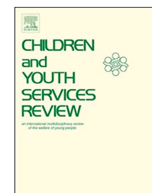
Children and Youth Services Review 118 (2020) 105465

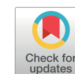
Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth



Steadfast benevolence: A new framework for understanding important adult-youth relationships for adolescents in care



Bridget Colacchio Wesley*, Julia Pryce, Johanna Barry, Philip Young P. Hong

Loyola University Chicago, School of Social Work, Maguire Hall, 5th Floor, 1 East Pearson St., Chicago, IL 60611, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Foster youth
Relational permanence
Well-being
Qualitative methods

ABSTRACT

Positive relationships with parents, caregivers and other adults are shown as critically important in supporting child and adolescent development. One consequence for youth of being involved in the child welfare system is the disruption of these relationships. Youth in care often lack relational permanence or meaningful bonds to sustain them in their transition to adulthood. Relationship-based interventions for youth in care, such as kinship care and mentoring, are poised to improve on youths' relationships with adults, though many intervention programs for youth in care are skills-based. This study is based on interviews with 17 adolescents in care (88% African–American, 12% Latinx, 14–19 years old, from a large urban center) who were part of a program aimed at supporting high-school aged youth in care in their transition to adulthood. Through iterative coding of all interviews, adult-adolescent relationships facilitated by the program emerged as a strong area of focus within the data. Data reflecting this focus were further analyzed using an interpretivist thematic approach. Findings reveal that adolescents experienced the program-based relationships in family terms, which were further classified by attributes captured by the central conceptual framework reflected in the data, identified as *steadfast benevolence*. Findings point to steadfast benevolence as an umbrella for multiple positive and instrumental relational qualities. This article concludes with discussion of implications of this concept for practice and future research.

1. Introduction

At any given time, there are over 442,000 children and youth in foster care in the United States (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019b). Of these, older youth in care between 13 and 20 years old account for 30% of all youth in the system (AFCARS, 2019). There are significant developmental pressures and expectations for all adolescents as they move toward adulthood (Arnett, 1998). On top of those, adolescents in care experience additional challenges, particularly in the areas of skills development and relationships (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009), both of which are critical for successful transition to adulthood.

In addition to the neglect, abuse and other traumas that predicate entry into the child welfare system, many children and youth experience significant disruption to their primary relationships with family, friends and support networks while in the child welfare system. With multiple placement moves, chances of returning home to families of origin decrease (Akin, 2011), and children who remain in the system into adolescence are less likely to return home at all (Leathers, Falconnier, & Spielfogel, 2010). The accompanying relational shifts and disruptions are associated with behavioral and other problems related to their well-being (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). In general, adolescents in care are at risk of suffering increased difficulties when entering adulthood without a permanent family situation (Bellamy, 2008). Compared to their non-fostered peers, young people in care later struggle in many areas of adult functioning and well-being. Former youth in care experience more homelessness (Fowler, Marcal, Zhang, Day, & Landsverk, 2017) and criminal activity (Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017), and less attainment in education (Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004) and employment (Dworsky & Gitlow, 2017). New relationships within foster families may not provide the requisite safety and stability for developmental tasks that are critical for youth. Evidence indicates that as an intervention, foster care may not be successful in improving the well-being trajectory for youth in care (Mersky & Janczewski, 2013), and may convey additional risks for later difficulties, even compared to other maltreated children who were not removed from home (Courtney et al., 2004).

It is in this context that this study aims to explore the effects of long-term support for high school aged adolescents in care through a national university-based youth engagement model called the First Star Academy. Through attention to relationships as well as skill-development, First Star engages adolescents in care with peers and supportive

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: bwesley@luc.edu (B. Colacchio Wesley).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105465
Received 19 May 2020; Received in revised form 9 September 2020; Accepted 9 September 2020
Available online 17 September 2020
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adults through a cohort model. Through partnerships with universities, First Star commits to the youth for four years as they move through high school, with the central goal of supporting academic achievement and post-secondary vocational or educational engagement within a supportive community. This study aims to understand, according to First Star participants, what elements of the long-term engagement model particularly contribute to well-being as defined by the young people themselves.

1.1. Relationships as core to healthy adolescent development

Adolescence is a developmental stage marked by significant physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral growth and change (Arnett & Jensen, 2019). Erikson's stages of development point to adolescence as a time for integrating these components of one's identity (1968), and the theoretical basis of relationship formation is critical to adolescent development. Research has documented protective effects on adolescent development of positive relationships with peers (Ragelienė, 2016), parents (Newman, Harrison, Dashiff, & Davies, 2008) and non-parental adults (DeVore & Ginsburg, 2005). These benefits do not end when youth legally reach the age of majority. For any adolescent, there is a need for ongoing supportive relationships well into adulthood, as that found in relationships based on attachment and resilience models (Schofield & Beek, 2005).

While much of the historical child welfare literature has urged programs to support youth in moving toward independent living, Antle et al. (2009) in their seminal research urge the discourse to pivot instead toward what they termed "interdependent living." The authors emphasized the importance of relationships for youth, particularly with caseworkers and foster families, so that these relationships could serve as models for healthy relationship skills. Where these relationship skills became especially important was when youth needed support in setting educational and vocational goals and in fostering strong romantic relationships later in life (Antle et al., 2009).

