and thus are more likely to persist in, important relationships when they feel that their partner is invested in the relationship (Joel, Gordon, Impett, MacDonald, & Keltner, 2013). The youth’s initiative and interpersonal risk involved in selecting and inviting the mentor may serve to signal some level of investment in the relationship to the mentor. A sense of pride in being recruited, combined with a shared history and/or connections, may lead adults to feel a stronger sense of commitment to the young person relative to those matched by programs. This could contribute to the relationship starting out with a higher level of commitment on the part of both mentor and youth.

Previous Research on YIM

Some research does point to the promise of YIM for improving mentoring relationship duration and quality with higher risk youth. A study of the

National Guard Youth Challenge Program (NGYCP)—an intensive, residential program for youth who have dropped out of high school and are unemployed—found that the YIM relationships established as a part of this program were enduring, with 74% of participants reporting contact with their mentors at the 21-month follow-up and 56% reporting contact at the 38-month follow-up (Schwartz et al., 2013). This is substantially longer than formal mentoring relationships, with a national poll indicating that most mentoring relationships last an average of 9 months and only 38% last more than 12 months (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006). Interestingly, youth who chose their own mentors were more likely to be in enduring relationships than those for whom parents or NGYCP staff made the selection (Schwartz et al., 2013). In a retrospective, qualitative interview study of YIM with former NGYCP participants (Spencer et al., 2016), participants indicated that selecting mentors who were already known to them contributed to their feeling comfortable with their mentors from the start and facilitated feelings of trust early in the relationship. A YIM approach may be particularly beneficial in this regard to youth who are transitioning out of institutional systems that may have been physically distant from their original neighborhoods. Adults in these contexts may represent healthy touch points to former communities and school systems, providing needed stability and familiarity.

In essence, YIM represents a promising, cost-effective, and scalable approach to youth mentoring, both as an embedded and a stand-alone program. To date, however, most of the research on YIM has been conducted in the context of one program—the NGYCP, and these studies have not been specifically designed to explore YIM. Consequently, little or no information exists on the factors contributing to youth's selection of adults to serve in the mentor role; why adults agree to the commitment, the quality, activities, and intensity of the ensuing YIM relationships; and the role and reactions of parents to this new approach. Research is therefore needed to understand the actual experience and impacts of YIM.

Present Study

This study takes a closer look at the formation of YIM relationships for system-involved youth and how they are experienced by the participants. This study also extends the existing research by examining YIM under more typical conditions for mentoring relationships, rather than embedded within the context of a highly intensive intervention program as NGYCP. The specific research questions were as follows:

Research Question 1: Whom do youth select to serve as their mentors and why?

Research Question 2: Why do the adults selected agree to serve as mentors?

Research Question 3: What is the nature of the relationships that ensue?

Method

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited from two mentoring programs participating in a pilot of YIM in a midwestern city. Both agencies had established mentoring programs but were piloting YIM. Program 1 served youth who were first-time offenders in the juvenile justice system and referred as part of a diversion program. Program 2's traditional mentoring program focused on homeless and runaway youth who were transitioning to independent living. For the YIM pilot, this program recruited youth involved in or recently aged out of the child welfare system and transitioning to independent living. Program 1 required mentors and youth to be of the same gender; Program 2 allowed for cross-gender matches if it was preferred by the youth and approved, when appropriate, by the parent/guardian. Ultimately, this sample includes one cross-gender match with a male youth and female mentor.

Mentoring program staff interviewed all youth who were referred to the program. Program 1 required that the youth's parent/guardian be present for the interview and agree to the nominated mentor because all youth served were minors and these practices were in line with the practices in their traditional mentoring program. Because Program 2 served mostly youth who were legally adults, the youth was usually interviewed alone. However, in some cases, typically when the youth was a minor and lived with a parent/guardian, that parent/guardian was also interviewed; if the youth was a minor, the parent/guardian had to sign off on the mentor selected. Staff coached youth on choosing a mentor (see the "Results" section) and then reached out to nominated mentors. Mentors, who were interested, were screened and trained by mentoring program staff. Once mentors were approved, mentoring program staff met with the youth, mentor, and sometimes the youth's parent/guardian (a requirement for Program 1, optional for Program 2) to go over program policies and officially start the mentoring relationship. All YIM matches were one-on-one, community-based relationships, meaning that once relationships were formalized through the YIM program, mentors and youth were expected to meet in the community at least once per month, scheduling and choosing

activities on their own. All match parties were asked to make a 1-year initial commitment to the relationship during which mentoring agency staff were supposed to check in regularly to provide monitoring and support.

