ALIGNING YOUTH'S ATTRIBRUTES AND NEEDS WITH ECOLOGICAL ASSETS: A RELATIONAL-DEVELOPMENTAL EXAMINATION OF SUPPORTIVE NON-PARENTAL YOUTH-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS ADOLESCENCE

A Dissertation Presented to

The Faculty of the Curry School of Education

University of Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Mark Vincent B. Yu, B.A., M.S.Ed.

May 2018

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Abstract

Supportive youth-adult relationships (YARs) during adolescence can be powerful avenues for positive development. Utilizing a Relational-Developmental Systems approach, which emphasizes individual ↔ context processes, the purpose of this dissertation was to understand *how* and *why* supportive YARs matter and are effective for youth's positive development across adolescence. The data for this dissertation come from a longitudinal mixed-methods study on YARs. In Phase 1 of the study, 289 youth participated in an initial screening survey. In Phase 2 of the study, a subsample of 40 youth was purposefully selected from the survey sample to participate in five in-depth interviews across three years. Utilizing qualitative methods, Paper 1 explored positive teacher-student relationships, one type of YAR, in order to identify and understand key interactions and characteristics of high-quality, supportive YARs in schools and classrooms. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: teacher noticing and teacher investment. Within these themes, the role of "free" and "same-level" conversations appeared critical in promoting positive teacher-student relationships. Paper 2 was a mixed-methods exploration of specific processes that underlie YARs, guided by two specific frameworks: attachment and social support. Findings from this study underscore the importance of considering youth's individual attributes (e.g., attachment models) in the context of their ongoing relationships to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role and dynamics of supportive YARs. Paper 3 was a qualitative study that compared the characteristics and nature of five types of social support (companionship, emotional, validation, instrumental and informational) between two distinct stages in adolescence: early and late adolescence. Findings provide implications to understand, promote and sustain supportive YARs during key developmental stages in adolescence. Collectively, these three papers shed light on how individual ↔ context processes operate in the context of supportive YARs. These relationships provide a variety of developmentally appropriate supports – supports that have strong implications in optimizing youth's positive growth and development across adolescence.

Mark Vincent B. Yu
Education Leadership, Foundations and Policy Department
Educational Psychology: Applied Developmental Science Program
Curry School of Education
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia

APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, (Aligning Youth's Attributes and Needs with Ecological Assets: A Relational-Developmental Examination of Supportive Non-Parental Youth-Adult Relationships Across Adolescence) has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the Curry School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Nancy L. Deutsch (Chair)

Joanna Lee Williams

Christian Steinmetz

Noelle Hurd

Valerie Futch Ehrlich

______March 27, 2018_____Date

DEDICATION

To Mama and Papa

Thank you for your sacrifices, for the countless hours you've worked
to support and provide for me, Kuya, Jayrald and Mary Ross,
and for being a constant source of love, encouragement and inspiration.

To Jaiden, Ashton, Aizayah and Jayce
Count on me to be a VIP for many years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Nancy Deutsch. Nancy, you exemplify all the qualities of an excellent advisor and mentor. I am extremely fortunate to have gone through this journey under your guidance. Everyone who knows you understands how much of a positive impact you leave on this world every single day. Thank you for believing in me, challenging and encouraging me, providing me with countless opportunities, and most importantly for never letting me give up. Thank you for being a true inspiration, my safe place, my solid ground, and ultimately, the best mentor I've ever had.

Thank you to Joanna Lee Williams, Valerie Futch Ehrlich, Christian Steinmetz and Noelle Hurd for sharing your knowledge and expertise with me as members of my dissertation committee. A special thank you to Joanna and Valerie who have served as my secondary advisors. Your guidance has been invaluable. You have been some of the best role models in my life.

This dissertation would not have been possible without my village of support at the Curry School of Education. Thank you to the READY lab (Courtney, Aisha, Theresa, Mimi, Alison, Victoria and our RAs over the years), my amazing cohort members (Lauren and Christina), and my awesome EP-ADS colleagues (especially to Katherine, Helyn, Pilar, Cathy, Fran, Kimalee and Chelsea). I am indebted to the kindness and support you've all given me throughout my time at Curry. Thank you also to Sara Rimm-Kaufmann for your incredible leadership and your constant encouragement and support of my development as a scholar.

Haley, Shannon and Justin, you three have been there for me since day one. Thank you for the countless laughs, rides to the airport, dinners, adventures and game nights. Thank you for providing me a space to share my anxieties, doubts and struggles. Thank you for picking me up every single time I fell. Thank you for always celebrating my small and big wins and everything in between. Most importantly, thank you for being my family away from home.

Un Dangkalo' Na Si Yu'us Ma'ase, Maraming Salamat Po to my support system 8,000 miles away in Guam. To Patrick, my homeboy, thank you for reminding me of home every single day. You've supported me at every part of this journey and helped me find my way back when I lost my way, and that means more than you will ever know. To Jason, thanks for checking in on me, for visiting me, and for being there the times I needed it the most. To all of my other friends, your waves of support may have been from thousands of miles away, but know that I felt every ripple – thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Lastly, thank you to the funding agencies that have generously supported me throughout the years including the Guam Professional Technical Award program, the Curry School of Education Foundation and the UVA Raven Society. Additional thanks to the William T. Grant Foundation (Grant # 181357) and YouthNex: The UVA Center to Promote Effective Youth Development for funding and supporting the research in this dissertation. The opinions expressed in this dissertation are those of the authors and do not represent the official views of these sponsors.

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LINKING DOCUMENT

Aligning Youth's Attributes and Needs with Ecological Assets: A Relational-Developmental Examination of Supportive Non-Parental Youth-Adult Relationships Across Adolescence

Mark Vincent B. Yu

University of Virginia Curry School of Education

The Three-Paper Manuscript-Style Dissertation: Overview

This dissertation presents a line of research exploring the characteristics and influence of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships across adolescence. This dissertation follows the requirements of the three-paper manuscript-style dissertation option, as defined in the University of Virginia Curry School of Education's Ph.D. Dissertation Manual (2015). The three-paper dissertation calls for students to submit an introduction (linking document) describing the conceptual and theoretical linkages among all three papers, and three first-authored manuscripts ready for submission to peer-reviewed academic journals. In adherence with these guidelines, I am the first author on all three papers included in this dissertation. Paper 1 has been published in the *Journal of Adolescent Research* and is cited below. As of May 2018, Paper 2 is being considered for publication in another academic journal and Paper 3 is in preparation to be submitted for publication. All three papers are conceptually linked while providing unique contributions to the field. The remainder of this linking document discusses the rationale for the current line of research and the theoretical framework shared by the three papers. Following the linking document, each of the three papers are presented.

Yu, M.V.B., Johnson, H.E., Deutsch, N.L., & Varga, S. (2016). ”She calls me by my last name”: Exploring adolescent perceptions of positive teacher-student relationships. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *33*(3), 332-362. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416684958

Aligning Youth's Attributes and Needs with Ecological Assets: A Relational-Developmental Examination of Supportive Non-Parental Youth-Adult Relationships Across Adolescence

Supportive relationships during adolescence can be powerful avenues for positive development. Although peer and parent relationships are often considered the most significant influences on youth development, researchers have also emphasized the importance of youth's relationships with non-parental adults (e.g., teachers, coaches, extended kin; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). In fact, research suggests that the presence of significant non-parental adults or "VIPs" (also known as natural mentors), are a normative aspect of youth development (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Beam et al., 2002). Aside from being common, these relationships are considered one of the most important ecological assets for positive youth development (Theokes & Lerner, 2006). However, unlike parent or peer relationships, much less is known about non-parental youth-adult relationships (YARs) in terms of the mechanisms of their contributions to youth outcomes and the characteristics of these relationships that youth find supportive. The purpose of this dissertation was to understand *how* and *why* supportive YARs matter and are effective for youth's positive development across adolescence.

Relational-Developmental Framework: Individual ↔ Context Processes

In this dissertation, I utilized a relational-developmental systems (RDS) approach to positive youth development. This ecological perspective views relational processes as the byproduct of the dynamic interrelationships of multiple systems of development ranging from the individual to different levels of influence within the social ecology (Lerner, 2006; Overton, 2010). Conceptualized as individual ↔ context processes, the defining features of a RDS approach includes the integration of multiple levels of organization (e.g., from biology through culture and history), temporality (e.g., potential for systematic change over time), plasticity (e.g., opportunities for change), and a focus on the promotion of positive development across the lifespan (Lerner, 2006). Interactions resulting from individual ↔ context processes are known as "proximal processes" and are considered to be the driving forces of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The focus is on the ''rules," of these processes, that govern or regulate exchanges between individuals and their contexts (Lerner, 2006).

According to the RDS framework, optimal individual ↔ context processes occur through the aligning of youth's individual strengths and ecological assets (Overton, 2010). In this dissertation, I considered an array of youth attributes and needs that serve as potential strengths for positive development (see Figure 1 for conceptual model). These strengths included youth's developmental needs in classrooms (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009), relational working models (Allen, 2008), and youth's needs within developmental stages in adolescence (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). The potential for change in these areas of development is a core strength of all youth—a strength that can be supported and built upon. Ecological or "external" developmental assets include the individuals and the community institutions (e.g., schools, out-of-school time programs, neighborhoods) that foster and support youth's positive developmental trajectories (Theokas & Lerner, 2006; Benson, Scales & Syvertsen, 2011). Significant individuals, and in particular, caring and supportive adults, are considered one of the most important ecological assets (Theokes & Lerner, 2006), affirming the vital role supportive non-parental adults play in the lives of youth. However, the influence of these relationships on youth's development depends largely on several ecological factors including youth's opportunities to engage meaningfully with non-parental adults (e.g., based on the settings that youth occupy, youth's developmental stage, and other social factors including race, ethnicity, culture and gender), and their access and interactions with other social resources (peers, parents, community institutions) (Theokas & Lerner, 2006).

A Strengths-Based Perspective on Youth Development

Over the course of the past two decades, research on adolescent development has shifted from a deficit perspective focused primarily on preventing negative outcomes to a strength-based perspective focused on identifying individual and ecological assets that contribute to positive youth development (e.g., Lerner, 2006, Benson et al., 2011). Within this assets-based perspective, researchers have sought to explore how high-quality relationships with non-parental adults promote more adaptive outcomes among adolescents, including lowered risk, and increased positive socio-emotional (e.g., self-esteem, connection, character, caring) and academic-related (e.g., engagement and competence) outcomes (Lerner, 2006; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2001). Consistent with these findings, the Search Institute emphasizes the importance of “developmental relationships” in promoting youth’s positive development in four broad categories: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Benson et al., 2011). These developmental relationships involve adults providing support, expressing care, challenging growth, sharing power, and expanding students’ possibilities, connections, and opportunities (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2015). Positive youth development occurs through the alignment of these supportive developmental relationships and youth’s individual attributes and needs across contexts.

Social Support in Adolescence

One mechanism through which individual ↔ context processes have been studied, and in particular relationships as one of the ecological assets within a given context, is through the lens of social support. Social support is defined as the provision of both psychological and material resources with the intention of helping individuals cope with stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In this view, social support has been hypothesized to affect wellbeing by reducing the negative effects of stress on youth’s academic and socioemotional outcomes (i.e., stress-buffering hypothesis; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Although stress-buffering is important, there is also strong evidence indicating that supportive relationships are tied to wellbeing even in the absence of specific stressors (Lakey & Orehek, 2011; Feeny & Collins, 2015).

A recent meta-analysis of the literature on social support in adolescence found that nearly 60% of youth benefit from social support and that the influence of social support on outcomes increased with age (Chu et al., 2010). Indeed, research suggests that the significance of social support increases throughout adolescence (Schulenberg, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005), playing a vital role in youth’s successful transition into emerging adulthood (Shulman, Kalnitzki, & Shahar, 2009). Adolescence is a period characterized by profound changes in physical, cognitive and psychosocial developmental processes (Steinberg, 2016). Further, adolescence is accompanied by changes in contexts and developmental needs (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). These changes have implications for the types, characteristics and nature of social support in youth’s lives.

Sterrett and colleagues (2011) suggest that social support is a useful framework for considering how relationships with a range of non-parental adults influence adolescent outcomes. Non-parental adults can provide youth multiple types of support including informational, instrumental, validation, companionship, and emotional support (Wills & Shinar, 2000). These supports provided by non-parental adults are associated with increases in youth’s academic functioning and self-esteem as well as decreases in youth’s behavioral and emotional difficulties (see Sterrett et al., 2011 for a review). Although social support has been measured in multiple ways, it appears to be youth’s perceptions of social support that has the greatest impact on youth outcomes (Chu et al., 2010; Sterrett et al., 2011; Wills & Shinar, 2000).

Three-Paper Manuscript-Style Dissertation

Guiding Questions. The goal of this three-paper manuscript-style dissertation was to explore how individual ↔ context processes operate in supportive youth-adult relationships (YARs). I sought to identify and understand specific mechanisms (e.g., proximal processes) underlying supportive YARs and how they are influenced by youth's individual attributes and needs (e.g., relational working models, developmental needs, age) and contexts (e.g., settings, developmental period; see Figure 1). The three papers in this dissertation were guided by the following questions:

1. What characteristics of YARs do youth find positive and supportive?
    a. What types of social support do YARs provide youth?
2. In what ways do supportive YARs influence youth's positive development?
    a. How do supportive YARs meet youth's developmental needs?
    b. How do supportive YARs influence youth's academic and/or socioemotional wellbeing?

The following questions were specific to individual papers:

1. What interactions do youth find important in their relationships with teachers whom they view as significant non-parental adults (VIPs)? (Paper 1)
2. How do youth's relational working models influence youth's perceptions of social support from VIPs? (Paper 2)
3. How do the characteristics and nature of social support from VIPs differ between early and late adolescence? (Paper 3)

Methods. This dissertation utilized mixed-methods, namely qualitative and a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. I privileged youth's perceptions of supportive YARs based on substantial evidence of the power of perceived social support as compared to actual support received (e.g., Chu et al., 2010).

Paper 1, *"She calls me by my last name": Exploring Adolescent Perceptions of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships,* is an exploration of a universal context for youth (schools and classrooms) and a type of ecological asset that all youth have access to: teacher-student relationships (TSRs). Substantial research has documented the importance of positive TSRs for student success in academics and positive socio-emotional development (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). However, while the importance of positive TSRs is well documented, little is known about contributors to these relationships, especially during adolescence. In this paper, I, with the help of my co-authors, analyzed in-depth interviews from 13 youth who named a teacher as a significant non-parental adult. The purpose of this study was to explore adolescent perceptions of positive TSRs in order to identify and understand key interactions and characteristics of high-quality, supportive TSRs. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: teacher noticing and teacher investment. Within these themes, the role of "free" and "same-level" conversations appeared critical in promoting positive TSRs. These findings contribute to research aimed at understanding specific individual ↔ context processes occurring within supportive YARs. Specifically, we find promise in key teacher-student interactions that may 1) fulfill adolescents' developmental needs for autonomy, competence and connection and 2) promote youth's sense of wellbeing and engagement within classrooms. The findings of this study provide guidance for teachers in terms of specific ways of fostering positive relationships with students. A future direction highlighted in this study included further exploration of vertical versus horizontal interactions in supportive youth-adult relationships in adolescence (see Chu et al., 2010 for a discussion), a topic further examined in Paper 3.

Paper 2, *"It's like all of his attention is on you": Exploring Associations Between Adolescent Attachment, Supportive Adult Relationships, and Self-Esteem***,** built on Paper 1 by exploring perceived social support from various types of YARs, not just positive relationships with teachers. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to identify specific processes that underlie YARs, guided by two specific frameworks: attachment and social support. Per individual ↔ contexts relations, for this study, I consider youth’s relational working model (i.e., attachment) as an individual attribute and supportive YARs as an ecological asset. First, in a quantitative path analysis, I, with the help of my co-authors, found that perceived social support from non-parental adults partially mediated the association between youth’s attachment and self-esteem. In a follow-up mixed-method analysis, we examined youth reflections on social support experienced in relationships with VIPs. We analyzed excerpts coded for instances of five types of social support: emotional, companionship, informational, instrumental, and validation. We used Dedoose to produce normalized frequency graphs to determine the relative percentage of times each type of social support was coded in one of three attachment groups (positive, middle and negative). These groups were based on the distribution of attachment scores across the sample. As compared to youth with positive relational working models, youth with negative relational working models reported fewer instances of emotional support but more instances of validation support. Youth with negative relational working models described (1) the importance of trust and (2) receiving emotional support specific to their needs. In instances of validation support, these youth described how their VIPs (1) provided them with honest and realistic feedback, (2) challenged their negative thinking, and (3) created opportunities for them to recognize and showcase their strengths. These findings underscore the importance of considering youth’s individual attributes in the context of their ongoing relationships to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role and dynamics of supportive relationships in youth’s lives.