From Antle et al. (2009) work, other authors have explored aspects of successful youth relationships regarding attachment style (Okpych & Courtney, 2018), noting that the characteristic avoidant attachment patterns youth in the foster system demonstrate may result in higher college dropout rates. From their large-scale secondary analysis, avoidant attachment patterns were mitigated by increased social support and healthy peer relationships, a result also supported by Glynn (2020) in their international work regarding youth in the foster system and the need for cultivating mutually respectful social relationships.

1.2. Challenges to relationships within the foster care context

The need for and benefits of supportive relationships to adolescents applies particularly to those in care. The child welfare system seeks to provide children and youth in care with safety, permanence and well-being. Relationships can impact each of those arenas, and as noted previously, adolescents in care endure multiple relational disruptions (Rubin et al., 2007). Youth in care also face challenges due to the unique trauma they experience as part of a system often fraught with insecurities and uncertainty about their placements. Pecora et al. (2006) found that foster alumni aged 19–30 demonstrated posttraumatic stress disorder rates twice as high as United States war veterans. These symptoms inhibit one's ability to function in positive partnerships, as well as in friendships. However, while rates of PTSD among foster youth may be higher than in the general population, most youth do not report PTSD and youth do not themselves report as many deficits in their networks as expected by researchers and find resilient ways to connect with family members, staff and other adults, and peers (Gatt et al., 2020).

Similarly, the attachment literature suggests that former youth in care are 75% more likely to develop insecure attachment styles in later relationships as compared to their non-fostered peers (McWey, 2004). Whether insecure attachments to others result from previous neglect or abuse, having multiple foster placements, or other trauma experienced prior to entering the foster care system, individuals previously in foster care are noted to have more difficulty trusting others and developing positive, secure relationships throughout the lifespan. Additionally, many adolescents leave foster care without a permanent connection to a family, either biological or foster (McMurtry & Lie, 1992). Youth in care themselves are aware of this deficit and convey concern over not having family to lean on as they face adulthood (Liebmann & Madden, 2010).

In addition to the value of deep and strong bonds with caregivers, there is evidence supporting the value of a wide variety of social support networks for adolescents. These networks can improve positive developmental outcomes, such as mental health and well-being (Williams-Butler, Ryan, McLoyd, Schulenberg, & Davis-Kean, 2018). Adolescents in foster care often find themselves trying to balance a need and desire for close relationships with a heightened sense of self-reliance due to a history of unavailable adults; this quality, identified as "survivalist self-reliance", is both a positive attribute and a potential source of risk (Morton, 2017; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Related, youth in care have limited experience in healthy inter-dependent relationships with adults (Lenkens et al., 2020; Morton, 2017). While youth have highly, and at times hyper-developed self-reliance skills, which is key for resilience, this same relational inclination can make it difficult for them to lean on and trust adults, and to cultivate positive adult relationships.

Adolescent relationships with caring and supportive adults are important yet complex for all young people. The added disruptions and barriers for adolescents in care point to a need for targeted interventions to promote positive relationships for these young people as they navigate adolescence and move toward emerging adulthood.

1.3. Relationship-based support for adolescents in care

Adolescents in care participate in a variety of services and programs during their stead in foster care, from mental health services (Garcia & Courtney, 2011) to programs aimed at their independence (Chor, Petras, & Pérez, 2018). Many programs aimed at helping and improving the lives of young people in care are skills-driven, with focus on areas such as employment or career (Stevenson, 2017; Zinn & Courtney, 2017), education (Finn, Kerman, & LeCornec, 2005), and behavioral management (Izzo, Smith, Sellers, Holden, & Nunno, 2020). Other programs are created to help those in care cope with issues specific to their experience in child welfare, such as addressing fears and concerns about (im)permanence (Henry, 2005). While meeting other important needs for adolescents in care, these programs do not explicitly address the disrupted relationships adolescents experience in child welfare.

Relationship-based interventions for youth in care include a key effort to keep young people in care connected to their family networks. Kinship care is an alternative to traditional foster care, where children removed from the care of their parents are placed with family members, kin, instead of with unknown foster caregivers. 'Fictive kin' refers to other adults in the young person's life who are known to them before placement. Research supports benefits to kinship care, including increased physical and emotional health for youth cared for by kin or fictive kin (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2018). These efforts in part are due to the experience of young people within kinship arrangements as maintaining a sense of "family" amid the disruptions often characteristic of involvement in the child welfare system.

Beyond placement efforts, close relationships are also facilitated by support programs aimed at improving relationships for young people in care. Mentoring programs seek to meet the relational needs of youth in care, with recent emphasis on the benefits of youth-initiated mentoring (Spencer, Drew, Gowdy, & Horn, 2018) and natural mentoring (Greeson, Thompson, Ali, & Wenger, 2015). Natural mentoring is a relationship that evolves out of an organic connection youth make with an adult in their school or community, and is shown to improve

adolescent outcomes (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008). Unlike program-based mentoring relationships (i.e., traditional Big Brothers/Big Sisters-type relationships), natural mentoring relationships tend to be characterized by partnerships between adults and young people who share similarities in neighborhood background, race, or social networks (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). Natural mentoring relationships can provide stability for adolescents in care as they endure other disruptions through the system. Additionally, natural mentoring has demonstrated noteworthy results regarding foster youth's increased prosocial activities (i.e, sports, hobbies, games) and mitigated the risk of youth in care aged 14–17 who were at risk of emancipation (Thompson & Greeson, 2017). These mentoring relationships demonstrate benefits for youth and mentors. Outcomes-based programs for youth in care help promote skill development and positive functioning in various areas of adolescent and adult life. Much of the literature on mentoring also points to its impact on youth outcomes. Looking at a relationship-based program like First Star Academy, which differs from traditional matched or natural mentoring programs in its structure and function, is an opportunity to not only investigate the workings of the program, but also explore the dynamics of the relationships that contribute to positive youth outcomes.