In total, 17 youth (11 female) and 14 mentors (nine female) were interviewed, representing 18 mentor-youth matches. For 13 of these matches, both the mentor and youth were interviewed (see Table 1). Parent/guardians of the youth ($n = 6$, all female) were invited to participate only if they were involved in the matching process, as determined by program staff. At the time of the interviews, the youth were 15 to 25 years old ($M = 18.38$, $SD = 2.70$). Mentors were 21 to 58 years old ($M = 38.00$, $SD = 10.71$). Parent/guardians were 29 to 47 years old ($M = 37.83$, $SD = 10.71$). Parent/guardians were 29 to 47 years old ($M = 37.83$, $SD = 6.74$). Youth were racially and ethnically diverse, with 41.2% identifying as White, 23.5% as Black, 29.4% as Multiracial, and 5.9% as Hispanic. The majority of mentors identified as White (78.6%), with 14.3% as Black and 7.1% as Hispanic. Of the pairs interviewed, 61.5% had similar racial/ethnic backgrounds. The parents interviewed were racially and ethnically diverse: 33.3% Black, 33.3% Hispanic, 16.0% White, and 16.0% Multiracial. A majority of mentors (71.4%) had a household income of above US\$50,000, while a majority of parents (83.3%) had a household income of below US\$50,000. All pairs were matched less than 1 year at the time of the interviews, with an average match length of 3.8 months ($SD = 2.6$).

Procedures

All mentors and youth in active YIM relationships from the two mentoring programs were invited to participate in the study; parent/guardians were invited if program staff identified that they were involved in mentor selection. Each participant completed a one-time, in-depth (Johnson, 2002), semi-structured (Seidman, 1991) interview. The majority of the interviews were completed in person (64.9%); the remainder were conducted by telephone. All participants received a US\$50 gift card for their participation. Interview questions focused on the participant's expectations of YIM, their experience of the matching process, and their perceptions of the development of the formal mentoring relationship. Participants were asked questions such as "What did you think about the mentoring program when you first learned about it?" and "How would you describe your relationship with your mentee?" All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were then verified for accuracy and de-identified before analysis, with participant names replaced by pseudonyms. All study procedures were approved by the institutional review board at the first author's university.

Table 1. Participant^a Demographic Characteristics by Match and Mentoring Program.

	Match	Role	Gender ^b	Age	Race/ethnicity
Program 1	Match 1	Mentor	Female	37	White
		Youth	Female	15	Black
		P/G	Female	47	Black
	Match 2	Mentor	Female	48	White
		Youth	Female	18	White
	Match 3	Mentor	Male	32	Hispanic
		Youth	Male	16	Hispanic
		P/G	Female	36	Hispanic
	Match 4	Mentor	Female	58	White
		Youth	Female	15	White
		P/G	Female		Hispanic
	Match 5	Mentor	Male	44	Black
		Youth	Male	15	Black
		P/G	Female	42	Black
	Program 2	Match 1	Mentor	Male	30
Youth			Male	19	Multiracial
Match 2		Mentor	Female	37	Black
		Youth	Female	22	Multiracial
Match 3		Mentor	Male	30	White
		Youth	Male		
Match 4		Mentor	Female	43	White
		Youth	Female	25	Multiracial
Match 5		Mentor	Female		White
		Youth	Female	21	
Match 6		Mentor	Female		Black
		Youth	Female	20	
Match 7		Mentor	Female	56	White
	Youth	Male	20	White	
Match 8	Mentor	Male		Multiracial	
	Youth	Male	18		
Match 9	Mentor	Male	21	White	
	Youth	Male	17	Multiracial	
Match 10	Mentor	Female	31	White	
	Youth	Female	17	White	
	P/G	Female	32	Multiracial	
Match 11	Mentor	Female	37	White	
	Youth	Female	16	White	
	P/G	Female	29	White	
Match 12	Mentor	Female	28	White	
	Youth	Female	18	White	
Match 13	Mentor	Female		Black	
	Youth	Female	17		

^aP/G: parent/guardian, only listed if participated in an interview.

^bGender provided by mentoring program if match party did not complete an interview.