Paper 3, *Aligning Social Support to Youth’s Developmental Needs: The Role of Non-Parental Youth-Adult Relationships in Early and Late Adolescence,* built on Papers 1 and 2 by exploring the ways in which the characteristics and nature of social support from VIPs differ between early and late adolescence. Through the provision of different types of social support, VIPs can facilitate youth's positive development across adolescence. However, despite the potential benefits of these relationships, there has been little consideration of how the relational process may vary across different adolescent stages. Utilizing qualitative methods, this study examined five types of social support processes (emotional, instrumental, companionship, validation and informational) as reported by youth during early (n=23) and late adolescence (n=14). Specifically, this study compared the characteristics and nature of the five types of social support between these two distinct developmental periods. General characteristics of relationships that differed between early and late adolescence included younger youth having more vertical (e.g., adult to youth) interactions with their significant non-parental adults (VIPs), as compared to older youth who emphasized more horizontal interactions (e.g., peer to peer). Additionally, compared to younger youth who emphasized the importance of enacted support (e.g., frequency and availability of support in shared settings), older youth emphasized the significance of perceived support in times of need and despite physical distance or time apart. Additional differences emerged between the early and late adolescent groups across the five types of social support including the significance of scaffolding, humor-related interactions, and support for self-esteem issues for younger youth; and the significance of mutuality and support for education and career goals to name a few, for older youth. There was also some overlap in the findings from Papers 2 and 3 regarding themes related to emotional and validation support and specific outcomes, particularly self-esteem. For example, in Paper 2, youth with negative relational working models reported the importance of validation support that helped them challenge negative thinking related to self-esteem. This was similar to the way that younger youth in Paper 3 described the importance of supports for their self-esteem issues. Paper 3 adds an additional layer of understanding of these developmental processes in adolescence. By studying individual ↔ context processes, this study (Paper 3) demonstrates how a developmental perspective may elucidate the processes that characterize and underlie youth’s relationships with supportive non-parental adults in early and late adolescence. Findings indicate a need to understand, promote and sustain these important relationships in the lives of youth.

Conclusion

Together, the three papers in this dissertation shed light on how individual ↔ context processes operate in the context of supportive YARs. Social support is often thought of as the mechanism through which YARs influence positive youth outcomes. However, how and why social support provided by VIPs matter and is effective can vary based on the developmental needs of youth, their relational working models, and the contexts in which youth develop. VIPs are well situated in youth’s lives to provide a variety of developmentally appropriate supports as youth develop and transition from one context to another. These supports have strong implications in optimizing youth’s positive growth and development

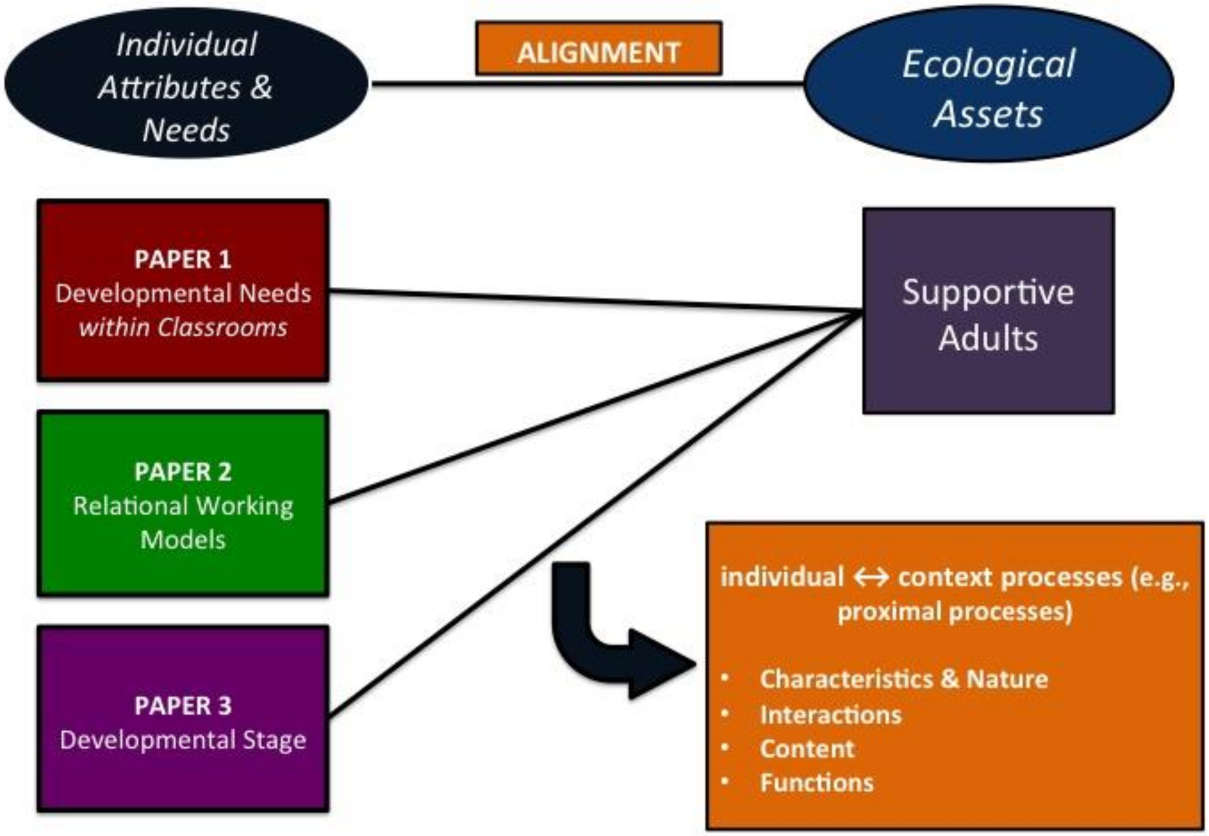
Individual Attributes & Needs
ALIGNMENT
Ecological Assets
PAPER 1
Developmental Needs *within Classrooms*
PAPER 2
Relational Working Models
PAPER 3
Developmental Stage
Supportive Adults
individual ↔ context processes (e.g., proximal processes)
Characteristics & Nature
Interactions
Content
Functions

Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

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"She calls me by my last name":

Exploring Adolescent Perceptions of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

Mark Vincent B. Yu[1], Haley Johnson[1], Nancy L. Deutsch[1] and Shannon M. Varga[2]

[1]University of Virginia Curry School of Education

[2]Center for Promise, Boston University

Abstract

Interpersonal relationships during adolescence can be powerful avenues for personal development. As school is a universal context for youth, positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) are one potential source for such developmentally promotive relationships. Unfortunately research has shown a decline in the quality of teacher-student interactions as students progress through PK-12, which suggests a missed developmental opportunity. More research is needed to identify factors that contribute to positive TSRs, especially during adolescence. Utilizing qualitative methods, this study explores adolescent perceptions of TSRs in order to identify and understand key interactions and characteristics of high-quality, positive TSRs. We identified two overarching themes that emerged from our qualitative analysis: teacher noticing and teacher investment. Within these themes, we also examined the role of “free” and “same-level” conversations in promoting positive TSRs. Our findings contribute to research aimed at understanding specific processes that occur within positive youth-adult relationships. Specifically, we find promise in key teacher-student interactions that fulfill adolescents’ developmental needs including autonomy, competence and connection. Our findings emphasize the importance of the student perspective and that capitalizing on positive TSRs during adolescence can be a powerful way to promote positive youth development.

“She calls me by my last name”:

Exploring Adolescent Perceptions of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

Interpersonal relationships during adolescence can be powerful avenues for personal development. As school is a universal context for youth, positive teacher-student relationships (TSRs) are one potential source for such developmentally promotive relationships. Unfortunately, a large body of research has documented a decline in the quality and quantity of teacher-student interactions, as well as student engagement as students progress through PK-12 education (Marks, 2000; Klem & Connell, 2004; Gallup, 2015). These are troubling findings considering there is strong evidence that relationships with adults in schools are among the most important predictors of positive youth development, which includes both academic (e.g., achievement) and non-academic (e.g., social-emotional) outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

One explanation for this marked decline is the assertion that adolescents’ developmental needs are not being met in today’s classrooms. For example, the changing structures of schools and dynamics of TSRs as students age may not be changing in a way that meets adolescents’ continued need for connection, meaningful challenges, and competence-building experiences (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Secondary school teachers are spending less time with individual students and reporting greater professional and physical distance from their students than primary school teachers which threatens the basic foundation on which high-quality teaching and learning depend (Hargreaves, 2000).

Despite these challenges, TSRs provide a unique entry point for researchers and practitioners working to understand and improve the social and learning environments of schools and classrooms (Pianta et al., 2012). More research is needed to identify factors that contribute to a positive teacher-student relationship in adolescence. Utilizing qualitative methods, this study seeks to address this goal by exploring adolescent perceptions of TSRs in order to identify and understand key interactions and characteristics of high-quality, positive TSRs.

Literature Review

Adolescent and Teacher Relationships

Positive teacher-student relationships have been linked to better academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes for students in elementary, middle, and high school (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Crosnoe et al., 2004). However, while the importance of TSRs is well documented, little is known about contributors to these relationships, especially during adolescence. Specifically, limited research surrounding TSRs in adolescence suggests that positive TSRs are both less frequent and less emotionally salient than relationships with peers, parents, or extended family members (Darling, Hamilton, & Shaver, 2003), limiting our understanding of the benefits and processes underlying these important relationships.

What is known is that adolescence is marked by significant developmental and social changes and challenges, which can be exacerbated by the social structures of middle and high schools. For example, the goals for learning emphasized through policies and practices become more tightly controlled and scheduled, limiting student access to and time with caring adults and opportunities for competence-building and healthy individuation (Eccles, 2004; Pianta et al., 2012). Additionally, school size, tracking policies, and school start and end times can negatively influence adolescents' social and academic experiences in schools (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Consequently, engagement (i.e. attention, interest, investment and effort students expend in the work of learning) has been shown to decline as students progress through the upper elementary grades and middle school, reaching its lowest levels in high school (Marks, 2000). In classrooms the expectations placed on school teachers to meet achievement standards, as well as their common misunderstanding of adolescence as a period of “conflict,” can lead to highly strict and punitive classroom settings and instruction methods that are highly teacher-driven and discouraging of exploration, curiosity, and emotional understanding (Hargreaves, 2000; Pianta et al., 2012). For adolescents engaged in complex identity work and relationship building, difficulty adjusting to these personal, social, and structural realities can lead to disengagement, disciplinary problems, alienation, and decreases in motivation and academic achievement (Marks, 2000; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Klem & Connel, 2004; Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Fortunately, research shows that positive relationships with teachers can assist students with these personal and environmental demands. In particular, positive TSRs, characterized by mutual understanding, warmth, closeness, trust, respect, care and cooperation, have the potential to cultivate feelings of confidence and connectedness for all students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). These relationships help maintain student interests in academic and social pursuits, which in turn can lead to better academic and social outcomes including more positive relationships with peers (Hughes, Cavell & Willson, 2001) and parents (Chen & Gregory, 2010).

During adolescence, aspects of TSRs that become most significant include bonding (i.e., feeling cared for by teachers; Crosnoe et al., 2004), belonging (i.e., feeling close to teachers; McNeely & Falci, 2004), trust (Gregory & Ripski, 2008) and respect (LaRusso, Romer & Selman, 2008). Additionally, research emphasizes the need for classroom settings that are characterized by a positive emotional climate where teachers are sensitive to adolescent needs and perspectives (Allen et al, 2013). Consistent with these findings, the Search Institute emphasizes the importance of “developmental relationships” in promoting positive connections between youth and adults. These relationships involve adults expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding students’ possibilities, connections, and opportunities (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2015). Whereas “developmental relationships” may come in various forms, teachers are an important potential source of developmental relationships to which all youth have access. Yet because of the structural features and contextual/social presses on schools, TSRs may face more constraints or be enacted in different ways than developmental relationships formed in other settings.

Adolescent Perceptions of Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

To date, relatively few studies have utilized qualitative methods to consider adolescent perceptions of positive TSRs. In fact, theories of effective student-teacher interactions are often based on empirical studies of the quantitative correlates of academic achievement and engagement (see Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011 for a review) and based more on adult (e.g., teachers, third-party observers) perspectives (e.g., Hargreaves, 2000; Allen et al., 2013). One way to advance theories of effective teaching is to understand TSRs from the perspectives of youth (Doda & Knowles, 2008). In support of this perspective, previous studies on social support have documented the significance and power of perceived support as compared to actual support received (Chu, Saucer, & Hafner, 2010; Sterrett, et al, 2011).

For example Roeser et al, (2000) found that adolescents’ perceptions of their school-learning environment (e.g., quality of relationships with teachers) predicted not only their achievement (i.e. GPA), but also their motivation and emotional functioning even after controlling for prior adjustment measures (e.g., poor academic motivation, delinquency) and demographic factors. Consistent with these findings, Klem and Connell (2004) found that students who perceive teachers as caring, supportive, and invested in their learning were more likely to report on-going engagement in school and more positive reactions to school-related challenges, which in turn were associated with higher attendance and test scores. It is noteworthy that in this particular study, secondary school students were almost three times more likely to report engagement if they experienced highly supportive teachers, compared to elementary school students. However the authors note that the reason they benefit more from high levels of support is unclear. These quantitative studies illustrate that schools and classrooms are fundamentally social contexts and that students' interpersonal experiences in these settings exert powerful influence on the processes of teaching and learning. Although there is general agreement that positive TSRs are important for educational processes, qualitative research that focuses on a realistic representation of this relationship from the students' points of view, including the perceptions and interactions assigned to this relationship as well as its relation to learning and development, has been rare.

Among the limited qualitative research in this area, previous studies have highlighted factors that may influence adolescent perceptions of youth-adult relationships including TSRs. For example, through semi-structured interviews with 31 high school students, Galbo (1983) found that adolescents described significant adults in their lives as having positive personality traits such as friendliness, trustworthiness, and a good sense of humor in addition to being characterized as intelligent, worthy of respect, and having "interesting" lives. Beyond personality traits, research has also highlighted the progression of positive youth-adult relationships over time. Jarrett, Sullivan and Watkins (2005) found that adolescents move through an initial distrust of adults towards a stage of meaningful connection, where youth perceived adults as providing various types of support and encouragement catered to their specific goals and needs. Chhuon and Wallace (2014) highlighted the benefits of teachers moving away from "just teach" moments – characterized by minimal enthusiasm for their job and little care for their students – towards interactions that helped students feel "known," which increased students' sense of school connectedness and personal belonging. Unfortunately, in this particular study adolescent participants noted more instances of teachers who “just teach,” which the authors contend was in part due to the fact that the schools which the students attended were located in urban contexts that experienced many of the social and economic issues that often challenge working class urban communities (Chhoun & Wallace, 2014, p. 388). These challenges may result from a scarcity of resources and supports as well as practices based on specific school and community characteristics (e.g., private vs. public schools, school culture, school & classroom size, parental involvement, safety, racial & ethnic composition), which may impact the quality as well as adolescent perceptions of TSRs (e.g., Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Crosnoe et al., 2004).

In order to further understand the processes that underlie positive TSRs, we utilized a relational developmental systems approach that emphasizes the interactions between adolescents and the relationships in their context that support and promote healthy growth and development (Overton, 2013). The conceptual emphasis of a relational developmental systems approach is placed on individual ↔ context relations, which considers learning and development as fundamentally relational processes (Pianta et al., 2012). Over the course of the school year, TSRs develop through a complex intersection of student and teacher beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, experiences, and interactions with one another. These interactions, known as proximal processes, are the primary mechanisms of human development and are composed of multiple cognitive and emotional patterns and processes that are influenced by the socio-cultural context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Yet, as noted, these proximal processes are also influenced by the more distal contexts, such as the school and policy environments, that may either facilitate or constrain relational opportunities.

The primary goal of this study is to identify and understand how immediate environmental processes operate in the context of high-quality, positive TSRs. Specifically, we explore what interactions youth find important in their relationships with teachers whom they view as significant and further explore what these relationships look and feel like from the youth perspective. Additionally, although it is not the focus of this study, we consider the broader ecologies our adolescent participants occupy that may impact their perceptions of these relationships. By focusing on adolescent perceptions of positive TSRs, we want to highlight the importance of considering schools and TSRs as contexts that can play an important role in students' broader academic and social-emotional development.

The overall study is grounded in an interpretivist or constructivist epistemology (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). We believe that it is the meanings that people make of their experiences that drive human action and are therefore important for social scientists to understand. In line with this approach, we view knowledge as being constructed in the interaction between the researcher and the participant, and use transactional methods that allow for the researcher and participant together to probe the participants' understandings of their relationships with adults. We interpret these meanings within a frame that privileges the contextual nature of lived experiences but that also seeks to discover when and where commonalities in meanings exist that may help inform educational and youth-related practice and policy.

Methods

The data for this study comes from two time points of a longitudinal, mixed-methods study on youth-adult relationships. Youth in grades 7-11 were recruited from after-school programs, schools, and community-based sites in a small Southeastern region to take a survey about themselves, their after-school activities, and their relationships with adults. A sub-sample of 41 youth were purposefully selected from the survey sample to participate in the longitudinal portion of the study, including in-depth interviews twice a year (see Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016 for details on the survey and sampling procedures). Since all the participants were under the age of 18 at the time of the interviews, both parent consent and youth assent where obtained. Interviews asked youth to nominate a significant non-parental adult, herein called their VIP (defined below).

Participants and School Contexts

In order to examine youth perceptions of important TSRs, we selected data from those youth who nominated a teacher as their VIP in Time 1 (n=13; see Table 1 for a summary of participant information). Based on demographic data acquired at the time of screening survey, 10 of the participants self-identified as White, two self-identified as African American, and one self-identified as White and Hispanic. Participants' ages ranged from 13-17 (mean=14.88). Eight participants identified as male and five as female. One participant was eligible for free or reduced lunch. All names in this study are pseudonyms, which were selected by participants.

Participants nominated VIP teachers from various content areas, including core subjects such as math and science and electives such as band and automotive tech. The majority of the participants (10) attended either a public middle or high school while two attended a private Catholic school and one attended a military high school. Based on publicly available data from school year (SY) 2013-2014 (year interviews began), the public schools represented in this study had standardized test scores and graduation rates that surpassed both state and national averages. The public middle schools represented in the study served an average of 600 students and had student to teacher ratios ranging from 11.1 to 13:1. Around 35% of the students in these middle schools qualified for free and/or reduced lunch and less than 15% had limited English proficiency. On average, the public high schools represented in the study served 1200 students and had student to teacher ratios ranging from 13:1 to 16:1. Less than 25% of the students in these high schools qualified for free and/or reduced lunch and less than 8% of students had limited English proficiency. All the public schools (both middle and high) had majority White students (ranging from 50%-70%) followed by Black (ranging from 13%-20%) and Hispanic (ranging from 11%-19%) students. No information regarding the private Catholic school and military high school were available. However, according to a National Citizen Survey[1] conducted in 2014, the larger community contexts in which all these schools (both public and private) occupied had above average "Quality of Life" ratings in overall community quality, economic sustainability, and cultural and educational opportunities to name a few.