1.4. First Star Academy

First Star Academy is an example of a national program model aimed at supporting adolescents in foster care and assisting the youths' successful transition into adulthood through relationships and academic support. First Star Academy was founded in 1999 as a national public charity dedicated to improving the lives of child victims of abuse and neglect. While the initial focus of the organization was on policy work, in response to years of seeing continually poor records across the country the organization shifted focus in 2011 to have greater impact on the level of college preparation among adolescents in care.

Now an international consortium of university-based Academies around the U.S. and in the United Kingdom, First Star Academy is a 4-year program for youth in care in high school hosted on university campuses. The program components include monthly Saturday Academies, a month-long summer Residential Academy, and ongoing case support for the adolescent participants and their caregivers. The program staff at this site includes full-time paid staff who are present throughout the youths' four years in the program, as well as seasonal undergraduate and graduate student interns in the role of group mentors. The team of 6–8 group mentors shift each year and are not assigned to an individual student(s); they lead group activities with the youth and are available equally to all participants during program activities.

During the Academy gatherings on the weekends and over the summer, youth participate in full days of programming, with various sessions dedicated to academic, social, and life skills development, for example: book club reading and discussions, team building activities, and budgeting workshops. This is interspersed with planned recreation, community meals, and down time. The staff dedicates considerable time and effort to building relationships with youth during the Academies: meeting with them as individuals and in small groups (both scheduled meetings and as needed), participating in all community activities, and intervening in moments of conflict or crisis. Staff communicate with the youth weekly via phone or text to check in on school, family and any other mundane or important happenings in their lives. Staff also attend key meetings with the youths' schools, casework agency, and foster families throughout the year. Through this holistic and intensive set of interventions, the program aims to shift the outcomes statistics for youth in care (i.e., high school graduation, college attendance and graduation, homelessness, etc.) by providing a nurturing, consistent community of peers and adults, and academic and life skills to help them attain high school graduation, college enrollment, and successful launch into adulthood.

Research on the impact of First Star and the mechanisms through which that impact takes place, is emerging slowly. To date, research has included an assessment of the life skills acquisition of youth at one site (Tate, 2018), and a description of collaboration among youth participating in a media project at another site (Friesem, 2014). This study was in response to the lack of empirical understanding of the impact of, or experience within, the program. While not a program evaluation, this exploratorystudy was aimed at understanding the experience of a cohort of foster youth participating in one site of the First Star Academy program hosted by a university in the Midwest.

The relevant literature points to the value of mentoring relationships and the value of skill development programs for older youth in care. The gap in the literature is around relationship-based programs as described by the youth themselves. This research questions for the study included: Based on the experiences and voices of the young people themselves, which components of the First Star Academy program were most meaningful to the youth participants; and through what mechanisms was programmatic impact made?

2. Methods

Before conducting the study, the research team received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from both the host university and the local child welfare agency.

2.1. Sample

All study participants were active members of the First Star Academy program at one Midwestern university. At the time of the study, there were 25 active participants in the program, defined by youth maintaining regular monthly communication with program staff, and attendance at least half of all program activities throughout the preceding school year. All students in the program were invited to participate in the study during the summer Academy. Adolescents who elected to be interviewed provided written and oral informed consent to participate and received consent to participate from their parent/guardian per IRB approved procedures. The study sample included 17 adolescents, representing two racio-ethnic identities, with 88% identifying as African American and the remaining 12% as Latino/a. The gender identities of participants were 1/3 female and 2/3 male. Participants were between 14 and 19 years old at the time of the interviews, and on average were 16.4 years of age. The youth self-identified as having been in foster care between three and 16 years, residing in one to 26 foster homes during that time. Two study participants had returned home to biological families at the time of the study, and one had reached permanency through guardianship. In terms of program participation, the participating youth had attended between four and ten (out of ten) monthly Saturday Academies over the previous academic year.

2.2. Data generation

In accordance with the interpretivist theory undergirding this research (Thanh & Thanh, 2015), the authors used a semi-structured interview format. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in the interview process, while still allowing researchers to follow divergent threads of conversation as needed (Padgett, 2016). Each of the interviews occurred at a First Star Academy location at a university setting. All interviews were conducted by a member of the research team not directly affiliated with the Academy. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min each. Interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed by student research team members and reviewed by one coauthor to ensure accuracy.