Data analysis. A multistep thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted with all 37 interviews (17 youth, 14 mentors, and six parent/guardian) to examine how youth selected the adult mentors, why the adults agreed to serve as mentors, and the nature of the ensuing relationships. An initial codebook was developed by two research team members, who conducted the majority of the interviews, drawing from the interview protocol, initial impressions of the data, and previous research on YIM. Initial codes addressed broad areas of interest related to the research questions, including youth motivation, and family involvement in mentor selection and mentor engagement. The codebook was continuously evaluated and refined based on topics and themes identified during the coding process. All available interviews associated with a match were coded together by one coder using NVivo. Once coding for a match was complete, the coder constructed a narrative summary (Way, 1998), summarizing and synthesizing the participants' perspectives and experiences of the YIM relationship. One team member served as the master coder, reviewing all coding and narrative summaries to ensure consistency across cases and coders. Coders met weekly throughout the coding process to review and address questions about coding, discuss cases, and identify emerging themes. Two team members then reviewed the 18 narrative summaries to identify major themes related to the research questions (i.e., whom the youth selected as their mentors and why; why the mentor agreed; and the nature of the relationship that developed). A conceptually clustered matrix (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) was constructed to identify themes across cases.

Results

With guidance from program staff and sometimes input from parent/guardians, youth tended to select adults whom they had encountered through school or social services (see Table 2). Youth described YIM as appealing, in part, because they could select mentors who were already familiar with their histories, were not judgmental of them, and had previously demonstrated belief in and acceptance of them ("she didn't look at me like I was damaged"). Although many mentors described initial hesitancy due to concerns about the time commitment or shifts in boundaries from their prior role with the youth, most agreed to serve because of the strength of their previous connection or feeling positively about the youth who nominated them. Many mentors also indicated they intended the commitment to be long term. The investment in the relationship was shared by the youth, which seemed to help these matches develop quickly into what were described as strong and meaningful relationships.

Table 2. Mentor's Previous Role in Youth's Life (N = 18).

Role	n
School employee	
Teacher of youth/sibling	4
Counselor	1
After-school program staff	1
Social services worker	
Residential home worker	2
Caseworker	1
Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA)	1
Independent living coordinator	1
Church activities	2
Friend network	2
Extended family member	2
Former foster parent	1

Youth Motivation to Participate in YIM

Youth involved in the juvenile justice system first learned about the YIM opportunity through diversion program staff as one of many options available to them. Youth involved in or aging out of foster care were affiliated with a separate program providing life skills training, leadership opportunities, and other supports. In both cases, youth were shown a brief video describing the YIM approach to mentor selection and had the option explained by staff. If interested in learning more or enrolling in the mentoring program, the youth were then referred to the appropriate program. The program serving youth involved in the juvenile justice system required parent/guardian involvement in the enrollment and mentor selection process. The program serving foster care youth included the parent/guardian if they played an active role in the youth's life (typically if the youth was a minor and lived with a guardian).

Many youth said that they were interested in mentoring because it offered them someone to talk to and would get them out of the house and doing fun activities with their mentor. Some of these youth said that they did not have an obvious person to turn to in their life already, so they could use a formal mentor. A few youth said that a mentor sounded particularly appealing because it offered them someone outside of their family to whom they could turn. As Bailey, a youth who would soon age out of foster care, explained, "I need my people to be there on my team. To help me become a better person. So that I don't feel alone." Many youth also noted that YIM was

more attractive than traditional mentoring because it gave them a say in the selection of their mentor. As one youth, Louise, said, “you get to pick your own person. So more than likely you are going to pick somebody you already have a connection with.”

Youth were also interested in YIM as a way to maintain or revive their connections to influential adults. When asked why YIM had appealed to them, almost all cited its potential to help them maintain or restart their relationship with an important adult. Among those who were in contact with their mentor at the time they were officially matched (about half of the youth), a motivation for participating in YIM was formalizing that connection—to “build a more structured relationship with someone who was . . . a good influence on me . . . because it’s really hard to set that up yourself” (Chase). For those who had lost contact, it offered an opportunity to reconnect, which was not likely to happen without facilitation by the program. As Davide explained, “It’s really hard to get back in contact with someone from your old high school.” There was general consensus that it was hard to make these connections on their own.