In-Depth Interviews

Interviews asked participants to nominate a VIP, which we defined as "persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make" (Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois, 2011). Interviews lasted an hour to an hour and a half. Approximately a third of each interview (both Time 1 and 2) consisted of questions surrounding the VIP relationship. In Time 2, we included follow-up questions on relationships with previously nominated VIPs. Participants were asked what they normally did with their VIP, what they talked about, why they felt close to their VIP, how they knew the VIP respected them, etc. In order to gather a more complete picture of the youth's relationship with their VIP, the interview protocol also included questions regarding negative interactions, conflicts, and changes in closeness during the course of the relationship. Additionally, at Time 1 youth were asked to nominate an "Other Adult" – an adult they spent a lot of time with but to whom they did not feel close. We asked participants similar questions about these relationships. In our sample, two participants who named a teacher as a VIP also named a teacher as their “Other Adult.” Although it was not the focus of our study, these perspectives allowed us the opportunity to compare the way students talked about teachers they considered significant adults in their life with teachers with whom they felt a disconnect.

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[1] The National Citizen Survey™ (The NCS) is a collaborative effort between National Research Center, Inc. (NRC) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). The NCS was developed by NRC to provide a statistically valid survey of resident opinions about community and services provided by local government.

Two principle-investigators, three graduate students, and two full time research assistants conducted interviews. A majority of the interviews were one-on-one, but occasionally we worked in interviewer pairs to enhance interviewer-interviewee repertoire as well as our comfort level (e.g., to ensure a same-gender interviewer was present). The majority of the interviewers are women (84%) and racially identify as White (71%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (29%).

Analyses

We conceptually coded (see Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) the VIP sections of the Time 1 and Time 2 interviews for youth who nominated a teacher as their VIP (n=13). For comparison, we then applied the thematic codes to the two youth at Time 1 who also nominated a teacher as their “Other Adult.” Our analytic process is described below.

Coding Data. The first and second author started with line-by-line reading of and memo-ing on the interview data. The process was iterative, involving multiple readings of the transcripts and constant discussion between the two researchers (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2008). Out of this process an initial codebook was created to reflect what youth perceived to be key interactions in their positive TSRs. These included teacher “noticing,” “investment,” “accommodating,” “validating,” “conversations,” and “promoting a positive atmosphere.” Drawing from the Consensual Qualitative Research method (CQR; Hill et al., 2005), the first and second author coded the 13 transcripts independently and met to arrive at consensus.

Thematic Analysis. Teacher noticing and teacher investment were the most frequently applied codes in the youth’s narratives of positive TSRs and encompassed many of the initial codes described above. In order to better understand these themes, the first two authors re-read the data within each theme, comparing within and across youth. Two subthemes emerged: “free” conversations within teacher noticing and “same-level” conversations within investment. Using the same CQR method (Hill et al., 2005), the data from the two “Other Adult” sections were coded for the same themes and compared within youth. During this process we also engaged in coding for disconfirming evidence throughout all discussions of teacher-student interactions. We defined disconfirming evidence as instances where the interactions described would be observed as positive or negative by an outside observer yet the participants attributed them as the opposite or neutral. Examination of disconfirming cases allowed us to further investigate the nuances of positive TSRs, and gain a deeper understanding of the underlying processes of these relationships. We also hoped to provide credibility and validity by examining these negative and discrepant cases (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Auditing and Reliability. Throughout out the entire analysis the first two authors were in conversation with the third and fourth author. As more experienced qualitative researchers they provided guidance and acted as auditors of the themes. Finally, a researcher familiar with the project but not actively involved with the data corroborated the themes and analyses in order to decrease the power of groupthink (Hill et al., 2005).

Findings

We identified two overarching themes that emerged consistently across all of the interviews: teacher noticing and teacher investment. Within these themes, we also examined the role of “free” and “same-level” conversations in promoting positive TSRs (see Table 2 for Codebook consisting of themes, definitions, and examples).

Teacher Noticing

Teacher noticing encompasses teachers' noticing of students' presence and needs in and outside of the classroom. This theme involves actions such as teachers calling on students to answer questions in class and initiating informal greetings in the school hallway. A key aspect of this theme is that interactions do not need to be lengthy or in-depth. In fact, many participants in our study described the "little" and "normal" things their teachers did to notice them that facilitated a sense of closeness and respect. For example, when asked about what his teacher does that makes him feel close to her, Robert, a middle school student says:

> In class when she calls me by my last name. It just makes me feel accepted, that she notices me a lot. And so, yeah, those types of things make me feel especially close to her.

Initially, Robert describes how he felt close to his teacher because of her personality, specifically how she's "always smiling" and "always happy." He goes on to say that he grows to feel especially close to her because she calls him by his last name. Here we see a simple interaction initiated by a teacher that leads to a student feeling accepted and even closer to a teacher. Other students in our study described similar interactions noting how their teachers gave them nicknames and "joked" around with them that likewise fostered feelings of closeness and respect. What seem to separate these noticing interactions from similar interactions that occur in everyday classroom settings are students' perceptions of their teachers. Like Robert, students often commented on their teacher's personality, which helped the effectiveness of teacher noticing interactions. Moreover these interactions were consistent as indicated by students' descriptions of these interactions: "He would *always* say hi to me," and "He jokes around with me *all the time*" (emphasis added).

Whereas teacher noticing interactions were plentiful, these interactions varied in content across participants. For some students it involved simple interactions such as greetings initiated by a teacher. For other students noticing involved interactions that were much more complementary to their academic and socioemotional dispositions. For example, Bob, a high school student says, “he noticed right away that I was behind” when describing the beginning of his relationship with his Spanish teacher. He adds that knowing that his teacher notices that he “tries really hard” at improving at Spanish indicated that his teacher respected him. Similarly, Carrie, a middle school student who describes her relationship with her Science teacher says, “She understands how I learn and the way I process things.”

Bodos, a high school student, alludes to how his Drama teacher notices when he is not willing to engage in conversation:

> If she seen that I was upset…she wouldn't harass me or make me talk about it. She'd leave me be if I said I didn't want to talk about it.

For Bodos, it is important that his teacher notices and accepts his unwillingness to talk about his problem, which for him is indicative of respect. Other students in our study shared similar sentiments noting how their teachers noticed that they were “tired” or “having a bad day,” which for students signified that their teachers cared for them.

Although most aspects of teacher noticing are positive, it can also manifest in ways that are perceived negatively by students. For example when teachers aren’t fully aware of their students’ academic abilities or assume what they know or are capable of, this can lead to friction within the teacher and student relationship. Connor, a high school student illustrates this here:

> Sometimes he can be a little brash – like when he’s going over like a test, he talks about things in a way that’s like it’s obvious that this shouldn’t have been it. And you’re sitting there and you look down, and you were the one who made that mistake.

It is important to note that in the above excerpt Connor is describing his relationship with his nominated VIP teacher. Although his teacher might have expected him to know the correct, “obvious” answers to the test, the way Connor is interpreting this particular interaction is negative. However this does not change the fact that Connor considers the relationship to be positive. Like Connor, other students in our study show that they are continually assessing how they believe others in their environment perceive them. Moreover, they show that interactions over time have the power to strengthen a relationship despite some conflict along the way.

“Free” Conversations. Most participants mentioned the importance of the ability to have conversations with their significant teachers. As a subset of teacher noticing, one particular type of conversation we identified was the idea of having “free” conversations. We conceptualized free conversations as being part of teacher noticing because of its emphasis on making students feel like their teachers notice their presence in and outside of the classroom. In a way, teacher noticing interactions create opportunities and a platform for free conversations. Feeling comfortable to have these free conversations with adults was a large contributor as to why students felt respected by, and close to their nominated teachers. We refer to these conversations as “free” because they represent a broad range of conversation topics ranging from simple “how are you” questions to informal exchanges about hobbies, jokes, or other “random things.”

These conversations were mainly teacher initiated and despite lacking length and depth, for some students they represented a positive connection. For example, when Abby, a middle school student describes having conversations with her AVID teacher she says, “She tells us lots of funny stories.” Abby adds how she appreciates her teacher’s sense of humor and her ability to connect with others through her stories without having to “really try.” Another middle school student, Skylar echoes Abby’s sentiment that it doesn’t take much for a connection to form. For Skylar the simple fact that her math teacher made the effort to have conversations indicated the teacher respected her:

> Interviewer: Does she do things so that you know that she respects you?
> Skylar: Well she does talk to us, which I guess is a big key. And not just with math,

> she'll ask you how's your day going and just normal conversation.

As the above examples illustrate, most free conversations were adult-driven and "normal," often part of day-to-day interactions that impacted students' perceptions of their relationship with their teachers. By engaging in free conversations with students, teachers acknowledge more than one particular, de-contextualized aspect of youth as "students." Skylar's statement in particular, runs counter to previous research that has highlighted teachers who "just teach," an approach that can lead to adolescent disengagement (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014).

Nonetheless, the presence of such conversations alone does not predict a strong relationship. Connor, for example, experiences a TSR where these free conversations are present yet he experiences a disconnect. In talking about his English teacher, who he names as an "Other Adult" who he spends time with but doesn't feel close to, Connor says:

> I can appreciate [when] she'd ask me personal questions like, 'What are you doing this weekend? How was your break?' [But] I just – I don't always quite understand what she says she's done, and she doesn't always quite understand what I've done.

Although Connor can appreciate the attempts his English teacher is making to understand him, he still experiences an in-authentic connection with his teacher. One reason for this disconnect is Connor's strong interest in math as compared to other subjects, which makes it difficult for him to form a close bond with his English teacher. Yet ultimately, Connor does respect his English teacher: "I feel like she – I respect her a lot, she respects me I feel like." Therefore, even if a student doesn't perceive positive personal conversations with a teacher that doesn't mean there aren't other ways to foster mutual respect.

Teacher Investment

It is widely known that students need to be more than physically present in the classroom for their experiences in school and their interactions with teachers to be transformative (Wallace

& Chhuon, 2014). Likewise, teachers must also show investment beyond their physical presence in the classroom. All the students in our sample described instances of teacher investment, the second major thematic category in our data, which we defined as moving beyond surface-level ways of interacting and connecting with students through the encouragement of growth and learning. In these instances, students described interactions when they felt like their teachers “really cared,” offered “extra help,” “accommodated” to their needs, and “listened.” A typical interaction that reflects this theme in the classroom was evident in Skylar’s interview:

> If I ask her a question she’ll really make sure I understand it before letting me go and trying to do it on my own and that’s just really nice because some teachers will be like, ‘Okay do you have it now?’ or ‘Okay here’s the answer go see if you can do it’ but she’ll be like, ‘Okay do you actually know or do you have any more questions?

Here Skylar described an appreciation for the way her teacher took the time and effort to ensure she understood a question. In her description of this interaction, she references other teachers’ lack of commitment in taking time to facilitate and ensure student learning. Her description speaks to research that suggests students learn and achieve more in challenging yet supportive environments in which they feel a positive connection. These environments are those that have “autonomy-supportive” teachers who emphasize student effort and persistence and create opportunities for students to work and learn in their own way (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

Similar sentiments regarding teacher investment were voiced by Bob, who says, “If I wanted to know something, he would help me, and then help me understand it better, as opposed to someone who might just tell me the answer, just to get me to leave them alone or something.” A central notion in fostering youth’s competence within schools is that students will only engage and personally value activities they can actually understand and master. Accordingly, it is necessary that feedback downplays evaluation and emphasizes students’ effectiveness, thus providing relevant information on how to master the tasks at hand (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In line with this idea, a few students, particularly the older students in our sample, noted the significance of being given “bigger projects” and “extra responsibility” which helped to develop their sense of competence as well as feelings of respect and trust in their TSRs.

As these examples suggest, teacher investment involves a level of teacher care and commitment towards student growth and learning. This level of care and commitment was not limited to the direct support offered by teachers but also included teachers caring enough to connect students to other resources, as Johnny Depp, a high school student describes here:

> He always has something – some good advice to give you about whatever problems you have. And if he doesn't then he'll point you to someone who does.

Adolescents also described instances in which their teachers invested their time outside of the classroom to support them. For example, when asked about particular interactions she thinks are representative of her relationship with her Band teacher, Rachel, a high school students says:

> I feel like if anything ever happens, I can go to see him outside of class, and I know he'll always take a minute from what he's doing and talk to me in private about whatever it is.

Rachel’s description was typical of the way many of the students described their interactions outside of scheduled classroom time -- as a teacher offering extra help and accommodating to students’ needs (e.g., schedules, privacy). However, characteristics of teacher investment, although often regarded as important by youth, may not always lead to positive TSRs. This was evident in McMolnakerson’s description of his “Other Adult” teacher:

> McMolnakerson: She’s always willing to help me. She’s a good teacher in that sense – she is a good teacher, but she’s not – we don’t get along.
> Interviewer: Okay. Does being with her make you feel better about yourself in any way?
> McMolnakerson: I feel – I dread that class every day.

McMolnakerson adds that although the teacher offers to help him, he feels as though she enforces rules without taking any context into consideration. McMolnakerson’s interview posits the importance of getting the fuller picture of TSRs, which is not limited to teacher pedagogy and teacher interactions, but also students' perceptions of these relationships. This is important because students who perceive greater dissatisfaction with the school environment are likely to experience less supportive relationships with their teachers (Fredrikson & Rhodes, 2004). Moreover the above excerpt highlights the juxtaposition that students can acknowledge positive traits even in a relationship they see as mostly negative as well as vice versa, identifying negative traits in a relationship they see as mostly positive. Although McMolnakerson did not have a close interpersonal bond with his teacher, he still thinks of her as a "good" teacher, one that he is able to learn from despite the negative classroom environment she promotes for him.

"Same-level" Conversations. As a mechanism of teacher investment, adolescents described having "same-level" conversations with their teachers. These involve exchanges where students play a more "equal" role to their teacher. A key aspect of this theme was that teachers acknowledged that they "didn't have all the answers" and that they can also make mistakes. We conceptualized these conversations as part of teacher-investment because of its emphasis on teachers providing a space for students' growth and learning by highlighting students' contribution to the relationship. For example, Connor says:

> Interviewer: Does he do particular things that make you know that he respects you?
> Connor: He doesn't treat us like little kids. He treats us like peers, he'll have discussions with us, and it won't be like he's talking down to us. He's talking at the same level.

Connor feels his TSR does not embody the stereotypical teacher-student dynamic, which involves the teacher lecturing down to students. In this view the teacher is the sole information owner. However the word "discussion" and "same-level" implies that each party, both teacher and student, has equal weight, contribution and influence in the dialogue. Rachel adds:

> I'd say [Band teacher] is more on my level. He understands me more. He's less 'parenty' than my best friend's parent. She kind of feels like another mom. When I'm talking to her, I feel like I'm talking to my mom. With [Band teacher] I feel like I'm talking to a friend.

Here Rachel is comparing her teacher to her best friend's mom, another non-parental adult she considers important. Rachel's descriptions, along with the Connor's example speak to the "in-between" role non-parental adults including teachers may play in student's lives, providing companionship typical of peer relationships and being less structured than typical parental relationships (Beam, Chen & Greenberger, 2002; Hirsch et al., 2011).

Another student, Carrie explains that because her teacher is "willing to come down to [her] level and not act superior" sets her a part from other teachers. Further echoing this sentiment, Robert says his teacher "respects his opinion." He elaborates by saying "If I tell her anything, she really considers it as if like I may know as much about the subject as she does, even though she's lived a lot longer than I have." As a result of these same-level conversations, students not only noted increased levels of respect and closeness with their teachers but also increased interests in the relevant subject matters (e.g., math).

Benefits of Positive TSRs

As noted throughout the findings sections of this paper, positive TSRs facilitated feelings of closeness, respect, and trust. Aside from these relational qualities, our participants noted additional benefits from their relationships with their teachers and in particular through the specific interactions (e.g., teacher noticing and investment) highlighted in the previous sections. For example, many students noted an increase in academic skills. A few students were able to transfer some skills to other contexts as Abby states here: "I've learned some skills to use outside of class, and in my other classes too." Older students in our study noted being able utilize knowledge and skills they learned from their teachers to help them with the college process.

Another benefit was an enhanced sense of wellbeing. Specifically, students noted how their teachers "built-up [their] self-esteem" and gave them a more "positive outlook on life and on [themselves].” This was not the case for all the students, however, as Michael replies here when asked if his Science teacher makes him feel better about himself:

> Not really… It’s just fun to be around him really. Like he doesn’t really make me feel any different…it’s just like a different learning environment, which makes him different.

While not all the students noted an enhanced sense of wellbeing, a third and consistent benefit was the promotion of a “different,” “positive,” and “infectious” learning environment, which in-turn, enhanced students’ engagement in their classes and in their larger school community. This was particularly evident in Skylar’s interview:

> It is nice going into his class because he promotes a good vibe, you could walk-in sleepy [but] once you get in there you just feel happy, awake, and ready to learn and improve.

Similarly, other students noted wanting to work “harder” because of the care and support they received from their teacher. For example, Connor says, “He just brings you up… and makes you want to go out and try.” McMolnakerson, as a result of his teacher’s noticing interactions feels that his teacher “cares more about [him],” which in turn makes him feel better about his place at his school: “I feel like I fit in better there.” As far as interactions that were more indicative of teacher investment, he adds, “I started enjoying my class and started understanding more because before it was like a big puzzle but now it’s all coming together.”