At the start of each interview, participants were asked to give a pseudonym for their interview, and these pseudonyms are used exclusively in the reporting of findings below. Interviews were conducted

with different individual youth during two consecutive Summer Academy sessions. The interview protocol consisted of multiple questions and related probes focused on youths' perceptions of positive and negative aspects of the program, the program's impact on their lives and their relationships, and their ideas about well-being in child welfare. Sample questions from the interview protocol included: "What are your goals related to school and career? How is the First Star program helping, or not helping, you reach those goals?" "How did your interactions with participants in the program affect your experience, positively or negatively?" "Twenty years from now, what do you think will stand out to you about your time in the program?" These questions were intentionally broad in nature to more wholly capture the adolescents' experience within the program, both in the present and how they expected the experience to impact their later development. Interviewers used spontaneous probing questions to invite participants to expand upon their initial responses, for example: "Tell me more about what [staff member] does that makes you feel X." "In what ways is your relationship with [staff member] different or the same from other adults in your life?"

2.3. Data analysis

An iterative, interpretivist analysis using thematic coding was employed for this research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Using words directly from participant interviews to derive meaning and generate themes, initial analysis centered on open thematic coding procedures in accordance with an interpretivist paradigm (Bhagat, Cormode, & Muthukrishnan, 2011; Greene, Kreider, & Mayer, 2005; Kock, McQueen, & John, 1997; Padgett, 2016). This research utilized an interpretivist research paradigm because of the value placed on understanding the subjective, unique experiences of participants and the assumption that there are multiple realities and experiences possible (Schwandt, 1994). The goal of this qualitative research was ultimately to learn from participants about their experiences and to avoid prescribing meaning to those experiences. To uplift the voices of youth within the foster care system, it was essential to utilize a philosophy and analytic process that would seek to enable the complexities of youth's stories to guide the research process. Later phases of the analysis applied the same approach to a subset of the data to arrive at a distilled conceptual finding directly representing the views of the participants. In keeping the analysis in line with the tenets of interpretive work, it was essential during the analytic process that the researchers honor the subjective experiences participants conveyed, thus leading to this open coding approach (Padgett, 2016). The research team engaged in ongoing memoing and regular debriefing meetings to confirm findings and identify the language that best captured the scope and meaning of emergent themes (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008), using the participants' direct language whenever possible.

There were two phases of analysis. During the first phase, two of the four co-authors created the initial codebook, alternating between coding the interviews and updating the codebook accordingly after each iteration. The researchers ultimately created 10 iterations of the codebook, the last of which consisted of seven descriptive parent codes with 17 sub-codes. After the codebook was complete, the first author, a researcher who had previous experience as a staff member with the program, also joined the analysis effort. Multiple steps were taken to identify and account for any potential bias introduced by her presence on the team. This included the first author's extensive memoing and conversation regarding ways her role may impact her perception of the data. These memos were then discussed with other members of the research team to ensure transparency, rigor and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Other steps to mitigate any potential bias in the analysis included regularly returning to the data by the whole team to check for alternative explanations for emerging themes (Saldaña, 2015) and to confirm that findings were derived directly from the words of the participants (Bhagat et al., 2011), and by reviewing findings with peers at conference presentations and group meetings (Padgett, 2016).

Using the finalized codebook, one member of the research team independently coded the 17 interviews. This researcher then divided the transcripts into two groups, randomly assigning half of the transcripts to each of the other two analytic team members to code. This process ensured that all interviews were coded by at least two of the team members to ensure the codebook's reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). The three-person research team met bi-weekly in-person and virtually over a 9-month period to build agreement on definitions and exemplary quotations representing the codes (Padgett, 2016). For example, the team was seeing overlaps in the data between the relationship-building code and other codes like belonging, connection and trust, as well as mentions of family. By iteratively "hashing out," or consulting, discussing and negotiating, points of divergent interpretations of the themes (Waitzkin, 1991 as referenced in Armstrong, Gosling, Weinman, & Marteau, 1997) the team reached an initial finding: according to the adolescent participants, the most important part of the program were the relationships they experienced there.

As a result of this early finding, the team decided to conduct a deeper phase of analysis on that thematic area, selecting nine relevant codes that described program relationships. These codes included: relationship-building, trusting others, connection, belonging, family, accountability, and mentors as nurturer, challenger, instructor-teacher, and instrumental support. The team analyzed all data within these codes, continuing the iterative analysis through multiple rounds to identify the emerging themes from the data subset. Initially, the team identified that the data exposed how a *sense of family* was important to the adolescents. This theme was rich, complex and nuanced, and the team sought to understand it more clearly by focusing on this concept, and the meaning that *sense of family* held for these young people.

Table 1 below captures the progression of the analysis at this phase, during which the team consulted regularly, biweekly over four months. The focus of analysis at this phase was to uncover the nature of a sense of family, and the qualities of the relationships that participants identified as so central to this sense. This led to creating a new list of emergent advanced codes, seen in the first column of Table 1. To move the codes forward toward themes at this point, the team found it necessary to veer away from the participants' direct word choices, and therefore consulted to reach agreement on specific language to capture the scope and meaning of the data on relationships. To aid this process, the team continually returned to the data subset to confirm accurate

Table 1
Analytical movement from advanced coding to framework language.

