

'She was like a mother and a father to me': searching for the ideal mentor for youth in care

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies of youth in out-of-home placements have indicated that a successful mentoring relationship in care is associated with better emotional, educational and behavioural outcomes in adulthood. The goal of this exploratory qualitative study is to describe the profile of a staff member who is able to establish a meaningful relationship with youth in care through the perspectives of 20 young adults aged 21–26 who left care in Israel. Findings revealed that the staff member who formed meaningful relationships with youth was the staff member who was available to the youth and familiar with their personal backgrounds, who was able to see them as positive and trustworthy and to provide guidance and support from a non-judgmental approach. One of the study's conclusions is that staff members who were able to transform their connection with the youth into mentoring relationships were those who were able to make the youth feel as if they were the staff member's own children, and as a result feel cared for deeply and loved. The discussion addresses the barriers in forming a mentoring relationship with a formal professional and the ways to utilize these mentoring relationship components more effectively within the care system.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring relationships are among the most significant relationships that children develop with non-parental figures (Cavell *et al.* 2002). The concept mentor refers to a supportive adult who is significant to the child, who provides guidance, emotional and practical support, and who can serve as a role model and advocate in addition to or regardless of parents. Resilience studies suggest that a mentoring relationship leads to better outcomes among at-risk children and youth (Goldner & Mayseless 2009), highlighting the social, cognitive and affective processes through which mentoring relationships have the potential to strengthen outcomes in adulthood. As a result, programmes that seek to establish mentoring relationships between participating youth and non-parental adult volunteers are increasingly being employed with the goal of improving outcomes (Daining & DePanfilis 2007), and have been shown to be effective in promoting positive youth outcomes (DuBois *et al.* 2002; DuBois & Silverthorn 2005).

With regard to youth in the care system, studies of former foster youth found that the presence of an adult mentor was associated with improved outcomes in adulthood including overall health and better mental health (Ahrens *et al.* 2007, 2016), higher life satisfaction and lower involvement in risky behaviours such as unprotected sex, police involvement (Munson & McMillen 2009) and homelessness (Courtney & Lyons 2009). However, studies on mentoring relationships among youth in care are less consistent with regard to benefits when compared with other populations of youth (Spencer *et al.* 2010). One reason for this could be that in natural mentoring among youth in the general population the relationship is embedded in the young person's social network. This is different with youth in care, where natural mentors are not always part of the social network, similar to youth from underprivileged or risk populations (Rhodes 2002).

Prior studies on mentoring relationships among youth in foster care (Collins *et al.* 2010; Greeson *et al.* 2010) found three main categories of people with whom youth in care reported meaningful mentoring

relationships: family members, adults involved with the youth in an informal role and adults involved with the youth in a professional role within the care system. The current study deals with the latter and examines the skills and attributes former residents of youth villages value in staff and the way their 'formal relationships' can be formed into 'mentoring relationships' over time.

Youth in out-of-home placements live away from their families. Staying in care enables them to spend a lot of time with various staff members that can guide and support them during their adolescence and emerging adulthood (Sulimani-Aidan 2014). Therefore, although they are considered as part of the youth's formal support, staff in care have an enormous potential of becoming 'natural mentors' for the youth during their stay in care and after, especially because of the relatively high stability youth in care experience in Israel compared with other countries (Benbenishty 2008). However, in contrast to earlier studies in other youth populations that associate mentoring relationships with better outcomes, findings on the relationships between staff and youth in care and their future outcomes are inconsistent. While a number of studies have indicated that relationships with staff are associated with better adjustment after leaving care (Schofield & Beek 2005; Cashmore & Paxman 2006), other studies did not find any association between staff–youth relationships and better outcomes after the transition from care to adulthood (Schiff 2006; Dixon 2008; Sulimani-Aidan *et al.* 2013). Therefore, an essential question is how staff can establish profound relationships with youth in care: what are the qualities, traits and skills of the kind of 'ideal staff member' who can make a significant impact on the course of the youth's life?. This exploratory qualitative study addresses that aspect through the eyes of former residents of youth villages in Israel. It seeks to expand our understanding of the 'profile' of staff members who can form successful relationships, which support and guide youth in care and after, and discusses these relationships with reference to mentoring literature.