Beyond Proximal Processes

Although it was not the primary focus of our study, we acknowledge that the interactions and characteristics of positive TSRs that we’ve highlighted are part of a system in which individual, social, economic, and political forces can converge to inform adolescents’ perceptions of these relationships. In our study, the duration and timing of some of the positive TSRs we described seemed to be of particular importance. Specifically, most of these positive TSRs, with the exception of three, were relationships that have persisted over a year with the longest being over 4 years. Furthermore, the timing of the relationship seemed key for a few participants. For example, a big reason why Bob initially got close with his Spanish teacher was because he was "struggling with Spanish," encouraging him to seek out extra support from his teacher. For Abby, it was through having her AVID teacher multiple years and seeing her everyday that she was able to develop a "stronger" relationship. For Michael, the fact that his science teacher was also a part of his church helped to facilitate their relationship. For most of the older students in our sample, the fact that their teachers provided them with support and resources pertaining to the college process was among key factors that made them important.

Another important consideration seemed to be students' interest in the specific class subjects their nominated teachers taught. Notably in our sample, more than half of these classes were outside of core subjects. This brings into question the type of classes that may be more conducive for positive TSRs. Rachel, takes this into consideration when asked what made her Band teacher such an important and influential person in her life:

> I think also part of it is the teaching position that he has, because he doesn't have to help students cram for an [standardized tests]. We're just there to make music. So it's like more of a free expression kind of class. Aside from that he's different from other teachers because he will stop class and give an important life lesson, or he just teaches differently.

Here, Rachel acknowledges that her perception of her teacher is influenced in part by the nature of the class he teaches where in particular, "free expression" is welcomed. In another example of this, Robert notes that his Bible teacher "teaches us to be more loving and caring," which in itself can be more conducive to the formation of a positive TSR. These examples speak to the benefit of having classes that are less structured and afford students the space to connect with their teachers outside of prescriptive curricula.

Other larger, social-cultural factors influenced a few students' interactions with and positive perceptions of their teachers. For Bodos, one of two African-American participants in our sample, being able to have conversations about “racial issues, stereotypes, and politics” with his teacher was very important to him and was among the reasons why he felt close to and cared for by his teacher. He adds that his teacher, a White woman, provided him with the space to have these conversations, which helped to facilitate their relationship. Reagan, a participant who self-identified as being gay, shared a similar appreciation for the space provided by her teacher to talk about her sexuality. In particular, in response to our question to provide a specific example of what made her teacher an important adult in her life, she says “[He] is really open for me to talk about my sexuality with him whereas at home it’s not. So that’s a big example, honestly.”

Discussion

What makes a positive teacher-student relationship? What do they look and feel like from an adolescent perspective? These are questions this exploratory study attempted to answer. Previous research makes it apparent that positive TSRs are important for student success in academics and positive socio-emotional development (Roeser et al., 2000). However, we have reason to believe that the quality of TSRs decrease as students progress through PK-12 education (Marks, 2000). Specifically, the ways educational settings are changing and becoming more scripted and structured may be hindering opportunities for students and adults to interact meaningfully (Eccles, 2004). Yet, despite this generally dismal image of schools and classrooms, this study shows that students are able to identify and describe, with passion and enthusiasm, a relationship with a teacher that they felt was meaningful and important to them.

Currently, we know a lot about the outcomes associated with positive teacher-student relationships but we know less about the contributors to the actual relationship. This study joins other lines of research (e.g., Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005) that have explored the specific processes that underlie positive youth-adult relationships.

Development, teaching, and learning do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they are driven by interactions and experiences over time. These proximal processes help to shape students' learning and development in and outside of the classroom. Qualitatively analyzing in-depth interviews with adolescents, we identified two overarching themes indicative of interactions and characteristics of positive TSRs: teacher noticing and teacher investment. Within these themes, we also found that "free" and "same-level" conversations helped to facilitate and promote indicators of positive TSRs (e.g., feelings of closeness, respect, and trust) as well as students' positive academic and socio-emotional development.

The Importance of the Student Perspective

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), the subjective perception of the environment by adolescents can influence development in the same way as the actual, concrete experience of the environment. In our study we found focusing on adolescents' perceptions of positive TSRs vital in examining the benefits and the underlying processes of these relationships. Our adolescent participants were keenly aware of themselves, their thoughts and feelings, and their relationships with others. Along with numerous studies that have highlighted student perspectives in other areas, we support the notion that it is important to incorporate and evaluate students' perceptions of their context, however varied they may be. To this end, we acknowledge that perceptions, as well as the quality of TSRs, may be influenced by students' socio-cultural context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Indeed, we found differences in the way students interpreted similar interactions based on their experiences and backgrounds. We argue that incorporating their perspectives can provide a more nuanced understanding of positive TSRs.

Developmental Needs of Adolescents

As we analyzed our data, we found that the themes that emerged from the data closely aligned with well-documented developmental needs of adolescents. Drawing from Ryan and Deci (2000)'s Self-Determination theory, which posits the importance of supporting adolescents' needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, we found that teacher noticing and teacher investment interactions were instrumental in nurturing these needs. For example, relatedness, the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others in meaningful ways, was evident in students' descriptions of teacher noticing. When students felt like their teachers noticed them and their academic and socioemotional needs, they felt more connected to their teacher, their classroom, and their school community. Through teacher investment, students' needs for autonomy and competence, referring to a sense of student agency and a feeling of being capable of meeting environmental demands, respectively, was supported by interactions including "same-level" conversations, which fostered "autonomy-supportive" collaborations (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). These collaborations were characterized by supportive yet challenging interactions that created opportunities for students to contribute, learn, and work in their own way and on things they found meaningful and beneficial to their growth and learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Further, our findings support prior work (Cooper, 2014) that suggested that students may be more engaged in classrooms where teachers use strategies that foster identity development, a major task of adolescence. The strategies identified in that study, which are "connective" in nature and help link student's individual interests and needs to the classroom, reflect many of the same types of processes identified by youth in our sample.

Small Wins and Genuine Teacher Care

Previous research has found that when teachers make efforts to form a personal connection with a student, they can dramatically enhance student motivation in school and emotional functioning outside of school (Roeser et al., 2000). This does not however imply that every moment in teacher-student relationships need to be packed with profundity and personal growth (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang & Noam, 2006). Positive TSRs are perhaps better characterized as a series of “small wins” that emerge sporadically over time (Rhodes, et al., 2006, p. 697). Indeed, it seems that even simple, everyday interactions (e.g., calling on students in class, giving them nicknames, and initiating informal “free” conversations) can make a difference. We found that students picked up on whether their teachers cared for them and that students especially appreciated when they felt like their teachers genuinely cared, treated them like actual individuals instead of decontextualized students. These helped students learn to see their teachers as sources of support, guidance, and reassurance (Allen et al., 2013).

The Confluence of Positive and Negative TSR Characteristics

In our study, we found that adolescents reflected on both the negative and positive characteristics of their relationship with their teachers. In students’ descriptions of positive TSRs, they noted instances in which they did not always get along with or had a conflict with their teacher. Attachment theorists have posited the significant role that conflict can play in the development of youth’s healthy and secure relationships with adults (Gormley, 2008). Specifically, what often differentiates positive from negative youth-adult relationships are how conflicts are perceived and internalized (Gormley, 2008). Interactions over time can strengthen a relationship or if internalized by youth as negative, can lead to experiences of stress and disengagement (Rhodes et al., 2006). In line with this idea, although we found that “personality” seemed to be a precursor to positive TSRs, it was clear that students’ subjective perceptions of their teachers’ personalities were in part formulated through key interactions (e.g., humor-related interactions, conversations). This shows that relational practices that engender more positive interactions between students and teachers may impact students’ perception of their teachers.

In our analysis of the “Other Adult” descriptions, we found that students regarded their teachers as being “very good” teachers despite some negative traits. Darling et al. (2003) suggests that a close interpersonal bond may not be the critical feature of youth-adult relationships. Rather, the instrumental aspects of the relationship, or the extent to which the adult engages in challenging and goal-directed joint activities, are what are most salient to adolescents and most influential. However, what seems to separate positive TSRs from negative TSRs in this study is the attention and care (through teacher noticing and investment interactions), teachers provide to their students both academically and socially. Allen et al., (2013) articulate the importance of considering both by stating that “adolescents are not only ‘learners,’ [they] are first and foremost highly social and emotional beings (p. 94).”

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

Positive TSRs have important implications for educational practice and policy. In particular, the fact that these relationships have been consistently linked to important academic and social-emotional outcomes represents an important leverage point for change. Based on the characteristics of positive TSRs that our adolescent participants idenitified, we argue that schools must create opportunities for teachers and students to interact more meaningfully. This effort should include providing a space and time for teachers to connect with their students to engage in interactions such as “free” and “same-level” conversations - both school and non-school related - in order to learn about their students’ academic and social-emotional dispositions, backgrounds, interests and goals. Indeed, the more teachers understand the adolescents they work with, the more likely they are to focus on students’ growth and possibilities (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). This process includes helping teachers implement classroom-friendly activities that can readily show increases in student engagement (Boykin, 2015). It should be expected, however that the implementation of these activities should be gradual yet incremental and be accompanied by helping teachers capitalize on instances of authentic student engagement in their classrooms (Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011). Implementing changes to the larger structural context of schools may also help the development of positive TSRs. For example although we found that TSRs in this study were longer-term, the current system in middle and high schools, in which students often have teachers for only one year, might undermine the development of stronger TSRs. Whereas it might not be practical or possible for students to have teachers for multiple years, creating opportunities for some TSRs to bridge across years might support youth connecting more to teachers and therefore to school.

Teacher training needs to promote an understanding of adolescent needs and goals. Educators must realize that despite the general and often negative trends in student engagement, adolescents have specific developmental needs that require special care and attention. Teachers who understand these patterns of growth, change, and development would be better able to adapt contexts and opportunities for learning in ways that are more successful for their students (Snyder & Lit, 2010). The extent to which interactions in secondary school classrooms are tailored to adolescents' developmental needs will enhance both student engagement and achievement. Given that teaching and learning are "emotional practices" policymakers need to recognize that developing positive TSRs are equally as important as performance standards or achievement measures (Hargreaves, 2000; Allen et al., 2011). They must consider the ways in which local and national policies may undermine or detract from the development of positive TSRs at the point of student development that it may be most needed (Eccles & Roeser, 2011).

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of this research deserve comment. First, aside from our small sample size, the diversity of our participants in terms of race and ethnicity (over 75% White) and socioeconomic status (SES; less than 10% free/reduced lunch) were also limited. Further, we acknowledge that all of the students in our sample come from relatively high-performing schools and privileged communities, which can speak to the quality of resources afforded to these students. This in turn can affect the development and nature of their TSRs (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Although we found some patterns of differences in our study, more work is needed to explore how the nature of positive TSRs are influenced by sociocultural context. For example, Crosnoe et al., (2004) found that positive TSRs are stronger in schools with certain characteristics (e.g., private sector, having greater racial-ethnic matching between students and lower SES status), although these associations vary across race-ethnicity.

Other research has found that although Hispanic and African American students are less likely to name teachers as important adults (Sanchez & Colon, 2005), they may reap more benefits from these relationships than do white students (Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009). Our finding that more male participants identified a teacher as an important adult (over 60%) is linked to research that suggest males are drawn to instrumental support (as opposed to psychosocial support) which teachers might be seen as providing more of (Bogat & Liang, 2005). We also found that 63% of our male participants named a same-gendered teacher compared to 40% of our female students, which is consistent with research that suggests that male students are more likely to see same-gendered teachers as role models (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007). Future research should examine the ways in which race, ethnicity, and gender influences or interacts with students' experiences and perceptions of TSRs. This may have particular importance because of the differences in the availability of same gender and same race teachers to students since the vast majority of teachers are white females.

Lastly, although we found that “free” and “same-level” conversations fostered feelings of closeness, trust, and respect for all our students regardless of age, future work should examine shifts from vertical to more horizontal relationships as students transition to upper grade levels (see Chu, et al., 2010). Despite these limitations and need for future research, one thing is clear from this present study: capitalizing on developmentally promotive practices in schools can be a powerful way to promote positive youth development.

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Table 1

Summary of Participant Information

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Grade	Free and/or Reduced Lunch	School Type	Teacher Subject	VIP Gender
Abby	Female	White	14	8	No	Public Middle School	AVID Teacher	Female
Bob	Male	White	16	11	No	Private Catholic School	Spanish Teacher	Male
Bodos	Male	African-American	16	11	Yes	Public High School	Drama Teacher	Female
Carrie	Female	White	14	9	No	Public High School	Science Teacher	Female
Connor*	Male	White	17	11	No	Public High School	Math Teacher	Male
Johnny Depp	Male	White	16	11	No	Military High School	Physics Teacher	Male
McMolnakerson*	Male	White	17	12	No	Public High School	Auto Tech Teacher	Male
Michael	Male	White	13	8	No	Public Middle School	Science Teacher	Male
Prime	Male	African American	13	8	No	Public High School	Algebra Teacher	Female
Rachel	Female	White	17	12	No	Public High School	Band Teacher	Male
Reagan	Female	White, Hispanic	17	12	No	Public High School	Band Teacher	Male
Robert	Male	White	13	8	No	Private Catholic School	Bible Teacher	Female
Skylar	Female	White	13	8	No	Public Middle School	Math Teacher	Male

*N*ote. AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination and is an elective college preparatory course. Students noted with an asterisk (*) also identified a teacher as an “Other Adult” – an adult they spent a lot of time with but did not feel close to. Both those students named a female English teacher as their “Other Adult.”

Table 2

Codebook: Themes, Definitions, and Examples

Theme	Definition	Examples
Teacher Noticing	Involves teachers “noticing” students’ presence in and outside of the classroom. Furthermore, it involves teachers’ noticing of students’ needs in regard to their academic and socioemotional dispositions.	“He’d pick in me in class and kind of joke around with me” “He kind of noticed right away that I was behind” “She kind of understands how, like the way I learn and the way I process things”
“Free” Conversations	Represents simple “how are you” questions to informal exchanges about hobbies, jokes, or other “random things.” Students played a more passive role in these conversations.	“He’s always saying hi to me in the hallway and starting conversations” “He'll talk to us in the middle of class about random things”
Teacher Investment	Represents teachers moving beyond surface-level ways of interacting and connecting with students through the encouragement of growth and learning.	“He’s really helped me out and just made me better at it” “If I ask her a question she’ll really make sure I understand it before letting me go and trying to do it on my own.”
“Same-level” Conversations	Exchanges where students play a more “equal” role to their teachers. This theme implies that each party, both teacher and student, has equal weight, contribution and influence in the dialogue.	“He doesn’t treat us like little kids. He treats us like peers, almost like – you know, he’ll have discussions with us, and it won’t be like he’s talking down to us. He’s talking at the same level”

“It’s like all of his attention is on you”: A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Adolescent Attachment, Supportive Non-Parent Youth-Adult Relationships and Self-Esteem

Mark Vincent B. Yu[1], Nancy L. Deutsch[1],

Miriam R. Arbeit[1], Valerie A. Futch Ehrlich[2], Haley E. Johnson[1] & Theresa N. Melton[1]

[1]University of Virginia Curry School of Education

[2]Center for Creative Leadership

Abstract

Relational working models of attachment continue to exert strong influences on adolescent self-esteem. There is also a substantial body of research that has documented the importance of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships during adolescence. More research is needed to identify and understand the important features and underlying processes of these supportive relationships in youth's lives. In a quantitative path analysis, we found that perceived social support from non-parental adults partially mediated the relationship between adolescent attachment and self-esteem. In our follow-up mixed-method analysis, we analyzed youth reflections of support experienced in relationships with significant non-parental adults (VIPs). As compared to youth with positive attachment models, youth with negative attachment models reported fewer instances of emotional support but more instances of validation support. Youth in the negative attachment group described (1) the importance of trust and (2) receiving emotional support specific to their needs. In instances of validation support, these youth described how their VIPs (1) provided them with honest and realistic feedback, (2) challenged their negative thinking, and (3) created opportunities for them to recognize and showcase their strengths. Our findings underscore the importance of considering youth's individual attributes in the context of their ongoing relationships in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role and dynamics of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships in youth's lives.

"It's like all of his attention is on you": A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Adolescent Attachment, Supportive Non-Parental Youth-Adult Relationships and Self-esteem

One of the primary developmental milestones of adolescence is building a sense of self. During this process, adolescents are confronted with a variety of challenges that can affect self-development, including changes to their physical appearance, changes in family and peer dynamics, school transitions and much more. Studies have demonstrated declines in self-esteem during the transition into adolescence (Huang, 2010). While not universal, research suggests that some youth may be susceptible to low self-esteem during adolescence. This is concerning as low self-esteem is often associated with negative social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes (Silverstone, & Salsali, 2003; Rosenberg & Owen, 2001).

During adolescence, having low self-esteem is linked to and can be exacerbated by negative attachment working models (Wilkinson, 2004). Fortunately, research shows that the perception and experience of social support from non-parental adults can reinforce self-esteem during adolescence (Sterrett, Jones, McKee & Kincaid, 2011). However, youth may experience and utilize social support in different ways based on their early relational experiences.

This study began with a quantitative path analysis to explore the roles of attachment and perceived social support from non-parental adults in facilitating self-esteem during adolescence. These findings then framed a qualitative analysis of different types of support from non-parental adults as described by youth with different attachment models. Through this mixed method, multi-step process, we aimed to understand the relational processes that promote positive development in adolescence.

Literature Review

Adolescent Attachment

According to attachment theory, the quality of relationships with primary caregivers in early childhood is central to understanding developmental issues linked to adolescence (Bowlby, 1980; Allen, 2008). In the course of interactions with primary caregivers, infants develop a working model of thoughts, feelings, expectations, plans and goals that organize their relationships with others (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). These models display stability over time and predict future behavior and functioning (Hesse, 2008).