Advanced codes	Initial themes	Dimensions	Conceptual framework
"Always" there, checking in, providing support, and instrumental aid	Consistent and dependable	Stable and unconditional	Steadfast
Withstanding difficulties, not giving up, not allowing kids to push away, "no-matter-what"	Durable and persistent		
Continued for years, projected into the future, enduring	Long-term		
Space for making mistakes, open communication, comfortable being oneself, someone to talk to	Open and accepting	Loving and giving	Benevolence
Mutual, giving and receiving, intersubjective knowing that the love was "real"	Authentic		
Fun, prompting growth, cheerleading, feeling understood and wanted	Positive and encouraging		

representation of the meaning of the emerging themes. For example, when the researchers arrived at wording for an emerging theme, such as "consistent and dependable," the first author re-read all relevant data references to validate that the advanced codes and participants' quotations were captured by the team's word choice. Through this process, the advanced codes were then grouped by thematic significance into six initial themes to describe the program relationships: (a) consistent and dependable; (b) durable and persistent; (c) long-term; (d) open and accepting; (e) authentic; and (f) positive and encouraging.

Following continued memoing and several debriefing sessions, the team coalesced the themes into two larger, simplified dimensions of relationships that more broadly encapsulated the ideas conveyed by the youth, namely that the relationships were: (a) stable and unconditional, and (b) loving and giving (see the third column of Table 1). The team again honed the language used to identify the dimensions, translating their meaning into the creation of a new conceptual framework, a succinct phrase that captures the total youth-derived framework of important relationships for adolescence in care: *steadfast benevolence*. Table 1 demonstrates the complete analytical movement from advanced iterative coding to the identification of themes, dimensions and ultimately the conceptual framework.

3. Results

The rigorous analytical process described above resulted in findings related to participants' experiences of relationships in the First Star Academy program at a Midwestern University. While describing their relationships in distinct family terms, the youth revealed a set of dynamic qualities that point to one central relational framework that represents the quality of relationships that rises to attribution of family: *steadfast benevolence.*

The adolescents' perspectives of their time in the program pointed clearly to the impact of the relationships they experienced. Interviews invited youth to reflect upon all dimensions of the program, and youth pointedly responded that the positive impact of the program was experienced primarily because of and via the relationships they had, both with peers and more centrally, adults (i.e., mentors and staff) in the program. In their interviews, the young people referenced adults of significance in the program in various roles, from full-time paid staff to undergraduate and graduate student group mentors. Participant data referred mostly to program staff, though data referencing the group mentors was not qualitatively distinctive in terms of themes represented. Thus, for the purposes of efficiently reporting these findings with a focus on the *steadfast benevolence* framework, all references to adults in the quoted data below will be referred to as "staff."

As stated above, participants described their relationships in the program in family terms, explicitly using the words "family", "parent", "sibling", "mom", "brother" and "sister". For example, in discussing his relationships in the program, Tom said the other people were: "Family. I like them…because we do everything together. We help each other out." The nature of the relationships reflected a meaningful experience that youth equated to relationships with family members. This experience was largely in reference to the nature of individual relationships with adults and peers, as opposed to an important, but more vague sense of group belonging.

Another student, Bob, expanded on the familial sentiment he felt in relationship to the staff: "Even if we do something bad, it's like a mother and a son type of bond. You still love your son even if he does bad." The theme of family was pervasive in the data and held many forms and meanings. The quality of those family-like relationships is explained below in the description of a set of characteristics that exemplified what familial relationships are, or should be, like for the program's adolescents.

3.1. Steadfast benevolence

As participants explained in detail the familial-type relationships they experienced in the program, several qualities and descriptors emerged as most defining of these impactful relationships. Participants described these relationships in terms of the nature or quality of the interactions and care they received from adults and exchanged with peers. These qualities fell into six initial themes: (a) consistent and dependable; (b) durable and persistent; (c) long-term; (d) open and accepting; (e) authentic; and (f) positive and encouraging. As outlined in the analysis section and in Table 1, sub-themes *a-c* coalesced into the broader theme, "steadfast", which meant stable and unconditional; while sub-themes *d-f* merged into the broader theme, "benevolence", which meant loving and giving. Each of the themes and sub-themes of steadfast benevolence are explained below with illustrative quotes from the data.

3.1.1. Steadfast

Adolescents described their relationships in the program as persisting over time and through difficulties, or being steadfast. According to participants, this meant that the relationships were consistent and dependable, durable and persistent, and long-term.

The idea of people *consistently and dependably* "being there" for the youth was a strong message within this theme. As James explained, "[The staff] always been there for me when I needed [them]. [They] been calling me every day to see if I'm okay, if I need anything, if I'm feeling good. It makes me feel good to have somebody that cares for me." Knowing that there was someone regularly checking on them was a significant component in the youths' relationships. This included regular communication, as James indicated, and a sense of the staff's regular, ongoing presence in the youths' lives. Asya described this latter point of presence, and how she believed that her emotional or instrumental needs would be met by staff. "[Staff] plays a big role in my life. I guess they are very supportive, and they care about everybody and how they feel… they show it, really. They show it. Like, if I needed something, or if I needed to talk to them or, you know, see them, they will always be there." The consistency of the relationships led some students to grow to depend and count on them, as John said: "It's not specifically anything that they do. It's just that they're *there*." The consistent and dependable presence of the program relationships was key to the youths' positive experience of them.