Rhodes (2005) model of mentoring relationships posits that a mentor–mentee relationship bond is formed through trust, empathy and mutual benefit, with the aim of eventually producing improvements in the youth's socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development. By exploring mentoring relationships from youth's own perspectives, the present study seeks to inform the design of mentoring programmes and so that mentoring relationships become more effective at helping youth in care achieve better outcomes and improve their prospect as adults.

Youth villages in Israel

Youth villages in Israel are a widespread form of out-of-home settings supervised by the Ministry of Education. They involve approximately 24 000 youths and are voluntary in most cases (National Council for the Child 2009).

Placements in youth villages in Israel are fairly stable compared with other styles of placements as in the US (Benbenishty 2008). Youth in these placements mostly come from immigrant families (Ethiopia and Former Soviet Union) and from underprivileged families with low socioeconomic status who are struggling with social and emotional problems and dealing with many difficulties in providing their children's needs in the context of their limited personal and environmental resources.

Youth villages in Israel include many staff members that support and guide the adolescents in different aspects of their lives. The youth interact most closely with their social counselors and 'housemothers' (women who live with the youth and are responsible for helping with their daily routine), but also with other professional staff such as social workers, teachers, volunteers (living in the youth villages), therapists, village nurse, etc.

Guided by an integrative educational–therapeutic approach, all staff members work together as a team in order to provide the youth's emotional, educational, social and functional needs. As part of a holistic working model, many of the staff members live in the youth villages and interact with the youth intensively day and night (Grupper & Romi 2011). Therefore, the variety and availability of staff members both formal (e.g. counselors) and informal (e.g. volunteers) increase the possibilities for the youth to gradually form 'natural mentoring' relationships with staff members.

Research questions

This study inquired into how young adults described their 'ideal' staff member in care settings, including their characteristics, skills and type of relationship formed with youth. Therefore the research questions are:

- 1 Who was the meaningful staff member for the youth while they were in care and why?
- 2 What makes a staff member good and meaningful to youth in care?

METHOD

Participants

The sample included 20 young adults aged 21–26 who were emancipated from youth villages in Israel.

Table 1 Young adult's demographics ($N = 20$)

Demographics	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	14	70
Female	6	30
Ethnicity		
Israel	8	40
Soviet Union	4	20
Ethiopia	4	20
Argentina	4	20
Age		
21–22	5	25
23–25	12	60
26 and older	3	15

Among the 20 care leavers, the majority were between ages 23 and 25. Three were 25 years and older and a quarter were between 21 and 22 years old. All the young adults left care at age 18; therefore, most of them left care five to seven years before the interview. The majority were young men ($N = 14$) and 6 were young women. Eight of the participants were born in Israel and more than half were immigrants from the Soviet Union ($N = 4$), Ethiopia ($N = 4$) and Argentina ($N = 4$) (Table 1).

With regards to their status in adulthood: a third were serving in military service (mandatory in Israel) and half were employed; almost 70% did not complete their high school diplomas; the majority (67%) were living at home with their parents. Nearly half (45%) stayed three to four years in care before emancipation.

Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of the Ministry of Education. After obtaining approval from the inspectors of the youth villages, the researcher was given the names and phone numbers of youth who left youth villages two to nine years previously ($N = 120$). The researcher then randomly approached the young adults over the phone, giving an explanation of the study goals and asking for their consent to participate in the study. This process was continued until 20 participants agreed to be interviewed. The twenty young adults who voluntarily agreed to take part in the study were interviewed over the phone. The selected participants had to have graduated on time, and they had to have stayed in care at least two years. Also, because youth villages include different ethnic groups, the sample included young adults from the most dominant groups (Israel, Soviet Union, Ethiopia and South America).