Adolescence is comprised of individual and relational developmental processes (Allen, 2008). Representations of attachment relationships may be continuously modified as adolescents develop new intimate relations including relationships with non-parental adults (Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2004; Zimmerman Bingenheimer & Behrendt, 2005). Aside from an increased sense of autonomy and physical capacities, this modification process is a product of cognitive shifts to formal operations, which increases adolescents' ability to reflect upon their internal experience, motivations, and relations with others (Keating, 1999). Accompanying these changes are typically a host of environmental challenges, including school transitions, changes in family and peer dynamics, and changes in self-esteem (Eccles, 2011). The combination of both increased capacities and environmental demands during adolescence can create ideal conditions for a broader range of intimate relations to develop (Shumaker, Deutsch & Brenninkmeyer, 2008).

Adolescent attachment has been conceptualized along two dimensions: Anxiety and Avoidance (Mikulincer, Shaver & Pereg, 2003; Feddern Donbaek & Elkit, 2014). *Attachment anxiety* is defined as fear of interpersonal rejection, an excessive need for approval, and distress when significant others are unavailable. *Attachment avoidance* is defined as fear of interpersonal intimacy, an excessive need for self-reliance, and reluctance to self-disclose (Wei et al., 2007, p. 188). Both dimensions inform the ways adolescents perceive and interact with others (Feddern

Donbaek & Elkit, 2014). In general, having lower levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance is associated with having secure attachment or a positive attachment model, whereas higher levels are typically associated with having insecure attachment or a negative attachment model (Mikulincer et al., 2003).

Adolescent Attachment and Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is generally defined as an individual's overall evaluation of personal self-worth and wellbeing (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). During adolescence, building one's self-esteem occurs within a period of complex identity development characterized by a need for consistency and continuity of self (Erikson, 1968). However, the profound and rapid transformation in cognitive, physical, emotional and social systems make this developmental period a time of heightened self-scrutiny and greatly fluctuating self-esteem. Low self-esteem in adolescence has been linked to depression, anxiety, obesity, and problem behaviors including substance abuse and criminalized activity (Silverstone, & Salsali, 2003; Rosenberg & Owen, 2001; Trzesniewski et al., 2006; McClure, Tanski, Kingsbury, Gerrard & Sargent, 2010). In contrast, a growing body of research suggests that high levels of self-esteem are associated with wellbeing including life satisfaction and better physical and mental health (see Orth & Robins, 2014 for a review), as well as stronger academic performance and achievement (Booth & Gerard, 2011).

Attachment models can exert strong influences on adolescent self-esteem (Wilkinson, 2013; also see Gorrese & Andrisano-Ruggieri, 2013 for a review), with youth with negative attachment models reporting lower levels of self-esteem. However, while research consistently reveals that attachment anxiety is related to low self-esteem, the relation between attachment avoidance and self-esteem is less clear (e.g., Foster, Kernis, & Goldman, 2007, Otway & Carnelley, 2013). Adolescents with positive attachment models tend to display more positive models of identity development (Berman, Weems, Rodgriguez, & Zamora, 2006) and demonstrate more positive coping skills and emotional regulation than peers demonstrating negative attachment models (Seiffge-Krenke & Beyers, 2005).

Social Support as a Mediator of the Effects of Attachment in Adolescence

Social support, generally defined as the provision of psychological and material resources, provides a helpful lens for understanding and describing what occurs in youth's relationships that make them effective. During adolescence, attachment models function to both explain and predict the dynamic interactions between self and others and thus can be thought of as "antecedents" to the formation of supportive relationships (Zimmerman et al., 2005).

Attachment helps define the way future relationships are developed, the characteristics of the relationships, and the level of trust and closeness formed in them (Rhodes, 2002). In fact, there is evidence to suggest that adolescents who perceive having supportive relationships have different attachment models from adolescents who do not. Adolescents with positive models of self and others, characterized by feelings of closeness and intimacy, are more likely to engage in positive support seeking and report high levels of perceived social support (Greenberger & McLaughlin, 1998; Blain, Thompson & Whiffen, 1993; Murray, Kosty, Haueser-McLean, 2015). Conversely, more avoidant and anxiously attached individuals are not only less likely to form intimate relationships but also have biased and often negative perceptions of social support (Collins & Feeny, 2004; Stanton & Campbell, 2014).

Research has demonstrated the interrelatedness of attachment and social support constructs and their influences on socio-emotional outcomes (e.g., Vogel & Wei, 2005; Collins & Feeny, 2004). The most frequently identified pattern of relations among these variables involves social support as a mediator of the impact of attachment on various psychological outcomes. In this conceptualization, attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance both contribute to decreased perceived social support. In the case of attachment anxiety, negative representations of self diminish perceived social support via a heightened sensitivity to the potential unavailability of others in times of need. In the case of attachment avoidance, negative representations of others diminish perceived social support due to a desire for interpersonal distance. These disruptions would contribute to diminished self-esteem by preventing the benefits that can be derived from supportive relationships.

Types and Sources of Social Support in Adolescence: The Role of Non-Parental Adults

Wills and Shinar (2000) proposed five types of social support present in relationships: validation, emotional, instrumental, informational, and companionship support. Validation support, described as process of providing positive confirmation about the appropriateness of youth’s behaviors through feedback or social comparison, has been linked to positive identity development and increases in feelings of self-worth and competence (Nora, Urick, Cerecer, 2011). Ruzek and colleagues (2016) found that teachers who provide emotional support by being available and listening to youth when they are having personal issues and demonstrating genuine concern and care, helped to increase students’ behavioral engagement and mastery motivation. These outcomes constitute aspects of self-esteem that are particularly important for adolescents’ academic achievement. As these examples illustrate, different types of social support may have differing influences on youth self-esteem and development more generally. More research is needed to identify and understand how youth perceive and experience different types of social support.

Although peer and parent relationships are often considered the most significant influences on adolescent development, research has emphasized the importance of adolescents’ relationships with non-parental adults (e.g., Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Sterrett et al., 2011). In fact, there is research to suggest that the presence of significant non-parental adults or “VIPs” (also known as natural mentors) are a normative part of youth development (Beam et al., 2002). However, unlike parent or peer relationships, much less is known about non-parental youth-adult relationships’ contribution to youth outcomes or the aspects of these relationships that youth find supportive (Sterrett et al., 2011).

As noted previously, there is considerable evidence for continuity in relationship styles across individuals’ various relationships. Thus, it follows that adolescents’ attachment can play a key role in influencing the development and quality of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships. Georgiou, Demetriou and Stavrinides (2007) found that adolescents who had a natural mentor were more secure in their parental attachment than those who did not. Similarly, Rhodes, Contreras, and Mangelsdorf (1994) found that adolescent mothers with natural mentors reported their parents were more accepting of them during childhood compared to participants without mentors. Romero-Canyas and colleagues (2010) assert that youth with unsatisfying close relationships may be less trusting of the overtures of supportive adults.

Overall both social support and attachment models are helpful in understanding the relational processes that occur between youth and adults as well as how youth perceive themselves in such relationships (in terms of feeling secure, supported, respected, etc.), processes which have been shown to have implications for both physical health and psychological well-being (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Yet there is little empirical basis for understanding how relational processes work or develop within YARs or what micro-level social processes contribute to forming quality relationships or attachment that promotes positive youth outcomes.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the associations between adolescent attachment, supportive non-parental adult relationships and self-esteem. This study utilizes an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano, 2011) using qualitative results to assist in explaining and interpreting the findings of a quantitative analysis. First, we used quantitative methods to test two hypotheses derived from the proposed links among attachment avoidance and anxiety, perceived social support from non-parental adults, and adolescent self-esteem (Figure 1): (1) Both attachment anxiety and avoidance would be negatively associated with self-esteem and (2) Perceived social support from *non-parental adults* would be a significant mediator of the link between both attachment constructs and self-esteem. We then turned to youth's perceptions of their relationships with significant non-parental adults (herein referred to as VIPs) to understand how attachment influences relational processes in adolescence. The following research questions guided our mixed methods analysis: (1) What types of social support do youth of different attachment models report and how often? (2) How do youth's perceptions and narratives of these types of support differ based on their attachment?

The Youth-Adult Relationship Study

The data for this study come from a longitudinal, mixed-methods study on youth-adult relationships. In Phase 1 of the study, we recruited youth who varied in age from 11 to 18 years old (n=289; M=14 years) from schools, after-school programs, and community-based programs in a small city and surrounding, rural counties in the southeastern United States. In Phase 2 of the study, a subsample of 40 youth was purposefully selected from the survey sample to participate in the longitudinal portion, including in-depth interviews twice a year (see Futch Ehrlich, Deutsch, Fox, Johnson, & Varga, 2016 for details on the survey and sampling procedures). Below we present details of quantitative analysis from Phase 1 data, and mixed methods analysis from Phase 2. These methods were approved by an Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects.

Quantitative Methods

Quantitative Sample

As described above, the data for the quantitative methods portion of the study are drawn from a survey of 289 adolescents. Participant ages ranged from 11-17 (M=14) and 57% identified as female. Participants identified their racial/ethnic background as Caucasian/White (55%), African American/Black (27%), Hispanic/Latino (4%), Asian American (3%), Multiethnic (10%), <1% Native American. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.

Quantitative Data Collection and Measures

A 15-20 minute survey packet was administered to participants in person (in schools, after-school clubs, etc.) or online through Question Pro. Participants were assured confidentiality of their data. The screening survey included basic demographic information, presence of and closeness to “significant adults” (see definition below), and several scales measuring relational styles and perceptions of social support. The following measures were included.

Adolescent Attachment. Information about adolescents’ attachment models was collected via an adapted version for adolescents of the Experiences of Closeness Relationships Scale Short Version (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007), which includes 12-items assessing attachment anxiety (*e.g., I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved*) and avoidance (*e.g., I try to avoid getting too close to people*). All items were ranked on a 7-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Documented coefficient alphas for the subscales range from .77 to .86 for the anxiety subscale and from .78 to .88 for the avoidance subscale across six studies (Wei et al., 2007). Reliability analysis for our study population yielded moderate reliability for the anxiety (.69) and avoidance (.66) subscales.

Perceived Social Support from Non-Parental Adults. We used the three items from the Vaux Social Support Record (VSSR; Vaux et al., 1986) to measure adolescent perceptions of the availability of support from non-parental adults. Items are evaluated on a three-point scale (*not at all* (0), *some* (1) & *a lot* (2)). The point values of each item are summed to calculate a total score ranging from 0-6, with higher scores indicating greater perceived social support. A sample item includes *"There are adults at school that I can talk to who give good suggestions and advice about my problems*." The VSSR has demonstrated strong internal consistency (.80-.90) and validity across diverse ethnic and age groups, including adolescents ages 12-18 (Vaux et al., 1986). The internal consistency of the VSSR for our sample was .75.

Adolescent Self-Esteem. The Hare Self-Esteem Scale (HSES; Shoemaker, 1980) was used to measure adolescent perceptions of their self-worth and wellbeing. It includes a 10-question, 4-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* (1) to *strongly disagree* (4). A sample question includes *"I am not as popular as other people my age."* Scores from the ten items are averaged to calculate an overall score, with higher averages representing higher levels of self-esteem. The reliability and validity of the HSES has been supported across diverse adolescent samples (Shoemaker, 1980). The internal consistency of this scale for our sample was .78.

Quantitative Analysis

Preliminary descriptive statistics and correlational analyses among our model's variables and covariates were conducted. To test the relationship between attachment anxiety and avoidance and self-esteem and the mediation effect of perceived social support, a path analysis was then conducted in STATA/MP version 14.1 using the structural equation modeling (SEM) builder and estimation. Our model is an observed variable path analysis; we are treating scale scores as the variables, making the analysis comparable to a series of regression equations. Full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) estimation was used to account for missing data (see Table 1), which is optimal for dealing with missing data analyzed in a SEM framework.

Quantitative Results

Descriptive and Correlation Statistics. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for all variables in our model. Table 2 shows correlation coefficients for all predictor and outcome variables and covariates. Correlations among the variables indicate the constructs of interests (i.e. attachment anxiety and avoidance, perceived social support, and self-esteem) fit well together and in the expected directions. In our sample, males reported higher levels of attachment avoidance (r = -.16, p < .01), while females reported higher levels of social support (r = .15, p < .01). Older participants in our sample reported lower levels of attachment avoidance (r = -.16, p < .01) and lower self-esteem (r = -.14, p < .05). Both gender and age were thus included in the path model as covariates.

Path Analysis. The path model with standardized coefficients is presented in Figure 2. Both attachment anxiety and avoidance had a direct effect on self-esteem as well as perceived social support. All predictors and covariates were allowed to correlate, saturating the model and making the analyses comparable to a regression. The path model shows that the relation between attachment anxiety and avoidance was partially mediated by perceived social support. The direct effect between attachment anxiety and avoidance with self-esteem remained significant (β = -.31, p < .001 and β = -.29, p < .001 respectively). Further, indirect effects of perceived social support on the relation between both attachment anxiety and avoidance and self-esteem were significant (β = -.07, p < .001 and β = -.08, p < .001 respectively). Overall, this model (including predictors, covariates, and mediator) accounted for 44% of the variance in self-esteem. In addition to this mediation model, we tested non-linear regression models and interaction effects between attachment and social support. The results of these additional analyses were not statistically significant and were not included in this paper.

Quantitative Method Discussion

Attachment anxiety and avoidance were negatively correlated with adolescent self-esteem. Further, perceived social support partially mediated these relationships, indicating the important role that social support plays in adolescents' lives. These findings align with previous research that suggests social support mediates the relationship between attachment and socioemotional outcomes (e.g., Vogel & Wei, 2005; Collins & Feeny, 2004). Our findings speak to adolescent attachment as something that is relationally constructed and subsequently related to developmental outcomes. Although we found that having an insecure attachment (i.e., high levels of anxiety and/or avoidance) is directly related to lower levels of self-esteem, perceived social support from non-parental adults may help to redirect these associations. Yet how these redirections happen is unclear. Furthermore, although there is evidence to suggest that supportive relationships can generalize, enabling youth to interact with others more effectively, we know little about youth's relationships outside of parents and peers. Therefore, we turn to youth's perceptions of their relationships with significant non-parental adults (VIPs) as a way to understand these relational processes. We take a mixed-methods approach to explore differences between the types of social support youth report, perceive, and describe in relationships with their VIPs and look for patterns across youth with different attachment models.

Mixed-Methods

Mixed-Methods Sample

As described above, the data for the mixed-methods portion of the study are drawn from a subsample of 40 youth (ages 11–18, M = 13.9; 57% Female; 78% White, 14% African American, 5% Hispanic, 3% Other). Fifteen percent were eligible for free or reduced-lunch at school. Basic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 3. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, which youth selected for themselves during their interviews. Of the VIPs youth nominated, 28.6% were from school settings (mostly teachers and coaches), 25.7% from family settings (e.g., extended kin), 8.6% from after-school settings, 5.7 % from neighborhood settings, 2.9% from community settings (e.g., church), and 28.6% from other settings (e.g., family friends).

Table 3 also presents youth’s scores from the screening survey on the ECR subscales (anxiety and avoidance), the VSSR (social support), and the HSES (self-esteem). For each of the subscales, participants were placed in a “High” group if their score was one standard deviation or more above the mean, a “Low” group if their score was one standard deviation or more below the mean, or in the “Middle” group. If a youth had at least one “low” rating in either attachment anxiety or avoidance, we considered them part of the “positive” attachment group (n=9). Alternately, if a youth had at least one “high” rating in either attachment anxiety or avoidance, we considered them part of the “negative” attachment group (n=12). The remaining youth had “middle” ratings in both anxiety and avoidance (n=19). These categories lent themselves to mixed-methods analysis on the cloud-based software Dedoose (Dedoose Version 6.1.18, 2015).

Qualitative Data Collection: Time 1 Interviews

Interviewers asked participants to nominate a VIP, which we defined as “persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make” (Herrera et al., 2007). Interviews lasted an hour to an hour and a half. Approximately a third of each interview consisted of questions surrounding the VIP relationship (see Appendix A for interview protocol). Participants were asked what they normally did with their VIP, what they talked about, why they felt close to their VIP, and so on. Two principal investigators, three graduate students, and two full-time research assistants conducted interviews. A majority of the interviews were one-on-one, but occasionally we worked in interviewer pairs to enhance rapport or comfort level (e.g., to ensure a same-gender interviewer was present). Most interviewers were women (84%) and racially identified as White (71%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (29%).

Mixed-Methods Analysis

Utilizing the mixed-methods functions of Dedoose, we linked descriptive data (e.g., attachment scores) to interview transcripts. The qualitative excerpts derive from a comprehensive coding scheme applied to the youth interviews in the larger project (see Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016 for an overview). We used excerpts coded for instances of five types of social support: emotional, companionship, informational, instrumental, and validation (see Wills & Shinar, 2010 for definitions).

We used Dedoose to produce normalized frequency graphs to determine the relative percentage of times each type of social support was coded in each of the three attachment groups (see Figure 3). These graphs take into account both the raw counts of social support sub-codes and the sample size of each attachment group to calculate a weighted, relative frequency percentage. As shown in Figure 3, the relative frequency of companionship, informational, and instrumental support was similar across the attachment groups. Emotional support was coded relatively more often in the positive attachment group than the middle and negative groups. Validation support was coded relatively more often in the negative attachment group than the middle and positive groups. In order to examine what these differences look-like in youth-adult relationships, we explored how youth with positive versus negative working models talked about their experiences of *emotional* and *validation* support in their relationships with VIPs.

Two authors individually read emotional support excerpts and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clarke, 2012) how youth discussed their perceptions and experiences of social support. The two authors met to discuss themes and excerpts where they did not have agreement and came to consensus (Hill et al., 2005). Once themes were applied and finalized, comparisons were made between the negative and positive attachment groups. The same process was repeated for validation support. To audit our analytical process, we presented our themes to the larger research team as well as at a works-in-progress meeting with people unfamiliar with the data. In both instances feedback was provided, discussed, and incorporated as warranted.