Parent/guardians interviewed expressed similar reasons for wanting the youth to be matched with a mentor. As Ella’s guardian explained, she wanted Ella, who had been in foster care for many years, to “have somebody that she can open up to a little more because she is pretty closed off.” Prior to the formal mentoring relationship, it was really nice for Ella to just have a grownup that she could go get ice cream with or do a craft project with and . . . somebody outside of . . . her family and our house . . . to talk to, [which she hoped would continue in their new mentoring relationship].

Youth Selection of Mentors

Mentoring program staff interviewed the youth, and sometimes the guardian, as part of the enrollment process. Staff explained the program qualifications for mentors (e.g., age, gender), and coached youth and guardians on what kind of person can make a good mentor. Staff worked with the youth to identify adults who had made a positive impact on their lives and with whom the youth would be interested in spending time.

With this scaffolding, the youth were able to generate lists of mentors that included adults they had encountered in a variety of ways. As one young person, Jessica, recalled,

When I had my meeting to see like who I wanted . . . It was like, “What is your interest? What do you like to do for fun? What do you have for your future?” They asked questions. So every time they asked me some questions, I think in my mind like, . . . “Who knows me the best and who can encourage me . . . the most?”

Prompts to consider past as well as present relationships with adults resulted in some youth being able to identify a number of adults who could well serve in this capacity. As Ashley described,

I just thought about people that . . . made a big impact in my life. Not even people that's related to me. People that I grew up in a foster care system [with] who genuinely wanted to see me succeed in something. And so I went for my therapist, my counselor . . . I went for my case worker . . . I met [mentor] at a group home.

Youth were intentional in whom they selected and most prioritized trust. They described discerning this in different ways. Some spoke of a gut feeling: "I knew, just like seeing it and hearing it in her voice, I knew she was honest" (Louise). Others relied on a sense of comfort: "I was comfortable talking to her like back then . . . so I knew I would be comfortable talking to her . . . now" (Alice). Many described the importance of a history of the mentor communicating acceptance of the youth. Louise, whose mentor was a past teacher, described such a moment:

[I've] always been in bad situations with people. It's hard for me to trust. When I would get in trouble, instead of . . . sending me to the principal's office, she would try to get down to the core emotion and why I was feeling that way . . . I remember I had like a big huge fit one day, and she told me . . . "you're safe here, I'm never going to let you down. Never going to hurt you. Never going to lie to you."

Similarly, youth felt they could trust their mentor because they did not judge them "for things (they)'ve already done" (Laura). Knowledge of the youth's past coupled with acceptance of them were cited as key to the youth experiencing these adults as trustworthy.

Some youth were assisted in the nomination process by their parent/guardian. All parent/guardians who participated in the selection process were required to give final approval of the mentor that the youth chose, but others went so far as to suggest potential mentors themselves or veto potential mentors they felt were not appropriate choices. Youth did not always agree with their parent/guardian in regard to who could make a good mentor. For example, Kade did not like his mom's suggestion that her coworker could be his mentor because he preferred a mentor who did not drink alcohol. On the other side was Laura's mom, who vetoed several of Laura's initial choices for her who mentor would be. Laura was angry about this at first but was happy to be matched with the mentor she and her mother ultimately agreed on. In the end, youth came to understand their parent/guardian's concerns and came to agree with their parent/guardian on who was a better nominee.

The parent/guardians who were most involved in selecting a mentor had specific criteria regarding who was acceptable. Two parents noted a preference for a mentor of the same ethnic background, while another wanted someone who was in a career their child would find interesting. Parent/guardians expressed preference for an adult with whom they were already comfortable letting their child spend time and someone who was mature and stable. All interviewed parent/guardians indicated that participating in the nomination process was a positive experience, as they appreciated having a say in selecting an adult they trusted to be the one to spend time with their child.

Mentor Motivation to Serve

The adults indicated that they felt honored to have been nominated by the youth but still carefully considered whether or not to agree to serve. Many indicated they considered their schedules, work-life balance, and work policies first. Samson, a youth group leader, reflected on his busy schedule and personal life before committing:

I wasn't sure 'cause I just got married as well, and so I wasn't sure how much time I'm gonna have with doing school and doing work and being married and all this stuff . . . I said, "You know, what? I'll carve out some time for him because . . . he looks up to me and . . . wants to get together with me so much."

Those adults who had met the youth through work (e.g., teachers) indicated they had to consider their employer's policies before committing. Many also wanted further information about the handling of issues such as understanding the kinds of the activities mentors and youth typically engage in, whether they could drive the youth places and the implications of seeing the youth outside of office hours. For example, Lisa, a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) worker, expressed concerns about liability in the relationship if there was an accident or if she ever had an issue with her mentee's parents. In her previous role with her mentee, the organization she worked with protected her so it was important for her to understand the procedures in place before agreeing.