Another key dimension of the steadfastness was that the meaningful relationships were *durable and persistent*. This was seen most often in the participants' reflections on how their relationships in the program survived, and even thrived, in the face of obstacles, including their own mistakes. As Dom indicated, the value of the relationships he experienced was in how the program's staff stuck by him through difficulties. "They kept giving me chances, they didn't just let me go [when I messed up]. So that means they care for you." His experience of getting multiple chances and feeling persistently held onto in the face of his mistakes conveyed the staff's care and concern. This idea was echoed by other participants, including Jasmine, who compared the forgiveness she experienced to love:

Some just think we some bad ass kids, but [staff] don't…we did a lot of bad stuff but they still love us. Now we done matured a lot because we had unconditional love for us. And that is the foundation of this program…There is unconditional love, and you don't get that everywhere. It's unreal to have people to love you regardless… It takes a lot of work, forgiveness, and trust to do that.

Being loved "regardless" of their actions, their pasts or their mistakes was an experience of the durability and persistence of program relationships, even in the face of difficulties.

The final subtheme of the steadfast relationship quality was *long-term*. This element of longevity drew links to the long-term nature of relationships within a family frame, as Darius indicated: "We've been around [staff] for so long, she's like a mother figure to us." The

longevity of relationships, and the capacity to envision the continuation of these relationships far into the future, was an important idea for these young people. Dom spoke about this and other elements of steadfastness in his comment: "[In 20 years, I will remember] us being able to learn, and learn from our mistakes. Cause I've made a lot of mistakes in the program… Like getting high on campus, and the talks they had with me. It took time over the years, but the talks. I can think back to those, the reasons why I shouldn't be doing that." Here Dom expresses a belief and trust in the relationships' longevity by projecting them into the future; he also points to his experience that familial connections in the program can endure through trials and mistakes. Finally, he highlights the time required for these "talks" to take place, and for these lessons to be learned and understood.

3.1.2. Benevolence

In addition to the steadfast nature of the relationships, participants described their relationships in the program in terms that conveyed a sense of deep goodness, care, tenderness and positive intentions, or benevolence. To participants, this meant that the relationships were open and accepting, authentic, and positive and encouraging.

Participants described feeling well cared for by the way the staff and mentors created an *open and accepting* community. In reflecting on interactions with the staff, Joey shared a memory of the moment he realized he could trust the staff. He recalled thinking, "these are actually, like, cool peoples. They're not here to judge us, they're actually here to help us. So that's why I started, like, trusting." Within a set of non-judgmental and accepting relationships, participants further described feeling free to be themselves. As Nicole articulated, "We all developed this comfort with one another over time. We can be comfortable to be who we want to be. We don't have to put on these personalities. So, like, everyone is just themselves around each other." The ability to openly be themselves and let their guard down was aided by young people feeling they could trust being accepted by others in the program.

Benevolence was also understood as a sense of *authenticity* in the relationships. Christopher described an element of his transformation within the program being at least partially due to the "realness" of the relationships he encountered there.

You vibe with [the program and staff]. I felt the vibe automatically…[When I started the program] I was in a foster care house I did not want to be in. But I didn't feel fake attention [from the staff]. It was all real; it was all help. A lot of people reject it at first because I'm not used to nothing like that. They helping me 100%, and I'm not used to that! I had to embrace them the way they embraced me. The more you opened up, the more you got out of it. I got more out of it once I opened up.

In addition to the genuine nature of the relationships, Christopher's experience reflected the openness referenced above. Like many of his peers, he also introduced this element of mutuality that made the relationships feel more authentic. Tom explained this give-and-take dynamic with others in the program: "I feel supported and cared for. We all just show care, and care back for each other. They show respect so I gotta show respect too." The reciprocal nature of the relationships highlighted the authenticity, as it was different from typical one-way service provision the youth may be accustomed to.

Lastly, participants described their benevolent relationships in the program as *positive and encouraging*. They experienced goodness and affirmation in these relationships; some participants described the staff as "personal cheerleaders" who were motivating and offered genuine compliments. Nicole described a staff member in this light. "She was giving a lot of advice and she was really supportive. I don't know what the correct word is…when you don't really get praised often about things that you do? But she was like, 'yea you did a good job on this' or 'you do good on that' or 'keep working hard to do this.'" Encouragement came in the form of praise, advice and direction. As Kevin explained, "[T]hey are always there to help guide you in the right directions and decisions that you make. They are always watching your back. They always have the best intentions for you." This positivity helped the young people envision good things in their future, knowing that they had people in the program supporting and pulling for them. Bob said, "I think a kid like me needs a good support system. A person that wants you to do better, strives to do better." For participants, this benevolent, uplifting quality in their relationships contrasted with previous experiences, and was thus extremely impactful.

4. Discussion

Findings depicted here, from adolescents in foster care in a robust support program, provide insights into their overall program experience, with special focus on the significance of their relationships with adults in the program. Interview data from 17 adolescents revealed a new conceptual framework, "steadfast benevolence", through which practitioners and policy makers can better understand the most salient dynamics of impactful relationships from the perspective of the young people themselves. Findings have implications for child welfare programming as well as research in this area.