Mixed-Methods Results

Quantitative Trends in Attachment, Social Support and Self-Esteem. Given the relationship we found between attachment, perceived social support, and self-esteem in the preliminary path analysis above, we wanted to first confirm similar trends within the qualitative subsample. We examined youth's attachment scores in relationship to perceived social support and self-esteem by comparing patterns of scale scores across the three attachment groups. As shown in Table 3, youth in the positive attachment group had scores in the high or middle categories of perceived social support and self-esteem. Conversely, all of those in the negative attachment group had scores in the low or middle groups of those same scales. These trends were used as a lens for further qualitative analysis, discussed below.

Qualitative Analysis of Youth's Narratives of Emotional Support. Across the positive and negative attachment groups, VIPs were described as being good listeners, non-judgmental, warm, inviting, loving, caring, and funny. Youth also noted the importance of the consistency of emotional support they received and used parental metaphors to describe their relationships, noting that their VIPs were like a “second mom” or “second dad.” Some differences between attachment groups emerged, however.

Positive Attachment Group. Three themes emerged in these youth’s descriptions of emotional support: (1) Mutuality, (2) VIPs providing non-specific emotional support, and (3) VIP as not the only source of support.

Mutuality stemmed from youth’s comfort with personally connecting with others. Indeed, unsurprisingly, youth in the positive attachment group described themselves as being in general more personable and well connected than negatively attached youth. Youth described emotional support occurring within reciprocal interactions in which youth reported being very “open” with their VIPs. For example, DrewBrees said of his relationship with his VIP, “It's pretty personal. We both know each other pretty well. We know we can talk to each other about anything.” Skye echoed this sentiment by stating, “There are no boundaries to our personal conversations. I can just be totally open and tell her anything.” When asked to provide specific topics or examples of personal conversations with her VIP, Skye says, “We talk about everything, about school and like friends and I mean just like really anything that comes up.” Like Skye, other youth in the positive attachment group did not provide specific descriptions of emotional support.

Instead of providing specificity in terms of particular events or situations for which they would seek support, the youth in this group provided broad descriptions and generalized instances of emotional support. For example, PhilishaQueesha says, “We talk about things that I have going on in my life, and if I have some sort of like bad thing going on, then sometimes I’ll go to him for it.” Similarly, Robert says “we talk about things that bother me sometimes.” In both these examples, youth described general personal conversations they have with their VIPs, using “sometimes” to explain the emotional support, rather than providing concrete times or examples. This more general description is also associated with the third theme found within the positive attachment group: VIPs not being the only source of support for these youth.

While it is not surprising that youth have other sources of emotional support in their lives, the youth in the positive attachment group made it known in their interviews. Youth in this group described themselves as being well connected. Some youth described their VIPs as the “easiest source of support” (Skye), whereas Skylar added, “I probably wouldn’t choose [my VIP] as my first choice for my personal problems but if she was the only person I would be able to trust her.” Thus, although they talked more generally about emotional support than the negatively attached group, it was in the context of having multiple potential sources of support, which was not as evident in the negatively attached group.

Youth in the positively attached group displayed a comfort and willingness to share feelings and seek out emotional support from their VIPs in times of difficulty. These youth reported higher levels of self-esteem and more instances of emotional support. They showed that they are able to seek out support from other sources, while maintaining a meaningful relationship with their VIPs.

Negative Attachment Group. Two themes emerged in youth’s perceptions and narratives of emotional support in the negative attachment group: (1) the importance of trust and (2) VIPs providing emotional support specific to youth’s socioemotional needs.

First, youth described how their perceptions of trust informed their comfort in receiving emotional support from their VIPs. For example, when describing why he engages in personal conversations with his VIP, Johnny Depp said, “He’s trustworthy. He’s the kind of guy who wouldn’t go around telling other people what you said to him.” For Johnny Depp, trust not only contributed to his comfort confiding in his VIP but also his comfort to seek out emotional support in the future. Molly Hooper, who described herself as someone who avoids telling others about her personal issues, stated that knowing her VIP “won’t tell anyone anything” is important to her and one of the main reasons she continues to seek emotional support from this VIP. Similar sentiments were shared by Katherine, who described her VIP as someone who “won’t tattle on you,” which for her was indicative of both trust and respect and made her feel able to go to her VIP for support in times of vulnerability (e.g., feeling like she’s done something wrong).

The youth in this group also talked about how VIPs provided emotional support specific to their needs. For example, Lucy noted her VIP as someone “who knows when [she] is sad.” She adds that her VIP is really funny and always makes her laugh in the midst of personal hardships. Lizzy says, “I’m not the skinniest person, and my grandma knows that I don’t like that about myself, so she helps me with that.” Lizzy described her VIP as someone she would talk to about body image and more broadly about personal problems: “whenever there is something wrong, she just knows and has a caring nature about her that helps me talk to her.” This VIP worked with her to explore food options, which Lizzy noted made her feel better about herself and less wary of how others may think of her. Like Lizzy, other youth described instances in which their VIPs knew exactly what to say and do in response to their socioemotional needs. Prime, a youth who was particularly brief with his responses to our interview questions, pithily stated, “She understands me … [and] she has all the good answers,” when asked why he felt he could talk to his VIP about “personal stuff.”

Youth in the negatively attached group reported lower levels of self-esteem and fewer instances of emotional support. When trust was developed with adults, these youth were willing to invest emotionally in the relationships and learn from them. VIPs of youth in this group were perceived by youth to be effective when they provided the support youth specifically needed.

Qualitative Analysis of Youth's Narratives of Validation Support. Across both attachment groups, VIPs acknowledging youth's accomplishments (both big and/or small) was an important aspect of validation support. Similar to emotional support, youth noted the importance of the consistency of validation support received from VIPs. For example, Prime, in response to being asked why he thought his VIP wanted him to do his best said, "She tells me *everyday*" (emphasis added). Similarly, Drewbrees said, "He *always* tells me I'm a great guy" (emphasis added) when describing his relationship with his VIP.

Another theme related to validation emerged from youth's descriptions of ways their VIPs let them know that they respected the youth. Youth described instances of validation support that reflect horizontal interactions, characterized by reciprocity and approaching equality (see Chu et al., 2010 for a discussion on vertical versus horizontal interactions). Time illustrates this theme when she says, "He makes me feel smarter because we have real conversations and not just small talk or adults trying to talk down to children." For Time, having "real" conversations was a sign her VIP respected her, which led to her feeling smarter. By validating youth's contributions to the relationship, VIPs were able to create a safe space for personal development, as Philashaqueesha described here:

> With most other adults, I have to act all "adulty" with them. But with him, I can just like act like myself and not really have to act any different than I usually do.

No themes specific to the positive attachment group emerged. However, we did find several themes from the negative attachment group specific to youth's perceptions of validation support.

Negative Attachment Group. For the negative attachment group, three themes emerged in youth's perceptions and narratives of validation support: (1) VIPs providing honest and realistic feedback, (2) VIPs challenging negative thinking, and (3) VIPs providing opportunities to showcase youth's strengths and perspectives.

The first theme involved VIPs providing honest and realistic feedback regarding youth behaviors, progress, and accomplishments. For example, Johnny Depp said:

> I feel better about myself just because he's honest and he doesn't try to tell you things that you're not – So I feel like you don't have to wonder whether he's telling you the truth, or whether what I'm doing is right or wrong. He'll tell me straight up.

Like Johnny Depp, other youth described appreciating their VIPs' honest and realistic feedback because it indicated a genuine relationship with their VIPs. It also helped youth recognize their skills and strengths, which in turn helped them figure out how to use those strengths more fully. Missy illustrated this when she described the feedback she gets from her swimming coach VIP: "He would talk about [me] about [my] best times and how I can improve over the season." She goes on to describe her appreciation for her VIP's feedback based on her progress and his consistent and timely acknowledgment of her accomplishments.

In addition to celebrating youth's successes, VIPs also challenged youth's negative thinking. Lucy, for example said, "She always compliments me and always says that I shouldn't feel bad about myself because there's really nothing to worry about." Molly Hooper further illustrated this theme in her description of the things her VIP did that made her feel closer:

> She gives me honest advice instead of the usual – everything that people would usually say just to make you feel better…Like, so if I said I was feeling bad or I didn't know what to do, most people would just be like, "Everything's gonna be okay. You're okay." But she would tell me, "Just get it off your mind."…She'll help me come up with ways to distract myself or will just tell me that it's not important what other people think.

In this example, Molly Hooper's VIP not only acknowledged her personal struggle by giving her honest feedback but also challenged her negative thinking. Her VIP went a step further by providing her with ways to deal and cope with her personal struggles, which she later noted helped her gain more perspective.

Youth were taking into consideration VIP attributes such as honesty and the type of feedback they provide before feeling comfortable taking advantage of social support. The youth craved authenticity in relationships and were willing to share with others both the positive and negative aspects of their lives. Through consistent and realistic feedback, VIPs were able to help youth recognize their strengths and come up with ways to address personal struggles.

Youth in this group also described VIPs providing *opportunities* to showcase their strengths, perspectives, and contributions to the relationship. Bartholomew, for example said:

> When I’m running [with him], I feel good because it’s something I’m good at, and I guess I like doing things I’m good at. It makes me feel more confident in myself.

It is important to note that Bartholomew was describing his relationship with his track coach, whose role was to practice running with him. Other youth described their VIPs as being intentional in providing these strengths-building opportunities. This theme also appears related to having horizontal relationships, described above, as occurred across both the negative and positive attachment group. For example, Jenna said:

> She asks me questions about myself, and she incorporates me into the conversation. Like if she’s talking to my mom, she will ask me and just, like, listen to what I’m saying.

Not only did Jenna, as a result of these interactions with her VIP, feel “listened to,” she also felt included and better capable of contributing to the conversation. Similar sentiments were shared by Time who said:

> It’s like all of his attention is on you and he seems very nice [and] although he has strong opinions, he makes you want to have your own strong opinions, too, and that's something I haven't felt in very many people.

A key aspect of this theme was that adults facilitated strength-building opportunities. These opportunities were arising in multiple ways – from the roles that VIPs played to youth’s daily experiences and interactions – and had the power to make youth feel included, competent, and capable.

Mixed-Methods Discussion

The aim of the mixed-methods part of the study was to further understand how attachment and relational processes work together during adolescence. Specifically, we wanted to better understand the role of social support for adolescents with different attachment in relationships with significant non-parental adults. Findings suggest that youth report different types of social support and perceive them differently based on their attachment models. Youth in the negative attachment group reported fewer instances of emotional support but more instances of validation support. Yet all youth reported receiving a variety of types of social support from these relationships. All youth, regardless of attachment models, need access to supportive relationships that provide them with various types of support (Varga & Zaff, 2017).

When we initially designed the overall study from which this data were drawn, we purposefully selected youth for the sub-sample based in part on their attachment scores. We hypothesized that attachment models may affect the very phenomenon we were interested in studying: the development, trajectories and outcomes of youth’s relationships with non-parental adults. While the quantitative portion of this study supported a part of this hypothesis, the mixed-methods portion implies that the association between attachment and social support may not be best represented by a linear relationship. Instead, our qualitative findings suggest that supportive relationships with VIPs may serve as a buffer against the adverse effects of negative attachment.

As discussed by Zimmerman et al., (2005), it is possible that secure adolescents may be more likely to develop supportive non-parental adult relationships, while those with insecure attachment may be more motivated to seek out supportive relationships in order to compensate. Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan and Herrera (2011) found that youth with satisfactory relationships benefited more from mentoring relationships than did youth with strongly positive or negative relational profiles based on attachment style. Joining these lines of research, this study considers the key role that adolescents' relational histories play in influencing the benefits that are derived from non-parental youth-adult relationships. Future research is warranted to further explore the processes through which youth's relational experiences may influence youth's relationships with supportive non-parental adults.

As noted previously, in addition to the mediation model in the quantitative portion of this study, we tested non-linear regression models and interaction effects between attachment and social support. The results of these additional analyses were not statistically significant. The incongruence between the quantitative mediation model and mixed-methods portion of this study highlights the importance of utilizing multiple methods, particularly qualitative methods in elucidating these relational processes from the perspectives of youth. One potential reason for the discrepancy is that the scale we used to measure social support asked youth to rate the amount of support they perceived from non-parental adults more generally, whereas we asked youth to nominate a specific and significant non-parental adult in our qualitative interviews. It is possible that youth with negative attachment are less likely to perceive social support from adults more generally but if asked about a specific relationship, would be more likely to perceive social support. Indeed, youth in our interviews regardless of their attachment were able to describe with a passion and enthusiasm a supportive relationship they had with an important adult in their lives. Yet adults should be aware that particular aspects of youth-adult relationships may be more or less salient for youth with different attachment models.

Understanding what aspects of supportive relationships youth find important can inform future intervention work for youth who may have trouble with relationships and may not be as well connected. In our study, the themes we found related to self-esteem and of "VIPs challenging negative thinking" are particularly important given the correlation between attachment and self-esteem found by previous research and in the quantitative portion of this study. Youth with negative attachment may have more trouble with self-esteem and thus may need support specific to challenging negative thinking. Further, we found that trust and its role in enhancing youth's relationships with their VIPs has important implications for youth-serving settings, such as creating spaces for adults to build trust with youth and to learn more about the youth they interact with (Griffith & Larson, 2015). Indeed, we found that the more VIPs knew about youth, their dispositions, interests, needs, and challenges, the more able and equipped they were to provide appropriate social support. In turn, youth who may otherwise have felt anxious and avoidant exhibited more comfort and engagement.

Our findings link to well-documented developmental needs of adolescents including competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, relatedness, the need to feel belongingness and connectedness with others in meaningful ways, was evident in youth's descriptions of emotional support. Youth described the importance of trust, mutuality, and feeling like their VIPs had insider knowledge of their socioemotional needs. Through validation support, youth's needs for autonomy and competence, referring to a sense of agency and a feeling of being capable of meeting environmental demands, was supported by interactions that gave youth opportunities to recognize and showcase their strengths, perspectives, and contributions to the relationship. When VIPs provided support that matched youth's developmental needs, youth reported a greater sense of wellbeing. They noted feeling more included and capable of overcoming challenges. Given research that has documented declines in students' sense of relatedness, autonomy, and competence as they progress through PK-12 education (Marks, 2000), VIPs may play a vital role in providing a substantial basis for youth's ongoing growth and wellbeing.

Although the roles - both formal (e.g., teacher, coach) and informal (e.g., family friend) - that VIPs held informed the interactions they had with youth, we found key relational qualities that cut across various VIP roles and contexts. Our findings are important additions to the literature, as many researchers have studied VIP roles more individually (see Chu et al., 2010 for a discussion). Future research should explore how these relationships develop in the various contexts of youth's lives and how they change over time. This is particularly important in adolescence because of research suggesting that representations of attachment relationships may be continuously modified as adolescents develop intimate relations outside of parental relationships (see Allen, 2008 for a discussion).

In addition to the limited sample sizes and correlational nature of both the quantitative and mixed-methods parts of this study, we did not find robust differences among youth in the negative attachment group based on varying types of insecure attachment (e.g., fearful, dismissive, preoccupied; Mikulincer et al., 2003). Future work should explore how youth's perceptions of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships may differ based on these types of negative attachment models.

Conclusion

Overall, this mixed-methods study explored how and why supportive relationships matter in adolescence. Using attachment and social support as guiding frameworks, we identified key characteristics of supportive relationships during adolescence that promote youth's positive relational and socioemotional development. Our findings can inform applied efforts to cultivate natural mentoring relationships as well as to sustain and deepen relationships that have been formed. Our findings underscore the importance of considering youth’s individual attributes in the context of their ongoing relationships in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role and dynamics of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships in youth’s lives.

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Table 1

Descriptive statistics for demographic and study variables

	n	**%**	***% Missing***	***M***	***SD***	***Min.***	***Max.***
Demographic Variables							
Age in years	289		0	14.05		11	18
Gender	285		.01	14.05		11	18
Female=1	166	57.4					
Male=0	119	41.2					
Ethnicity	286		.01				
Caucasian/White	159	55					
African Amer./Black	78	27					
Hispanic/ Latino	12	4.2					
Asian American	8	2.8					
Native American	1	.3					
Multi-Ethnic	28	9.7					
Attachment Anxiety	287		.01	3.15	1.12	1	6.67
Attachment Avoidance	287		.01	2.98	.99	1	6.83
Self-Esteem	286		.01	3.15	.64	1.60	4
Perceived Social Support	284		.02	4.03	1.46	0	6

Table 2

Correlations for all variables included in path model

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age in years	--					
2. Gender (female = 1)	.01	--				
3. Attachment Anxiety	.10	.02	--			
4. Attachment Avoidance	-.16**	-.16**	.34***	--		
5. Self-Esteem	-.14*	.07	-.50***	-.50***	--	
6. Perceived Social Support	-.07	.15**	-.32***	-.35***	.48***	--

$^{*}p \leq .05$, $^{**}p \leq .01$, $^{***}p \leq .001$

Note. HSES = Hare Area Specific Self-Esteem Scale; VSSR = Vaux Social Support Record.