For most mentors, the main reason they ultimately agreed to serve was because they had been asked by that particular youth. Seth, a teacher, said, ". . . at first I thought, boy I'm overwhelmed . . . but when I heard that it was Chase, I was more than willing to help him." Lucy, another mentor who was also her mentee's former caseworker, described the difference being asked by the youth made in this way:

It wasn't like it was a professional person thinking that I would be a good fit for her, it was Bailey remembering me and asking if I could do it. And how do you say no to that? I can't imagine saying no.

Some also spoke to how they saw serving as a mentor to the youth as a natural extension of their former role in the youth's life. As Seth said,

I don't think everyone can do this . . . but I think that . . . teachers especially have a sort of natural knack, as long as they're passionate about wanting to help the student . . . to actually progress in their lives, not just a means of their contract . . . I think that's something that's very important . . . it's helped me to be pretty successful with Chase thus far.

A couple of other mentors were compelled to serve not by the youth or their previous role per se but because of a personal commitment to serve. Orlando, a friend of his mentee's parents, described how he viewed his role in his community:

I do everything I can. So . . . if somebody initiated the other way . . . I'd probably say, "Yes." Because obviously it sounds like a privilege for me. You know that you're being called . . . to serve somebody . . . Be a server to the community.

Importantly, these mentors' narratives made evident that they were not likely to have signed up to be a mentor on their own. Several noted they had considered it but never followed through. As Orlando said,

I think I thought about it before . . . But never actually went through with it. Because I get caught up, like I said, doing other things like sports and get involved with the community, and volunteering, and taking classes.

Whether the adult agreed because they were nominated or because of the specific mentee they would be matched with, these youth identified adults who were not likely to have served as a mentor in a formal program otherwise.

Nature and Quality of the YIM Relationships

Notable in the participants' descriptions of the relationships was how strong they sounded right from the start. This seemed attributable to mentors and youth beginning these relationships with realistic expectations based on actual knowledge of one another, youth's feelings of trust and comfort with the mentors, mentors' knowledge that they had already made a difference in the youth's life, and mentors' investment in the youth.

These adults and youth entered their formal mentoring relationships with realistic expectations based on their knowledge of the other person and actual experience with one another. As Alice's parent said,

They kind of like know each other . . . because they had that relationship in junior high, and it's like, when you know somebody from your past, and they come back in your life . . . It's like the perfect match.

In addition, mentors and youth seemed to have clear ideas about ways these adults could potentially have a positive impact on the youth's lives. Many mentors talked explicitly about goal setting, and supporting their mentee in the transition to adulthood.

Having a prior relationship also meant the pair got to skip over the initial getting-to-know-you phase. This seemed especially important for many of these system-involved youth who had told their story multiple times. Lucy spoke to the importance of this for her relationship with her mentee Bailey:

I think that makes her more comfortable too, because . . . every time she's had a new therapist, or a new case worker, or a new whoever, they . . . always start with, "Okay. Tell me about . . . what you've been through." And then she has to tell that story so many times. And I know she's sick of it, because she's told me that. So, with me, it was like, we met at a restaurant, and we just started talking about normal things, and she didn't have to explain herself or who she is or what she's been through.

All of the youth talked about beginning these formal relationships with a sense of basic trust in their mentor. As discussed above, this was one of the main reasons they had nominated the adult for this role. This trust was based in part on the youth feeling like these adults had some understanding of their life circumstances and were not judgmental of them. Louise described how strongly she felt about her mentor at the beginning of the formal match in this way:

Out of everybody I've met, she's . . . the only one that really understands me . . . I can really be myself around her . . . She knows almost everything about me because she taught me, in 5th grade. So she knows a lot about my background, my family history, and all that . . . I just . . . felt really comfortable with her.

This sense of comfort, according to Louise, has helped their formal mentoring relationship develop by skipping those first few months of trust-building. Having a sense of trust and comfort in their mentors right from the start seemed to also contribute to the youth being more open to the mentors' continued influence. For example, one mentee, Ashley, described how direct her mentor can be with her, and she seemed to not only expect it but also to appreciate it: "Sometimes I'll tell Meredith, 'Okay, just let me have it. I know it's coming. Let me have it.'"