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed consisting of open-ended questions on the role and

characteristics of the meaningful staff members they had while in care. Two interviewers interviewed the young adults over the phone. Each interview lasted approximately 20–25 min. First, the young adults were asked about their own personal characteristics (age, length of time in care, current occupation). The young adults were then asked to think of a staff member who was meaningful to them and describe the reasons that made their relationship important and meaningful to them. The young adults were also asked more generally about the characteristics a good staff member should have in order to be good at their job. The questions were as follows: (i) Who was a meaningful staff member to you while you were in care? (ii) Why were they meaningful? (iii) What in your eyes makes a staff member good at their work?. The young adult's answers were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The main method used to analyse the interviews was theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006), which is used to identify patterns and themes within qualitative data. Using this analysis allows the use of pre-existing theoretical frameworks, such as in the area of mentoring relationships (Rhodes 2002, 2005; Rhodes *et al.* 2006). Analysis was performed by three readers (the two interviewers and the leading researcher) who interpreted the young adults' answers and extracted central themes that expressed the young adults' perceptions of the 'ideal staff member,' their skills and characteristics. The readers employed an incident-by-incident coding technique in which every portion of the interview transcript was read and coded for important themes. This was followed by a focused coding process during which the incident codes were re-read and analysed in order to identify larger themes (Charmaz 2006). During these phases, the readers analysed the interviews and then met to discuss themes and resolve any discrepancies by discussion. Finally, to further check the validity of the findings and to provide feedback to the residential care staff and to the participants, a written report describing the study findings was provided to the youth village, and the participants' feedback was integrated into the final data analysis.

RESULTS

Most meaningful staff member in care

The young adults were asked to think about the most significant staff member they had. Most of the young

adults ($N=15$) chose their social counselors as the most meaningful staff members for them. The youth village's principal was also mentioned as a meaningful staff member ($N=1$), as were housemothers ($N=1$). Teachers and volunteers (living on site) were mentioned too ($N=3$).

What makes a staff member meaningful?

The young adults' description of their meaningful staff member included several themes: the mentor's personal characteristics, sense of purpose as main motivation, the mentor's personal background, his/her availability, seeing the youth's positive sides and seeing them as trustworthy, and forming a personal and intimate relationship.

The staff's personal characteristics

Young adults mentioned frequently personal characteristics they thought a good staff member has to possess in order to build a meaningful relationship with youth in care. These personal traits included: patience, the ability to care and be truly concerned for them, sensitivity and loyalty. As one young adult stated: 'He (the counselor) kept every promise he made. He meant every word he said...' In addition, the best staff member was characterized as a person with a 'strong character' that is resistant to the burnout that this type of profession can lead to.

The young adults also thought that in order to form a meaningful relationship with youth in care, the staff member had to be a 'life coach' and a good listener, and to know how to approach and talk with youth despite age differences. In this regard they portrayed him/her as a person who knew when to be there for them at different crossroads and advise them.

The young adults also mentioned that an essential quality of staff working in care has to be the ability to set limits and discipline. They explained that a good staff member knows how to make youth understand that they should focus on their studies instead of wasting their time using drugs and alcohol. Looking retrospectively enabled the young adults to appreciate the limits their mentor set even though they resisted them while in care. One of the young adults said: 'My counselor wanted me to pay more attention to my studies and he was harsh with me on this... I had a difficult time then and I didn't complete my high school diploma... I am sorry today that I didn't do that. Looking back I understand that he was right.' Another young adult said: 'Today I am working. I am in a great place and it is only thanks to

him (the principal), who insisted that I complete my high school diploma.'