Table 3

Participant Characteristics (Sorted by Anxiety and Avoidance Scores)

Participant	Age	Gender	Anxiety	Avoidance	Support	Self-Esteem	VIP Role
Chief	**12**	**M**	**High**	**High**	**Low**	**Low**	**Other-Familial**
Molly Hooper	**13**	**F**	**High**	**High**	**Low**	**Low**	**Counselor**
Jenna	**13**	**F**	**High**	**High**	**Low**	**Middle**	**Family friend**
Lizzy	**13**	**F**	**High**	**High**	**Low**	**Low**	**Grandparent**
Katherine	**14**	**F**	**High**	**High**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Family friend**
Johnny Depp	**15**	**M**	**High**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Low**	**Coach**
Prime	**12**	**M**	**High**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Low**	**Teacher**
Lucy	**13**	**F**	**High**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Family friend**
Time	**13**	**F**	**High**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Other-Familial**
Bartholomew	**16**	**M**	**Middle**	**High**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Coach**
Jack	**14**	**M**	**Middle**	**High**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Family friend**
Bob	**16**	**M**	**Middle**	**High**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Teacher**
Scooter	13	M	Middle	Middle	Low	Middle	Teacher
McMolnakerson	16	M	Middle	Middle	Low	Middle	Teacher
Z	14	M	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Family friend
Colt	16	M	Middle	Middle	Middle	High	Family friend
John	12	M	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Family friend
Red	12	M	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Grandparent
Michael	13	M	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Teacher
Connor	16	M	Middle	Middle	Middle	High	Teacher
Bodos	15	M	Middle	Middle	Middle	High	Grandparent
Rachel	16	F	Middle	Middle	High	High	Family friend
Alicia	17	F	Middle	Middle	High	Middle	Grandparent
Riley	15	F	Middle	Middle	High	High	Coach
Missy	13	F	Middle	Middle	High	Middle	Coach
Claire	13	F	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Grandparent
Nicole	15	F	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Aunt
Rachel2	16	F	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Aunt
Nothing	13	F	Middle	Middle	Middle	High	Grandparent
Karen	16	F	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Coach
Cecilia	16	F	Middle	Middle	Middle	Middle	Family friend
DrewBrees	**12**	**M**	**Low**	**Middle**	**High**	**High**	**Grandparent**
PhilishaQueesha	**14**	**M**	**Low**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Coach**
Poncho	**15**	**F**	**Low**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Coach**
Robert	**13**	**M**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Middle**	**High**	**Teacher**
Skylar	**12**	**F**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Middle**	**High**	**Teacher**
Abby	**13**	**F**	**Middle**	**Low**	**Middle**	**High**	**Teacher**
Skye	**13**	**F**	**Low**	**Low**	**High**	**High**	**Family friend**
Carrie	**13**	**F**	**Low**	**Low**	**High**	**Middle**	**Other-Non-Familial**
SwagBaller19	**12**	**F**	**Low**	**Low**	**Middle**	**Middle**	**Advisor**

Note. The bold text represents the high and low anxious and avoidant youth who were focused on for a portion of the analysis. If a youth had at least one “low” rating in either attachment anxiety or avoidance, we considered them as part of the positively attached group (n=9). Alternately, if a youth had at least one “high” rating in either attachment anxiety or avoidance, we considered them as part of the negatively attached group (n=12).

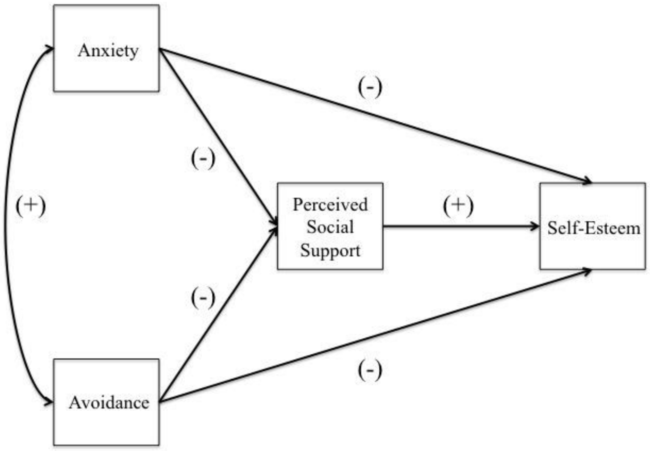
Anxiety
(-)
(-)
(+)
Perceived Social Support
(+)
Self-Esteem
(-)
(-)
Avoidance

Figure 1. Hypothesized path model. The hypothesized direction of each association are indicated in parantheses.

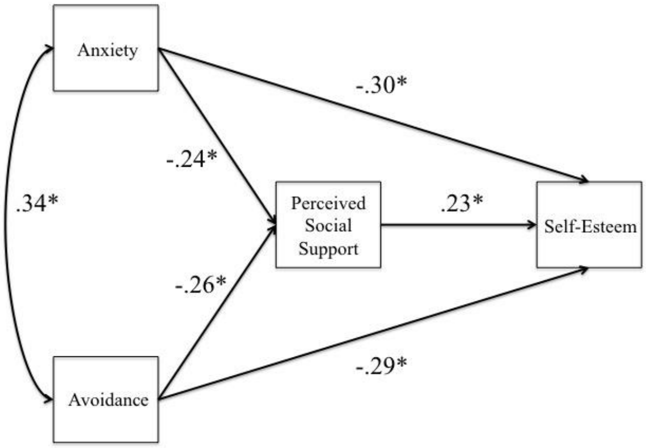
Anxiety
-.30*
-.24*
.34*
Perceived Social Support
.23*
Self-Esteem
-.26*
-.29*
Avoidance

Figure 2. Path model. Both age and gender were included as covariates in the model but were not depicted in the path model in Figure 2 for space and visual reasons. * p ≤ .001

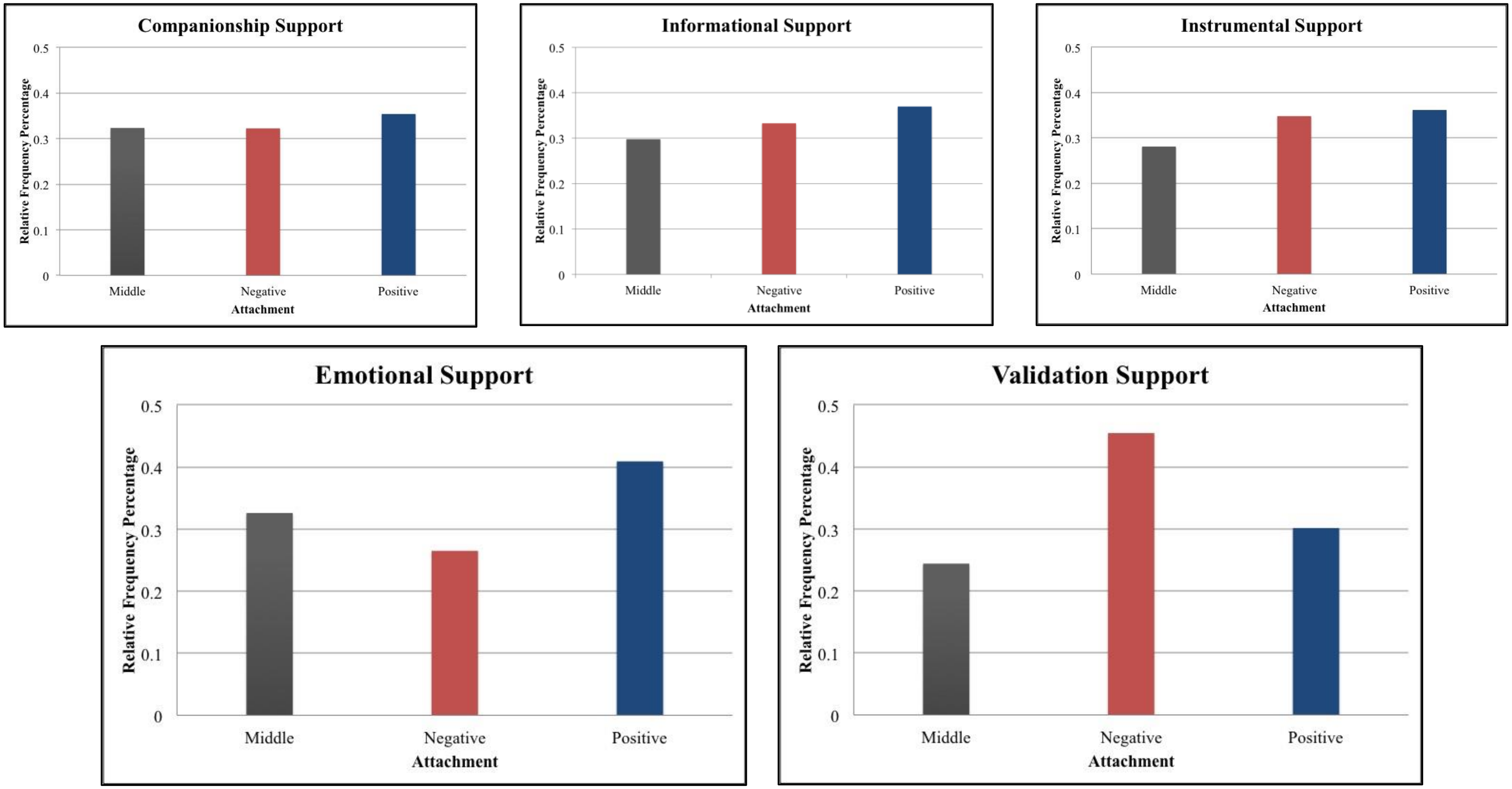

Figure 3. Relative frequency percentages for each attachment group by type of social support. Companionship support was coded a 58 times across the middle (27), negative (17), and positive (14) attachment groups and had relative frequency percentages of 32%, 32%, and 35% respectively. Informational support was coded 78 times across the middle (34), negative (24), and positive (20) attachment groups (frequency percentages of 30%, 33%, and 37% respectively). Instrumental support was coded 75 times across the middle (32), negative (24), and positive (29) attachment groups (frequency percentages of 28%, 35%, and 36% respectively). Emotional support was coded 79 times across the middle (36), negative (19), and positive (24) attachment groups (frequency percentages of 31%, 26%, and 43% respectively). Validation support was coded 46 times across the middle (17), negative (20), and positive (9) attachment groups (frequency percentages of 24%, 45%, and 30% respectively

Aligning Social Support to Youth's Developmental Needs:

The Role of Non-Parental Youth-Adult Relationships in Early and Late Adolescence

Mark Vincent B. Yu and Nancy L. Deutsch

University of Virginia Curry School of Education

Abstract

Through the provision of different types of social support, significant non-parental youth-adult relationships can facilitate youth's positive development across adolescence. However, despite the potential benefits of these relationships, there has been little consideration of how the relational process may vary across different adolescent stages. Utilizing qualitative methods, this study compared five types of social support processes (emotional, instrumental, companionship, validation and informational) as reported by youth during early (n=23) and late adolescence (n=14). Specifically, this study compared the characteristics and nature of the five types of social support between these two distinct developmental periods. General characteristics of relationships that differed between early and late adolescence included younger youth having more vertical (e.g., adult to youth) interactions with their significant non-parental adults (VIPs), as compared to older youth who emphasized more horizontal interactions (e.g., peer to peer). Additionally, compared to younger youth who emphasized the importance of enacted support, older youth emphasized the significance of perceived support in times of need and despite physical distance or time apart. Additional differences emerged between the early and late adolescent groups across the five types of social support including the significance of scaffolding, humor-related interactions, and support for self-esteem issues for younger youth; and the significance of mutuality and support for education and career goals to name a few, for older youth. This study demonstrates how a developmental perspective may elucidate the processes that characterize and underlie youth's relationships with supportive non-parental adults. Findings provide implications to understand, promote and sustain these important relationships in the lives of youth.

Aligning Social Support to Youth's Developmental Needs:

The Role of Non-Parental Youth-Adult Relationships in Early and Late Adolescence

Supportive relationships can facilitate youth's positive development across adolescence. Aside from supportive parent and peer relationships, many young people indicate the presence of significant non-parental adults (e.g., teachers, coaches, extended family members, etc.) in their lives (also known as "VIPs" or natural mentors; Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005). Through the provision of different types of social support, these relationships facilitate positive gains in the health and wellbeing of youth (Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Sterrett, Jones, Mckee & Kincaid, 2011; Chu, Saucier & Hafner, 2010). However, despite the potential benefits of these relationships, there has been little consideration of how the relational process may vary across different adolescent stages. These differences are important to consider, as early and late adolescents have distinct developmental needs. Just as with settings (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) and peer and parent relationships (Allen, 2008), non-parental youth-adult relationships that align with youth's developmental stage may be optimal for providing appropriate social support and promoting positive outcomes.

Types of Support from Significant Non-Parental Adults

Significant non-parental adults (VIPs) provide youth with multiple types of social support including informational, instrumental, emotional, validation and companionship support (Wills & Shinar, 2000; see Table 2 for definitions). These supports are associated with increases in youth's academic functioning and self-esteem as well as decreases in youth's behavioral and emotional difficulties (see Sterrett et al., 2011 for a review). A meta-analysis of the literature on social support in adolescence found that nearly 60% of youth benefit from social support and that the influence of social support on outcomes increases with age (Chu et al., 2010). Indeed, research suggests that the significance of social support increases throughout adolescence (Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005), playing a vital role in youth's successful transition into adulthood (Shulman, Kalnitzki, & Shahar, 2009).

The existence of multiple types of social support has posed challenges to establishing clear links between social support and adolescent wellbeing (Chu et al., 2010). While much of the literature has focused on establishing links between different types of social support from parents and peers, less attention has been given to non-parental adults. Indeed, much of the research on social support and non-parental adults is segmented, often focusing on single types of social support or grouping varying types of support as a single category. The research in this area is limited given evidence that suggests VIPs provide youth with varying types of support, which can differentially influence relational processes and youth outcomes (Sterrett et al., 2011; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). For example, informational support or advice could facilitate decision-making and goal-directed behaviors that lead to feelings of accomplishment and self-worth (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). Emotional support could increase youth's sense of wellbeing by instilling in youth the availability of support in times of personal struggle (Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, 2006). Forms of instrumental support or directive assistance can help youth's mobilizing efforts by keeping them focused (Larson & Agnus, 2011). Validation support or positive feedback can help youth better identify their strengths and abilities, which in turn can influence youth's learning and achievement in schools (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Lastly, companionship support or engaging in leisure activities with VIPs can contribute to a nurturing and sustaining state of emotional wellbeing, enhancing the pleasure experienced in everyday life (Spencer, 2006). More empirical work is needed to understand the characteristics and nature of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships during adolescence, as well as what types and aspects of support in these relationships may be most salient for youth at different developmental stages (Spencer, 2007).

Developmental Stages and Changes in Adolescence

Adolescence is generally divided into three sub-stages—early (ages 10-14), middle (ages 15-17), and late adolescence (ages 18-21; Steinberg, 2016), which coincide with the educational transitions of middle school and high school to a period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). With each of these transitions, youth’s social worlds expand as they move into a new social context (e.g., educational, out-of-school, and workplace settings). Notably, as they grow older, youth’s relationships with VIPs may take on new roles, functions, and meanings (Spencer, 2007; Beam et al., 2002; Hurd, Stoddard, Bauermeister & Zimmerman, 2014). Unfortunately, much of the literature on these relationships focuses on adolescence as a whole rather than as separate developmental stages. This lack of differentiation is problematic given literature suggesting great variability in the characteristics, needs, and perceptions of youth during different adolescent stages (Steinberg, 2016; Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Towards a better understanding of these differences and its implications for youth’s relationships with VIPs, this study focuses on two distinct developmental stages: early adolescence and late adolescence. These stages are characterized by profound changes in youth’s developmental needs and social contexts. By comparing the beginning and end of adolescence, this study seeks to identify and understand distinct characteristics and relational processes underlying these important relationships in youth’s lives.

Changes in Early Adolescence. Early adolescence is a period characterized by rapid and significant changes in physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development (Steinberg, 2016). Physically, early adolescents undergo more change than at any other developmental period except from birth to two years old (Scales, 2010). There are also significant changes that occur within the brain related to the development of executive function (e.g., control and coordination of thoughts and behavior) and social cognition (e.g., self-awareness, perspective-taking; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). As early adolescents develop, they continue to refine their capacity for abstract thought processes, increasing their ability to understand, reason, and make independent decisions (Scales, 2010). These changes facilitate youth's engagement in deeper and more complex relationships with others (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003).

As early adolescents exercise their independence and individuality, interpersonal relationships shift from parents to peers, which may place demands on youth as they explore more intimate relationships outside of the family (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Multiple studies have found that the most salient sources of social support shift across adolescence, with early adolescents reporting higher levels of support from parents and older youth reporting greater support from peers (e.g., Bokhorst, Sumter, Westenberg, 2010). Unfortunately, despite the salience of parental support there is evidence to suggest that early adolescents have high rates of conflicts with their parents (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Supportive non-parental adults—somewhere between parents and peers—may be in an even better position to influence younger adolescents by complementing the structure and support provided by parents and providing companionship support typical of peer relationships (Hirsch, 2005). Thus, these relationships may have profound and unique developmental consequences for early adolescents.

Early adolescence is accompanied by larger structural changes in the educational environment. Specifically, the goals for learning emphasized through policies and practices become more tightly controlled and scheduled, limiting student access to and time with caring adults, opportunities for competence-building, and healthy individuation (Pianta, Hamre &

Allen, 2012). Researchers have documented a number of challenges that youth report facing during this period, including perceiving less adult caring and support, and limitations in school organization, classroom autonomy, and instructional quality (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Klem & Connell, 2004). Consequently, indicators of student engagement (e.g., motivation, grades, and attendance) and socioemotional wellbeing (e.g., self-esteem, mental health) have been found to decline as students transition to upper grade levels (e.g., Benner, 2011, Marks, 2000). These changes are highly relevant to thinking about how youth's relationships with VIPs during early adolescence may best fit the needs of youth.