According to study participants, program-based relationships provided a specific and critically important experience of steadfast benevolence. As participants described these, they reflected relationships based not solely on providing a service, but rather connections made of authentic bonds critical to their well-being. This echoes the sentiment of child welfare professionals, who described well-being as both an approach they take in their work, as well as a lived experience of the youth (Wesley, Pryce, & Samuels, 2019). Within that approach, workers realized the well-being of their clients when they were deeply humanizing of the young person, when they focused on the child or youth's future, and when they helped promote close bonds with responsive adults. The concept of steadfast benevolence, as derived from adolescents, mirrors this perspective of experienced child welfare professionals (Wesley et al., 2019). Both pieces highlight the critical importance of authenticity (Spencer, 2006), and of feeling seen and understood (Pryce, Gilkerson, & Barry, 2018) by responsive adults, as central to the well-being of young people involved in supportive services.

In response to a broad set of questions regarding their own well-being and the most important aspects of a developmental program, adolescents consistently focused on the sense of family relationships, as characterized by steadfast benevolence, as central to their experience. We can understand the implications of this idea in several ways. First, the concept of steadfast benevolence may relate to the interdependence critical to achieving a successful transition to adulthood for adolescents in care. While adolescence is often considered a time of moving away from parents or caregivers and toward independence (Arnett & Jensen, 2019), adolescents in care need more support than non-fostered peers as they navigate the complex relational landscape of those charged with their care (such as caseworkers, foster parents, helping professionals, mentors, family members, and romantic partners) (Mendes & Moslehuddin, 2006). The process of garnering this support is challenging for adolescents in care, however, as they struggle with typically high numbers of placements and a decreased likelihood of being adopted or finding a permanent home, relative to their younger counterparts (Cowan, 2004). Beyond these challenges, adolescents as a group are often difficult to engage in structured programming due to some of their developmental needs that may not fit easily with a structured program context. It is within this developmental context that this study's participants pointed to steadfast and benevolent relationships as the reason and inspiration to stay committed to the program. In essence, the relationships conferred benefits directly on the youth and also acted as the vector or glue that kept youth engaged with the program, where they learned other skills critical to development.

Steadfast benevolence as a concept could provide direction for how to build reliable relational networks, networks more similar to those

often available to youth not in care, as they prepare to launch into adulthood (Antle et al., 2009).

Beyond our understanding of interdependence as a critical element of development, insights derived from the concept of steadfast benevolence can further inform our appreciation of the complex and layered relational needs of youth in care. To date, the field has made significant headway in this area through several key concepts, including relational permanence and belonging. Relational permanence is understood to be continuous supportive relationships marked by mutual trust and respect, and is correlated to increased psychological well-being for youth in care (Williams-Butler et al., 2018). Relational permanence can be as impactful as legal permanence for those in care, widely accepted as adoption or guardianship (Samuels, 2009). Others discuss relational permanence as a sense of family bonds and belonging (Jones & LaLiberte, 2013). In fact, a sense of family belonging is how many youth themselves describe the meaning of "family" (Boddy, McCarthy, Gillies & Hooper, 2019). A sense of belonging is positively associated with most outcomes related to youths' transition out of care and into adulthood. It has the greatest impact on youths' physical and mental health (Salazar et al., 2018) and academic achievement (Skilbred, Iversen, & Moldestad, 2017). Yet, many youth in care describe their relationships in foster care as lacking bonds or connection, such as familial negotiations, mutual rituals, and having fun together (Hedin, 2014). Youth report not "fitting in" within the context of often chaotic foster homes with much reactivity and judgement (Storer et al., 2014), all of which can precede placement disruptions (Hedin, 2014).

Both relational permanence and belonging speak to critical areas of the lived experience of children and youth in care. This study builds on these important concepts by illustrating how these relational outcomes might be attained through relationships marked by this specific relational framework – steadfast benevolence - which demonstrates *what* those relationships actually look like. Across the child welfare literature, we acknowledge the importance of creating a sense of permanence and belonging through programs, family placement, and youth mentoring. While permanence and belonging are generally accepted positive outcomes for children and youth in care, the literature is still developing in terms of pointing to how these key elements can be created and supported. The findings from this research, outlining the key elements of steadfast benevolence, provide a glimpse into the "black box" of intervention programs and associated relationships with adolescents in care, and point to how interventions can contribute to, or hinder, the success of such relationships, namely by enacting behaviors and practices that demonstrate benevolent care and long-term commitment.

The conceptualization of steadfast benevolence offers insight into how permanence and belonging can occur. For practitioners and program directors, this begs the question as to whether steadfast benevolence can be taught or trained in foster care workers and substitute parents. Some insight is available in a related relational mechanism, attunement, which has been used to train adult volunteers in youth development and mentoring programs. Attunement is a set of microskills that characterize moment-to-moment interactions between volunteer mentors and their mentees in youth mentoring programs (Pryce, 2012). Attunement "represents a broad strategy of reading both verbal and non-verbal cues…" (Pryce, 2012), and reflects a strategy that facilitates connection between staff in youth development and the mentors and young people they support. Recent work in advancing the concept of attunement suggests that these skills can be learned and developed by adults in youth development programs (Pryce et al., 2018), and that through training, staff can experience their roles in more meaningful and relationship-centered ways. Research on the development of attunement among home visitors suggests that attunement training facilitates increased reflection and collaboration, and less burnout among home visitors (Heffron et al., 2016). Future research can similarly investigate the steadfast benevolence concept as a mechanism or strategy that can be measured and trained. There is also potential for research on the interplay between these concepts; for instance, how attunement might increase steadfast benevolence, which in turn could lead to youths' lived experiences of relational permanence and belonging.