Sense of purpose as main motivation

The young adults described a good staff member as a person whose motives for working in out-of-home placements are not only material but come from a sense of meaning and purpose. They described the ideal staff member as a person who truly cares about youth in care and loves their profession as a social educator. One young adult stated: 'They (the counselors) gave to us far beyond the call of duty... they loved me and cared for me. I felt that I had someone to turn to... they motivated me to aspire more in life, invited me to their houses... that is much more than the Ministry of Education (the system that supervised this youth village) demands from staff.' Another young adult talked about his mentor's help beyond the 'geographical boundaries' of the youth village and said he drove him to his meetings with his probation officer and went with him to his court hearings, supporting him thorough the hard process and difficult period in his life, even though he wasn't supposed to be at work on those days.

Staff's personal backgrounds

Young adults believed that in order to be a staff member that fully understands them and their needs, one has to have a personal background that enables them to 'walk in their shoes' or care for them deeply and empathically. For example, if the staff member himself had been in an out-of-home placement as a child or if they had children of their own. In this regard one of the young adults talked about a staff member who had been a 'troubled youth' himself as a child and was able to help the most 'complicated youth' achieve things they never believed they could before they met him.

Availability and accessibility

Along with discussing the staff's own personal characteristics, the young adults mentioned the importance of the mentor's availability. They claimed that one of the most important aspects of a good staff member was his availability to them at times of need during their stay in care. Most importantly they felt that a staff member who lived within the youth village could perform much better and react more promptly to their concerns than a staff member whose permanent residence was outside the out-of-home setting.

Accessibility in their eyes referred to the fact that they could reach the staff regardless of 'formal working hours' via phone or in person, or that they could talk to the mentor even when they were on vacation or on weekends with their biological family. Some of the young adults stated that they were still in touch with their staff member via phone and social networks years after they left care. As one of the young women who frequently calls her former counselor to hear her advice today said: 'She supported me a lot during my army service. I think she suffered more than me (laughs)... the things she (the counselor) taught me in care are helping me today in my work... waking up in the morning even though it is hard and coming on time to work. Today I really follow her guidance. It's important in everything I do in my life.'

'He believed in me:' seeing the youths' positive sides and seeing them as trustworthy

Another theme that emerged from the young adult's answers was the staff's ability to see beyond their flaws, encourage them to see the best in themselves, believe in their abilities to succeed and push them to aspire higher beyond their stay in care.

Youth who enter out-of-home settings usually deal with emotional and behavioural problems and different degrees of educational gaps. Most importantly, they come from environments that could offer them only limited possibilities and in many cases school perceived them as inadequate and incompetent. Therefore, it is not surprising that the young adults formed the most meaningful relationships with staff who could see their good sides and believed in their abilities even though they might be hidden or unrecognized by the youth themselves or by other adults in their lives. As one of the young women said: 'I was a troubled teenager... I smoked a lot and they (the youth village principals) always called my parents and threatened to expel me, but my counselor was like a mother and a father to me. Without her I wouldn't have stayed beyond the ninth grade! Thanks to her I completed my high school diploma.' One of the other young adults commented: 'This teacher gave me everything I needed to do well in my studies. He was patient and reassured me that I could succeed. He was stubborn. I needed someone to stand up for me and it worked like magic.'

The ability of staff member to see in the youth more than meets the eye and believe in their abilities was also connected to seeing them as trustworthy despite their past and current actions and fostering a non-judgmental approach towards them, acceptance and forgiveness in

cases they stumbled. One young adult described an incident: 'Once he (the counselor) saw me getting drunk. He was mad, but he didn't make a big deal out of it. He knew how to make me listen but in other ways. More honest ways.'

Forming a personal and intimate relationship

The young adults described the staff members who were the most important to them as those who played more roles than just being their 'counselor' or 'teacher.' They felt that the staff member who was able to help them make a difference in their lives was the one who cared for them not just as 'students' or 'residents' but as if they were 'their own child.' One of the young women described her counselor as a 'mother' who cared for everything she needed, protected her and made her feel as if she were her own family. Another young woman shared that the 'housemother' invited her to sleep over at her house when she could not go to sleep at her own mother's house on the weekend. Another young adult described a situation when his counselor made him something to eat at 2 a.m. because he was hungry and could not sleep.