Another distinctive feature of these relationships was that the adults began the formal mentoring relationship knowing they had already made a positive difference in the youth's life by virtue of being selected to serve as their mentor. As one mentor, Seth, put it,

At first I didn't know why they maybe thought that I was qualified, but when I realized it was Chase that initiated it, it made sense to me . . . because we had talked and that he knew me fairly well and trusted me. That's what made it click in my mind.

This vote of confidence from Chase gave Seth the reassurance he needed to take on this role.

Mentors also conveyed a high level of investment in the youth and a commitment to the relationship. For example, one mentor, Will, who was a former caseworker, talked about how important it was for him to be committed to the relationship in light of the youth's prior experiences and vulnerabilities:

I knew that Tremayne had quite a bit of challenges, and I thought to myself going in, "This is not something I can do lukewarm" . . . It's something where you really have to . . . be able to do [it] wholeheartedly. And not just wholeheartedly . . . It also comes with . . . all of the background and all the information that I had . . . known of Tremayne.

Importantly, these youth sensed this commitment to *them* and appreciated it. Many were aware that volunteering to serve as their mentor was well beyond what had been previously required of these adults, and this mattered to the youth. When asked what her mentor brought to the relationship that other people did not, Bailey explained the difference between her mentor and other adults in her life:

All the others are court appointed. And I don't really have . . . I don't want to say "a friend" because that's not what she's there for . . . But, I mean just someone I don't have to call because it's court appointed. They were fit with me. They were only there when I needed them. She was there because she wants to be there. That she's someone [who] cares rather than being appointed to my team.

In most cases, the mentor, youth, and parents were interested in a long-term match and expected the relationship to last. They talked about their intentions to continue their relationship regardless of their status in the formal mentoring program, and some spoke about feeling committed to each other

indefinitely. One match, however, indicated that they had not yet thought about their long-term plan, and a few others talked about maintaining this relationship until a certain goal was met (e.g., aging out of foster care, graduating college).

Also notable was how these mentors seemed to take bumps or challenges in the relationship in stride. The mentors spoke about communication and scheduling challenges, but they were not described in a way that indicated these challenges posed a threat to the relationship or were being personalized in any way. One mentor, Mary, a former school counselor for her mentee, talked about being stood up by her mentee. Her account of this illustrates how a situation that could have become a rupture in their relationship was dealt with immediately and directly:

Well, I texted her and said, you know, "Where are you? What's going on?" And through a series of events, I spent about an hour trying to get connected with her. She was at work. But I spent about an hour and I, it wasn't a month where I had a whole extra hour . . . I just explained to her that . . . it wasn't that great for me, and it would have been kinder if she would have been a little more . . . forthcoming in helping me get to her so we could just spend the time . . . being together as opposed to an hour of me getting to her.

Another mentor, Lisa, described her response to behaviors on the part of her mentee that could be interpreted as disinterest or lack of engagement:

There's been times where she's just been in [a] bad mood and . . . I think . . . I talk too much. Like if I get . . . talking with her or asking her questions, and she just gets irritated . . . That's funny, because it's probably how it was with my mom growing up . . . she'll just be like, "Ugh, enough questions," and I'm just like, "Whoa, really?" [Laughs]

This mentor, having known her mentee for 3 years prior to beginning their formal mentoring relationship, appeared to reflect on her own behavior that might be eliciting the youth's reaction ("talk(ing) too much") and was able to step into her mentee's shoes to be able to laugh it off, rather than questioning whether the youth liked her or was invested in the relationship.

Discussion

The close examination of mentor, youth, and parent/guardian perspectives on matching and early relationship development in these relationships indicates that YIM is indeed a promising approach to formal mentoring relationships for system-involved youth. As has been found in previous studies of YIM

(Schwartz et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2016), these youth participants were able to identify appropriate adults to serve as mentors, with scaffolding and support from the mentoring programs and guidance from parents. However, this study also illuminated the ways that YIM not only influenced who was selected to serve as mentors but also how these relationships formed and began to develop. Of particular importance for system-involved youth, the YIM approach built on the youth's previous feelings of trust in the mentor and appeared to contribute to high levels of mentor commitment. Thus, the findings from this exploratory, descriptive study lend additional insight into relational processes that may be distinctive to YIM and may be particularly beneficial for system-involved youth.