The experience of family-like relationships characterized by steadfast benevolence impacted the young people's current experience of the program, as well as their sense of their future. These steadfast relationships are durable and long-term, and allow young people to learn lessons, as explained above, and make mistakes from which they can build and grow. Through such learning, adolescents were able to maintain connections with those who helped turn obstacles into hope and opportunity, rather than accepting them as failure consequences. Finding hope in the midst of obstacles is a principle driver of a related concept, psychological self-sufficiency (PSS; Hong, 2013). Future exploration of these dynamics could look at PSS as a latent or explicit outcome of relationships marked by steadfast benevolence.

5. Implications and limitations

This project has significant implications for programs within the child welfare system. Despite valiant efforts, many relationships within the system are characterized as temporary, and often reflective of low expectations of youth and the prioritization of compliance over relationships (Mirick, 2013). At the same time that young people voice the need for steadfastness in their relationships, the system is plagued by high levels of staff turnover and staff burnout. As young people highlight the importance of benevolence, child welfare staff report high levels of fatigue and discouragement (Briere & Lanktree, 2011), mounting caseloads, and an increasing emotional toll required by this work, even among the most talented and committed staff (Wesley et al., 2019). Such a tension between what young people hail as critical to their success, and the capacity of the system itself, is one with which we as child welfare professionals and policy makers must grapple.

Adolescent participants in this program are suggesting that steadfast benevolence – characterized by: (a) consistency and dependability; (b) durability and persistence; (c) longevity; (d) openness and acceptance; (e) authenticity; and (f) positivity and encouragement – are required for their development, a requirement that far exceeds meeting "basic minimum standards" (Lowry, 2004) advanced by the system. They expressed that their needs were being met by the program staff who were providing a family-like experience, which was distinctive from other relationships in their child welfare experience. This call by young people challenges the structure of the child welfare system itself by inviting programs to consider that youth need more than room and board placements and temporary support. Instead, they need relationships that approximate familial bonds as critical to supporting well-being as a humanizing practice (Wesley et al., 2019).

The study's findings have relevance for relational and skill-development programs for youth in care in terms of the type of relationship that will support and retain youth participants. There is direct relevance for other First Star Academy programs around the U.S. and in the U.K. The results of the study will be shared with the First Star Academy network and the state child welfare agency in the authors' home state, with the aim of educating practitioners and program directors of the opportunity to train for and measure steadfast benevolence between youth in care and the adults charged with their care. Naming relationship building, characterized by steadfast benevolence, as an explicit outcome of programs for youth in care can be an important first step in this direction.

Some limitations to the findings are important to note. This sample was drawn from one program site within a Midwestern, urban context, which limits transferability of findings. Future research would do well to explore these questions across other First Star sites and other program types in order to deepen findings and compare across regions and similar, but also unique, programs. It also draws on one in-depth interview per respondent, which limits our ability to understand these experiences of relationship over time. Additionally, there is the

potential other biases were present in the study, such as social desirability bias as interviews were conducted during the program Academy session. Selection bias was also possible as the youth in the sample were not compared to those who elected not to be interviewed for the study.

Broadly, members of the research team represented diverse backgrounds, which offered multiple valuable perspectives on the data analysis. As noted in the Methods section, it is important to note that one of our authors held a dual role as researcher and former program staff. As a research team, we worked carefully to monitor how this researcher's perspective differed, if at all, from that of other research team members. Given that feedback from adolescents was focused on program staff, it was particularly important to remain vigilant as a team as to the role of this research collaborator, and to make efforts to draw on the wisdom she offered as an "insider" to this experience (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007), while also attending to potential bias introduced into the analysis. Another co-author has a background in child welfare, and was the lead in collecting data, but did not participate in the program studied here. Two other co-authors are familiar with the data but did not have any direct experience with the program or data collection. This four-person set of co-authors helps to add richness, as well as rigor, to the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

6. Conclusion

This study provides opportunities for the child welfare system to reconsider priorities in programming for youth in care, and for researchers to advance findings in various directions. Given the limited measures of quality relationships for youth in care, future research could explore how to measure steadfast benevolence for youth in care. From there, researchers can investigate which relationship qualities contribute to which youth outcomes in the near and long-term. Additionally, the field would benefit from understanding the connection between relationship quality, like steadfast benevolence, and well-being outcomes over time. As a new concept, steadfast benevolence can be measured and monitored as we look to build critical relational networks for adolescents in care, interpersonally and at a systems level. In doing this, child welfare policy makers and practitioners can honor the inherent humanism of children and youth in care, as well as their lived experiences (Wesley et al., 2019).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Bridget Colacchio Wesley: Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, Visualization. **Julia Pryce:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing - review & editing, Supervision. **Johanna Barry:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft. **Philip Young P. Hong:** Resources, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the participants in this study, as well as the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services for their consent for the research and the First Star Academy program. We would also like to thank Melanie Minuche for her help in conducting participant interviews and transcribing the data, and Loyola University Chicago for supporting her role through the Provost Fellowship.

Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105465.

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