These personal and intimate actions were experienced by the young adults as true caring and as the way family members care for each other. As one of the young adults stated: 'I could turn to him (the counselor) about anything. It's a little bit more than a mother and a father.'

DISCUSSION

Earlier studies found that various non-parental adults serve as important sources of support and guidance for youth in care (Collins *et al.* 2010; Munson *et al.* 2010). This study focused on the potential mentoring relationships youth in care have with staff with whom they are formally involved, and explored these relationships within the wider literature of mentoring relationships.

All the young adults in the study identified at least one staff member who was meaningful to them, and with whom they were able to form a mentoring relationship. The majority mentioned their counselor as the person who supported them and led to a change both during their stay in care and after emancipation. This finding is consistent with earlier studies among youth in care, and emphasizes that although the relationship is essentially professional, staff members have the potential to develop 'natural' mentoring relationships with youth in care, similar to those that can be found in the community at large. Studies focusing on components of

mentoring programmes stress the importance of the length of the relationship between mentor and mentee (Rhodes & DuBois 2008; Little *et al.* 2010). In this regard, the relatively high average length of stay in care of youth in Israel could be a promotive component that allows the time for this type of relationship to evolve.

Young adults discussed the 'ideal' staff member as they see them and described the most significant staff member they had while in care. Overall, their descriptions included aspects concerning the staff member himself/herself and aspects related to the interaction between them and the staff member and the specific role or influence the staff member had on their lives. More specifically, we identified two major themes: one focused on the staff member's personal characteristics and the other focused on the way the staff member perceived the youth. Sub-themes within the former included: the staff member's personality traits, personal background and availability. The latter included the staff member's ability to see youth as trustworthy and treat them as more than 'just a mentee' by offering 'parental gestures.' In both of the major themes the youth's descriptions were connected to the interaction between them. Which is to say, the way the staff member's personal characteristics or perception of the youth influenced their relationship. The few studies on mentoring relationships in care found similar themes that describe the relationships youth have with their mentors (Greeson *et al.* 2010; Aherns *et al.*, 2016). However, the current study also indicated that youth in care view the significant staff member as a person whose motives for working with youth in care are not only material but come from a sense of meaning and purpose. This aspect seems to be particularly important among youth in care whose relationships with other 'significant adults' are mostly with professional staff who maintain 'formal' relationships with them that are usually constricted in time and place. Therefore, seeing youth beyond the 'geographical boundaries' of the care placement both literally and metaphorically could play a part in strengthening youth-staff relationships.

The staff member's personal characteristics

Traits and background

The staff member's personality traits were evident in all the young adults' descriptions, including: patience, sensitivity and the ability to care profoundly for the youth. Qualities of this type were found both in studies that focused on the nature of the mentoring relationship (Spencer 2006) and in others that focused on the

correlation between mentor-mentee relationships and improved outcomes (Rhodes & DuBois 2006). Personal qualities of sensitivity, loyalty and trust are especially important in working with youth in care whose relationships with their birth parents and close adult figures are impaired and suffer from disappointment and mistrust. By saying that their meaningful staff member 'meant every word he said and kept every promise he made,' the young adults touch the core of their complicated relationships with the most meaningful adults in their lives, who in one way or another did not keep their promises to care and protect them. Therefore, a good mentoring relationship can help the youth gain some of their lost trust in adult figures.