With regard to mentor selection, striking in these mentors' narratives was their uniform reporting that they were unlikely to have signed up for a mentoring program had they not been asked by a specific youth. Even among those who indicated they had considered volunteering in a mentoring program, all said they had never gotten around to it, and most had felt their lives were too busy. This indicates that having youth identify potential mentors can help programs tap into a different pool of adult mentors than is being reached through current recruitment efforts, which is particularly valuable in light of the limited supply of adult volunteers (Raposa et al., 2017). Interestingly, however, this approach did not result in the recruitment of mentors who are demographically different from those who typically participate in formal mentoring programs (Raposa et al., 2017). Most of the mentors selected by the youth in this study were predominantly White and middle income.

In addition to reaching adults who were unlikely to have signed up for a more traditional mentoring program, YIM also seemed to hold particular appeal for the youth participants. They spoke about how having a say in who their mentor would be was part of what motivated them to decide to participate in the mentoring program. The encouragement of youth voice and choice in YIM may be especially important for system-involved youth, who may be in great need of the kind of support a mentor can offer but also reluctant to enroll and slow to trust a new adult. Many of the youth participants had endured a series of short-lived or tumultuous relationships with adults of varying responsiveness and dependability, which can result in youth feeling fatigued, wary about forming relationships, and doubtful about the helpfulness of new relationships with adults who are strangers to them (Kupersmidt et al., 2017; Sander, Sharkey, Olivarri, Tanigawa, & Mauseth, 2010; Zilberstein & Spencer, 2017). As in natural mentoring relationships, YIM afforded these system-involved youth the opportunity to select adults they already knew, who knew a bit about their past, and with whom they felt some connection. However, the formality of the program and staff involvement

facilitated youth reconnecting or transforming their relationships with these adults into mentoring relationships, which many of these youth said was difficult to do on their own. Youth voice in the selection of their mentors is also more in sync with the developmental needs of older adolescents who tend to be seeking greater autonomy within their supportive relationships (Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008).

The youth's exertion of voice and choice in the matching process also appeared to influence the formation and early development of these relationships in a number of important ways. The youth described intentionally selecting adults in whom they already experienced some level of trust and confidence and whom they thought would be understanding rather than judgmental of them despite their involvement in the foster care or juvenile justice system. Their narratives indicated that this resulted in most of these relationships beginning with some foundation of trust already in place, something that can take more than a year for any adolescent to develop with a stranger (Levin et al., 2006; Lewicki et al., 2006; Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005; Spencer, 2006) and can be especially challenging for system-involved youth (Geenen & Powers, 2007).

The youth selection process also seemed to contribute to high levels of commitment on the part of mentors. Many described how meaningful it was to them to have been invited by the young person. Unlike mentors recruited and selected by programs, who tend to volunteer to serve as a mentor in the hopes of making a meaningful difference (Spencer, 2006), these mentors began their relationship being chosen by the youth, which they said made them feel like they already had made a positive difference in the life of that young person. Furthermore, whereas volunteers, both in general and in mentoring programs more specifically, report being motivated to volunteer for a variety of reasons, sometimes selfish (Caldarella, Gomm, Shatzer, & Wall, 2010; Clary et al., 1998; Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 2013), the participants in this study all indicated that their primary motivation was to be able to offer support to the specific youth who nominated them. This level of commitment and investment on the part of these YIM mentors suggests that this approach may indeed hold potential for addressing volunteer attrition that results in premature closures, a significant problem with formal mentoring programs that has been identified as being especially problematic for system-involved youth (Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010; Taussig & Weiler, 2017). Having been selected by the youth was perceived by these adults as a strong signal of the youth's own investment in the relationship, which may have contributed to the high level of commitment to the relationship voiced by these mentors, as the interpersonal relationship literature would predict (Joel et al., 2013).

The YIM selection process also resulted in youth and adults entering their matches with expectations for these relationships that were based on their actual experiences with one another. Notably absent in these mentors' narratives were expressions of the kinds of frustration and disappointment that have been observed in mentor reports of the early stages of both enduring and early ending traditionally matched mentoring relationships when the actual experience of mentoring was different from what the mentor had imagined it would be (Spencer, 2006, 2007; Spencer et al., 2017). Consequently, these relationships appeared to have taken off right from the start, skipping over what can be an extended, potentially awkward "getting to know you" phase in traditionally matched pairs, in which mentors can wonder whether the youth appreciates or even likes them, and youth can be uncertain about who the adult is and how responsive they will be (Spencer et al., 2017).

Also notable was the way YIM involved the youth's parent/guardian in the mentor selection process. As with the youth, being involved in the selection process gave parents a voice and choice, and all interviewed expressed how much they appreciated having this opportunity. In addition, the process empowered some parents to suggest mentors and to feel comfortable vetoing mentors they felt were not a good fit. The tendency for programs to focus more narrowly on the mentor-youth dyad can result in parents being excluded from direct involvement in the mentoring process (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). Family engagement is among the top challenges identified by mentoring programs (Garringer et al., 2017). YIM offers one way to address this and to do so in a strengths-based way by aligning the interests of all participants and engaging parents as collaborators (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2015; Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014).

Implications for Practice

Results from this study suggest that YIM is a promising intervention to provide supportive adult relationships to system-involved youth within the context of formal mentoring programs and, in fact, may result in the involvement of both youth and mentors who would not have otherwise engaged in formal mentoring. Evidence suggests that with appropriate coaching from program staff, these youth are able to successfully identify potential mentors who are willing to serve. Programs considering implementing YIM practices should include the youth's parent/guardian in the process as appropriate, which may improve the parent's engagement in the program and support for the mentoring relationships. Similar to traditional mentoring, YIM programs need to interview and train mentors to prepare them for the expectations of this new type of relationship with a youth and set guidelines for this new role. Given

the rapid relationship development and strong commitment described by YIM youth and mentors, embracing a YIM model might reduce challenges in the relationship down the line, making supporting the matches over the long-term easier and less time-consuming for staff.

Implications for Research

Although these data lend significant insight into the formation of YIM relationships, the findings here are based on one-time retrospective interviews with mentors and youth gathered within the first year of the mentoring match. Prospective studies that track the development of these relationships over time and that follow them beyond the 1-year mark are needed to more fully assess relationship quality and to discern their durability. Furthermore, included here are only youth who decided to participate in a YIM program and were able to successfully identify a mentor, and those mentors who agreed to participate. This furthers our understanding of the relationships formed between mentors and youth who were successfully matched, but does not include those youth and adults who declined to participate or youth who were unable to identify a mentor, thereby restricting our understanding of some potential limitations of the YIM approach. Examinations of the effectiveness of YIM in promoting positive youth outcomes are also needed. Although previous work on YIM in the Youth ChalleNGe program indicates that this approach can be effective, no study of the effectiveness of YIM in a stand-alone program has been undertaken to date. Comparative studies of YIM and traditional matching, and program-level examinations of YIM implementation, would also offer important information about the relative value of making the programmatic changes needed to implement YIM. The findings here indicate that the examination of whether this approach may serve to address the significant problem of volunteer attrition faced by many traditional programs is warranted. There may also be benefits to the adults who are selected, including improvements in self-perception, sense of purpose, and civic engagement.

Conclusion

This exploratory, descriptive study lends insight into relational processes distinctive in YIM. Among the youth, mentors, and guardians studied here, this approach empowered the youth to identify a mentor on their own, which allowed them the opportunity to reflect on and define what attributes of a mentor they find most important. Knowing that mentors will be nonjudgmental, trustworthy, and dedicated appears to allow for positive relationship

development, which is important given the difficulty of serving these system-involved youth, who are among the most vulnerable. They are at the greatest risk of mentoring relationship failure but may also stand to gain the most when things go well.

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Author Biographies

Renée Spencer is professor and chair of the Human Behavior Department at the Boston University School of Social Work. Much of her research focuses on the

relational processes at work in more and less successful youth mentoring relationships, specifically examining the particular contributions mentors make to the mentoring process, how and why youth mentoring relationships end, and the role of parents in the mentoring process. She has also considered how to tailor mentoring to the meet the needs of special populations, including system-involved and military connected youth.

Grace Gowdy is a doctoral candidate studying informal mentorship for under-resourced adolescents. Her broader research agenda focuses on community and family influences on upward mobility.

Alison L. Drew is a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Sociology and Social Work program at Boston University. Her research is focused on understanding individual, relational and organizational factors that influence successful youth mentoring relationships. She has worked on numerous projects examining factors associated with successful and failed youth mentoring relationships and evaluating innovations at the program level.

Jean E. Rhodes is the Frank L. Boyden professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Her primary research interests include formal and informal mentoring relationships in the lives of adolescents and young adults.