Spencer (2006), in his studies on the mutual perceptions of mentors and mentees, found that the deepening of the initial relationship between mentor and mentee is facilitated by the mentor's ability to share authentic feelings and understand reality from the mentee's standpoint as well as to form cooperation and partnership. The young adults' descriptions of the 'ideal staff member' in our study demonstrate these aspects, as they portrayed such a staff member as a 'life coach' and good listener who knows how to approach and talk with youth despite various differences. This 'youth-centred' style was found in earlier studies that focused on components of mentoring programmes (Rhodes & DuBois 2008; Little *et al.* 2010). In addition to these components, this study adds another aspect that is found to be important to mentoring relationships in care, which is the mentor's ability to set limits and discipline. This quality might be more appreciated in a retrospective examination, but is translated by the youth as caring for them and not giving up on them. Therefore, based on these findings, training for better mentoring relationships must include training for an empathic approach and setting limits in a respectful way.

Another mentor-focused aspect that was found to be important to the young adults was the staff member's own personal background and life circumstances that enabled the staff member to understand and sympathize with them. Earlier studies on mentoring programmes showed that the successful mentor is described as a person from a background similar to that of the adolescent, who has successfully coped with life's challenges (Rhodes & DuBois 2008). This element serves different aspects in promoting a positive mentoring relationship. First, it allows youth to relate more easily to someone they believe can understand their situation and with whom they can therefore share openly their feelings and unique stories. Second, the fact that this staff member had been in their situation as an adolescent

and had overcome difficulties and coped successfully with similar challenges turned them into a role model, one that inspired them and gave them hope and belief in their ability to become like that mentor: a positive adult with strength, who helps others rather than being helped. Therefore, it is not surprising that this type of mentoring relationship was found to be central in previous studies on mentoring programmes (Rhodes *et al.* 2006; Liang *et al.* 2008).

Availability

Earlier studies on mentoring relationships stressed the importance of a mentors' approachability and flexibility (Rhodes & DuBois 2008; Little *et al.* 2010). In line with this finding, young adults in our study frequently mentioned their need for an available staff member, one who could be reached at times of need and who was accessible. In this respect it is not surprising that the majority of young adults chose their former counselors as their meaningful staff member. Counselors in youth villages in Israel must reside at the youth village and interact with the youth intensively on a daily basis. Compared with other staff members, counselors are closer to the youth in care because of their daily intensive work with them which allows them to get to know more about the adolescents and their needs, provide them with more opportunities for a more profound and meaningful interaction and allow the adolescents to reach out immediately in times of need. All of these aspects widen the possibilities both for the youth and the counselor to deepen their relationship.

Nevertheless, the counselor's excessive availability and approachability have downsides. Counselors' availability in youth villages is part of their job description. However, without proper training and support this might put them at risk of elevated stress and burnout that can affect the quality of the mentoring relationship. Although this study did not include foster care settings/group home settings in which foster parents are the most dominant adult figures for the youth, this aspect could be of great relevance to foster parents too, because of their intensive involvement in the youth's daily routine and responsibility for their educational, emotional and social needs.

The staff member's perception of youth

Seeing the youth as positive and trustworthy

Rhodes (2005) suggested that a relationship between a mentor and mentee that involves trust, empathy and

mutual benefit can produce improvements in the youth's socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development. The young adults in our study reinforced this assumption with their descriptions of the bonds they formed with meaningful staff and the positive influence these relationships had on their status in care and after. The connection between trust, persistent encouragement and success was evident when the young adults mentioned their meaningful staff member who pushed them to believe in their abilities, strive to overcome challenges and not give up despite their difficulties and low faith in themselves. The staff member's ability to have faith in the youth and focus on their positive sides may lay the foundation for a process that gradually leads to improvement. For example, when the staff member consistently signals to the youth that she sees them as trustworthy, the youth's feelings of self-worth and personal belief in themselves might rise. As a result, the youth is motivated to deal with challenges that they used to avoid before and might be more persistent in pursuing goals and overcoming difficulties on their own. As one of the young adults said: 'He gave me everything I needed to do well in my studies. He reassured me that I could succeed... I needed someone to stand up for me and it worked like magic.'

Mentoring relationships that are based on trust and faith in youth translate into the mentor's ability to allow the youth to see beyond their barriers, encourage them to see the best in themselves, believe in their abilities to succeed and motivate them to aspire higher. All these processes allow the mentor to provide guidance and advice as well as emotional and tangible support. These findings are consistent with Rhodes and colleagues' model (2006), proposing that 'a successful mentoring relationship may challenge and help change the negative views mentees have about themselves and their relationships with adults.' These perspectives are evident in the young adults' descriptions of their relationships with their former staff members. That indicates that formal staff members in care do have the potential to become mentors and to contribute to a positive change in the lives of the young adults through forming profound mentoring relationships that have a later impact.

Offering 'parental gestures'

One of the central themes the young adults raised was the way the staff member treated them and cared for them as if they were 'their own child,' through offering special, intimate and 'parental' gestures. The type of mentoring relationship in which youth feel that the mentor is acting 'like a parent' was found in other studies.

For example, Greeson *et al.* (2010) found that one of the functional roles filled by natural mentors included being like a parent, as well as providing guidance and advice, providing emotional and practical support and serving as a role model.

Because youth in care live apart from their families and their parents are not close enough to take care of them, this role in the mentoring relationship seems especially important. 'Parental gestures' are those that make the youth feel as if they were the mentor's child and as a result feel they are being cared for deeply and loved. Therefore, they transform the connection with the staff member into a relationship with a mentor: a relationship that goes beyond the staff member fulfilling their required functional roles to a mentor that acts like a parent.

According to Keller & Pryce (2010), mentoring relationships are comprised of two familiar relationships that should be balanced: parent and friend. They suggest that mentoring is a voluntary relationship, as with a friend; between unequal partners, as with a parent. They argue that a successful mentoring relationship should put the emphasis both on enjoyment and interest (a friend), and on structure, development and contribution (an adult). Although staff members' work in out-of-home placements in Israel is not voluntary, the young adults who described their mentors perceived them as motivated by a sense of purpose in their work and as people who give the youth far beyond their 'formal' duty. In this respect, it seems very important for directors to regard these types of 'voluntary gestures' as part of the staff members' work and compensate staff for them in order to encourage this type of 'personal' relationships to continue.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

This study aimed to provide important new information about youths' perspectives regarding their meaningful relationships they had with staff while in care. However, it has some limitations that should be noted. Our study is based in one country on the retrospective descriptions of 20 young adults who left care, a relatively small number. Second, although our study's findings suggested that a profound staff-youth relationship have a positive influence on the core areas in the lives of care leavers, future studies should examine the correlations between these mentoring relationship and future outcomes among a bigger sample of youth in care and those who were emancipated. Finally, future investigation of the mentoring relationship could benefit from examining

staff's perspectives of their role as mentors and the barriers they come across in establishing these relationships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This exploratory study has several implications for policy and practice. First, this study's findings show that the relationships with staff who became important to the young adults while in care and whom they reached out to after emancipation, are characterized by a rather long and stable length, availability and 'parental gestures.' Therefore, it is important to consider how these components can be integrated in these types of relationships to elevate their significance to youth. For example, placements could integrate these components in planning, staff training, external mentoring and volunteer programmes.

Second, findings indicate that in order to enable 'professional relationships' to become 'mentoring relationships,' greater resources should be invested in supporting staff against burnout, training and recruiting staff that can serve as role models for immigrant youth, as well as compensating staff for their time and efforts beyond formal working hours.

Finally, because many of the young adults had contact with their most significant staff member after emancipation, it would be important to acknowledge that youth see their former residential settings as one of the main addresses to approach after leaving care when needing support with emotional experiences and other life areas. This suggests ways need to be found to enable the youth to continue accessing such support in the immediate period after their departure. This could be helped by an assessment of the young adults' needs before leaving care with a staff member whom the youth knows and trusts, who is trained to support youth in transition and is able to make use of the profound relationships the youth established with staff while in care.

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