Changes in Late Adolescence. Compared to early adolescents, older adolescents explore the possibilities of intimate relationships, work, and education and thus move gradually toward making enduring choices (Arnett, 2004). Consequently, this developmental period facilitates great personal growth. As students transition from high school, they are likely to move away from home and have access to a broader network of relationships including new non-parental adult relationships through the various contexts to which they become exposed (e.g., work, college). Thus, non-parental adults may not only be more accessible than parents but youth's relationships with these adults may also take on different functions and meanings. For example, Hurd and Zimmerman (2010) found that natural mentors may serve as a vital resource for youth, helping them cope more effectively with stress and risks (e.g., depression and sexual risk behavior) associated with this developmental period. Chang et al, (2010) found that VIPs provide an important bridging role, linking emerging adults to particular forms of social capital that they may not have access to through their parental and peer relationships. Indeed, VIPs can serve as important sources of support especially in the areas of work (McDonald, Erickson, Johnson, & Elder, 2007) and the transition and adjustment to college (Hurd, Tan & Loeb, 2016; Zalaquet &

Lopez, 2006; Chang et al., 2010).

Older adolescents have greater ability to consider different points of view, which can result in less reliance on others, and at the same time, increased empathy and concern for others (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). These changes have implications for the types and the nature of social support that youth may need and access from non-parental adults. For example, although older adolescents may be more apt than young adolescents to turn to non-parental adults for role modeling and help with important life decisions, they may be more sensitive to mutuality and non-directive forms of support (Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2008). Moreover, older adolescents may benefit from specific support that can help them develop and feel more confident in their life purpose, abilities and passions (Liang & Ketcham, 2017; Hurd, et al., 2014).

During late adolescence, youth balance connection with their increasing need for autonomy (Allen, 2008). Relationships with non-parental adults, as compared to parent relationships, may be particularly salient because they provide youth with connection without hindering youth's sense of autonomy (Allen, 2008). Notably, compared to younger adolescents, the amount of time spent with non-parental adults may be less important among older adolescents (Hurd et al., 2014). More research is needed to better understand the nature these relationships and the particular processes through which they influence youth development (Spencer, 2007). Such research would be further enriched by consideration of how the developmental stage of the youth may differentially shape these relational processes (Spencer, 2007; Hurd et al. 2014).

Purpose of the Study

The current literature offers insight into the ways that youth may differentially experience, and draw support from, relationships with significant non-parental adults (VIPs) in early and late adolescence. In order to further understand these processes, this study utilized qualitative methods to examine how the *characteristics* and *nature* of youth's relationships with VIPs differ between early and late adolescence and in particular, how differences vary across types of social support including companionship, emotional, validation, informational and instrumental support.

Methods

Data and Sample

The data for this study come from a longitudinal mixed-methods study of youth-adult relationships. Adolescents (ages 12-17; N=289) were recruited from a mid-sized Atlantic city through local youth programs, schools, and community settings. A sub-sample of 40 youth were then purposively recruited to participate in five in-depth interviews over 3.5 years. For the first four interview time points, the same set of questions was used to understand youth's relationships and interactions with their VIPs (described below), creating consistency in the information gathered about the VIP relationships across those time points. During Time 1 interviews, youth ages ranged from 13-17 and by Time 4 youth ages ranged from 15-19. For the present study, two interview time points with the largest proportion of early and late adolescent interview data were selected. Time 1 had the largest proportion of early adolescent interview data (n=23) and Time 4 had the largest proportion of late adolescent interview data (n=17).

Thus, for this paper, the subsample of 40 youth was split into two independent early and late adolescent groups. The early adolescent group included 23 youth who were between the ages of 13-14 at their Time 1 interviews. The late adolescent group included 14 youth who were between the ages of 18-19 at their Time 4 interviews (these youth were between the ages of 15-

17 at Time 1). There was no overlap between the two groups. Three youth who would have been in the late adolescent group because they were 15-17 years old at Time 1, did not have Time 4 interviews and thus were omitted from the sample for this paper, making the overall sample size for the present study 37. Across both early and late adolescent groups, 57% of youth identified as female. Seventy-eight percent of youth reported their racial/ethnic background as White, 14% African American, 5% Hispanic and 3% other. Fifteen percent were eligible for free or reduced-lunch at school. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, which youth selected for themselves during their interviews. Of the VIPs youth nominated, 40.5% were from school settings (mostly teachers and coaches), 26.7% from family settings (extended kin), 6.9% from work settings, 3.9% from community settings (e.g., church, afterschool programs), and 21.7% from other settings (e.g., family friends). Table 1 provides more information about youth and their VIPs including their education status (i.e., middle school, high school or college) or work status and the types and number of VIPs each youth nominated in their interviews.

Youth Interviews

Interviewers asked participants to nominate a VIP, which we defined as “persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make” (Herrera et al., 2007). Interviews lasted an hour to an hour and a half. Approximately a third of each interview consisted of questions surrounding the VIP relationship. Participants were asked what they normally did with their VIP(s), what they talked about, why they felt close to their VIP, and specific questions about various types of support their VIP(s) provide (see Appendix A for VIP interview protocol). Two principal investigators, three graduate students, and two full-time research assistants conducted interviews. A majority of the interviews were one-on-one, but occasionally we worked in interviewer pairs to enhance rapport or comfort level (e.g., to ensure a same-gender interviewer was present). Most interviewers were women (84%) and racially identified as White (71%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (29%).

Analyses

As part of the larger study, the research team developed thematic codes (Yin, 2016) encompassing the goals of the study, including social support. Once the themes were developed, researchers coded the transcripts using Dedoose Version 7.0.23, a cloud based mixed-methods data analysis application. The research team met weekly to address coding questions and to ensure reliability. Two coders were assigned to every transcript and after both coders independently coded a transcript, the two coders compared the codes and reconciled any discrepancies. Discrepancies which the coders could not reconcile or which they had questions about were brought to the larger group meeting and discussed and reconciled by the entire research team.

After all 36 transcripts were reconciled as part of the larger study, at least two research assistants then sub-coded excerpts of social support based on five types of social support. They coded for companionship, emotional, instrumental, informational, and validation based on Wills and Shinar's (2000) definitions (see Table 2 for definitions). Similar to the process described above, both research assistants coded independently and then met to compare codes and reconcile discrepancies. The first author oversaw this process and led weekly meeting to discuss and resolve disagreements between coders. This process helped to ensure reliability of coding application and helped to ensure that all instances of the types of social support were captured. Given the multidimensional nature of social support that VIPs provide youth (Varga & Zaff, 2018) and the ways in which youth in our study described their relationships and the supports they derived from their VIPs, many excerpts were coded as representing multiple types of social support. Examples of overlap between types of supports are discussed in the results.

The first author, with the help of two research assistants unfamiliar with the larger study, conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of the excerpts coded for each type of social support. Specifically this process involved the following steps. First all of the excerpts coded for each of the five types of social support across both the early and late adolescent groups were downloaded from Dedoose. Second, the three researchers then read through all the excerpts coded for a specific type of support (one type every week) and individually developed initial codes that appeared interesting and meaningful, while also memoing to begin developing overarching themes within the data. Third, all three researchers then met weekly to discuss initial codes and memos across all the excerpts followed by a more targeted discussion of differences between the early and late adolescent excerpts. Fourth, based on these discussions, a codebook of themes (which all three researchers agreed on) was then applied to the group of excerpts for each type of social support. As one way to audit this analytical process, the first author then consulted with another senior member of the larger study, who was heavily involved in the youth interviews, to get feedback on the themes and key examples.

Findings

Characteristics of Relationships in Early vs. Late Adolescence

There were differences in how the early and late adolescents described the general characteristics of their relationships with their VIPs. First, relationships differed in terms of power dynamics. Younger youth described having vertical interactions with their VIPs, characterized by VIPs exerting much more control in the relationship. Older youth on the other hand, described much more horizontal (e.g., peer to peer) interactions with their VIPs. Another general characteristic of relationships that differed between early and late adolescence involved the significance of perceived support. Indeed, compared to younger youth, who emphasized the importance of enacted support (e.g., frequency and availability of support in shared settings), older youth emphasized the significance of perceived support in times of need and despite physical distance. Specific examples of how these characteristics of relationships manifested in youth's relationships with their VIPs are presented below. Specifically, the following sections describe themes (italicized) and differences between the early and late adolescent groups across the five types of social support (see Table 2 for Codebook of themes).

Companionship Support

Companionship support involves VIPs participating in social and leisure activities with youth. For younger youth, a key aspect of this support was based on their *VIPs treating them like "peers."* This treatment often involved VIPs having "teenage"-like qualities as Swagballer19 described here about her school counselor:

> I kind of feel like she's a teenager when I talk to her. I feel like she thinks like a teenager. It's just easier to talk to her as a peer. It's kind of hard to talk to adults.

VIPs having peer-like qualities made it easier for younger youth to talk to and participate in social activities with their VIPs. For younger youth, pervasive stereotypes about teens as being "up to no good" and "annoying" made their VIP relationships particularly significant because it was a type of relationship they were not used to having. Indeed, younger youth shared their VIPs as being more non-judgmental as compared to other adults, and as being more "tolerant" of them as Michael described here in response to being perceived as an annoying teenager:

> I don't really talk to that many adults. Like he's just like that teacher that was nice and that I liked, and how he was kind of tolerant of me, and that really stood out.

The simple interaction of "tolerating" and going against negative notions about adolescence seem to have the power of facilitating positive relationships between younger youth and VIPs.

Whereas younger adolescents emphasized their VIPs' "peer" and "teenage"-like qualities, older adolescents described their *VIPs as treating them more equally as "adults" and as "friends."* Older youth described the significance of no longer being treated like students and at times "dumb teens." Further, older youth described the progression towards stronger friendships. Cecilia, for example, stated, "I guess [our relationship] just kind of fluctuated, but also as I've gotten older she became more a friend." This statement was echoed by Alicia who said "we've become just really good friends, even though she's older than me."

As a function of being treated more equally as adults and friends, older adolescents also described the importance of *"shared efforts."* This theme involves the idea that friendships are two-sided and thus require effort and action from both youth and VIPs. McMolnakerson, for example, said "We're pretty close, just because he holds up his end of the friendship, too. He'll text me and – he'll text me first and stuff like that." Riley added "I make an effort to show that [I] care about her so she makes an effort to always be there, we're pretty close." Similarly, Alicia said "*We're* friends, so *we* are committed to keeping up, and *we're* not gonna just lose touch with each other" (emphasis added). These shared efforts gave older youth a sense of connection and ownership of the relationship.

Although both younger and older adolescents described bonding over *similar personalities and/or shared interests*, a specific theme that emerged for younger adolescents included *humor-related interactions*, which involved exchanges of jokes, inside jokes, and sharing of fun and/or funny moments (e.g., laughing together). These interactions acted as a catalyst for youth's social relationships with their VIPs. For example, Time stated:

> We both like the same sort of music which is punk in the beginning when we first met, he would suggest all these bands for me and then it's just me like being sarcastic and joking

> around and we just started writing to each other, he's just a funny, strange person.

Indeed, humor-related interactions helped VIPs engage with younger youth. Humor also functioned as a way to make younger youth feel better. Lucy, for example, said, "She is really funny and she always makes me laugh when I'm sad" about her VIP. For PhilishaQueesha, humor-related interactions made him more comfortable around his coach: "He's a good friend that I can just go and do fun stuff with." Having these interactions with VIPs were important to younger youth. It made VIPs less intimidating, youth more comfortable, and helped to promote happiness and fun interactions between VIPs and youth.

Emotional Support

Emotional support involves VIPs being available to youth when they are having personal problems, while providing indications of caring, acceptance, empathy and trust. For younger youth, the provision of this type of support was often based on *VIPs being strongly connected to their social network* in terms of duration of relationships, settings, and the availability of support. Skye illustrated this theme when asked whether she goes to her VIP for personal issues:

> I mean yeah definitely just because of how long we've known each other – she knows what's going on in my life so it's not like every time I see her I have to catch her up on stuff. She's just always like caught up and knows how I act and so she'll know like her opinion on stuff but also how that can relate to what I would do.

Like Skye, other younger youth described their VIPs having "insider knowledge" of their personal issues based on duration and consistency of support. The settings youth occupied also played an important role in regard to VIPs being physically present and available in the same space to provide youth with emotional support for their personal problems.

Older adolescents, on the other hand, described emotional support from their VIPs despite physical distance or time apart. For example, Bob, a college student said, "I don't think that distance or even really time deteriorated our relationship" about a coach he had in high school. Katherine, another college student said, “She’s always gonna be someone in my life who I can talk to” about a coach in high school. McMolnakerson added “We don’t talk that much anymore, but if I really needed to I definitely could go talk to him about anything” about a previous teacher. These statements highlights an important aspect of emotional support during late adolescence in regard to *the power of perceived social support*. For these older youth, just feeling like their VIPs would “be there” in times of personal struggle was enough to maintain the positive perceptions they had about their VIP relationships as sources of emotional support. It is important to note that many older adolescents named and described VIP relationships they had prior to their transition to college and/or work, which may have important implications for promoting enduring relationships in this developmental period.

In regard to the content of emotional support, youth across the early and late adolescent groups described the importance of *being able to talk to their VIPs about personal topics* including general emotional issues (e.g., feeling sad or bad about something) as well as issues related to specific times of hardship (e.g., parents’ divorce, death in the family). For younger youth, emotional support was often coupled with follow-up support in the form of other types of support including validation and information support. For example, Molly Hooper, a youth who shared having personal conversations with her VIP about her self-esteem issues said, “When we are talking, she tells me what I need to hear.” She went on to say that her VIP was particularly helpful because “she’ll help me come up with ways to distract myself or will just tell me that it’s not important what other people think.” Here, it is important to note that Molly Hooper was describing her interactions with her counselor, whose role is to provide her with emotional support. Other younger youth described similar interactions with their VIPs and the importance of providing “follow-up” support. Prime, for example, said “she always good answers” in regard to advice that his teacher would give him after talking about “personal stuff.”

Conversely, older adolescents, described having a more mutual relationship with their VIPs in terms of *helping and encouraging each other during personal struggles*. This theme was apparent in Bartholomew’s response to having personal conversations with his teacher in high school:

> I just like kept the conversation going and then I left and then I realized that she needs to talk to someone too. So I went back and I gave her a hug and I said, “If you ever need to talk you can text me.” So we have those conversations.

The “shared friendship” as described above helped facilitate youth’s mutual relationship with their VIPs. Having a more mutual relationship made youth more comfortable to engage in personal conversations with their VIPs and made youth feel good about being able to reciprocate the emotional support they received from the relationship.

Validation Support

Validation support or positive feedback involves providing positive confirmation about the appropriateness of youth’s behaviors. For both the younger and older adolescent groups, VIPs highlighting their strengths and perspectives was key in helping them feel heard, special, and more competent. For younger youth, it was important that VIPs didn't just dismiss them but provided feedback related to areas of improvement, including help to better communicate and address their problems. For example, Scooter said the following about his church youth group leader:

> She can really relate to what I’m saying, and like she’ll understand and she’ll be like, “Yeah, I understand.” [Other] people are like, “Okay, what? What is he trying to say?

He went on to describe how his VIP not only complimented his efforts to share his ideas but also gave him ways to address similar challenging situations in the future. This sentiment was also shared by Claire who said, “she’ll provide you with constructive criticism and then explain how you can do [it] better in the future so you don't forget for next time."

Younger youth talked about *validation of their strengths and perspectives in the context of challenges* whereas older youth talked about *validation based more on their accomplishments and strong points*, as Poncho stated here:

> I mean I told [my teacher] about college. She told me about just life in general and what she thinks my strong points are going to be.

Additionally, for older youth, it was helpful that their VIPs provided them with feedback to support their growing sense of identity as it related to their education and career pursuits. Karen, for example said, "we talk about my accomplishments in college." Additionally, Johnny Depp said "he'll compliment you in front of people, and [will] give you a good reputation" referring to a line of work that Johnny Depp is interested in pursuing in the future.

As compared to older youth, younger youth, particularly females, spoke more often about the significance of validation support to *help with self-esteem issues*. For example, Lizzy stated:

> [My grandmother] doesn't think that I'm weak for feeling the things that I feel, and she doesn't think that I'm weird for liking the things – Well, that's not true. She thinks I'm weird, but she doesn't judge me too harshly…instead of mostly just thinking bad about myself, she remind[s] me that it's not true.

For Lizzy and other younger youth it was important that their VIPs helped them to address their self-esteem issues by providing a non-judgmental space to talk about these issues as well as feedback to challenge negative thinking. Youth reported gaining more self-confidence as a result of these interactions, and many youth reported feeling able to trust their VIPs.

Informational Support

Informational support refers to the provision of knowledge, advice or guidance. Across the early and late adolescent groups, the idea of *VIPs providing youth with different perspectives* – unique and different from that of peers, parents and/or other adults – was important for youth.

Robert, a younger youth demonstrated this theme when asked about why getting advice from his teacher was important:

> I guess its just advice from a person other than my parents. So I get the usual stuff from my parents all the time. So it’s just good to have it from a different point of view.

Similarly, older youth reported appreciating different perspectives but tended to be much more discerning of the sources and content of informational support. For example, Bob said the following about his core advisor in college:

> He’s a great guy but I wouldn’t…I think his job is to be there for students if they need help with anything. And it’s not like I feel uncomfortable going to him, but he wouldn’t be first on the list I would go to.

Bob added that depending on what he needed, he can go to mother or college peers because they are “already there.” Like Bob, other older youth noted having multiple sources of information support and being much more selective about whom they would reach out to for information. Not surprisingly, being selective of support was related to the theme of *“youth-initiated support.”* Older youth demonstrated their ability to consider different points of view and to understand and differentiate sources of informational support in their lives. Youth’s selectivity was also based on the role that VIPs played in their lives. Youth identified circumstances they would go to their VIPs over others because of their expertise and knowledge of particular information.

Compared to older youth, younger youth emphasized the *“process”* rather than the content of information support. This theme was represented in Claire’s response to whether she learns anything from her grandmother:

> Claire: Like you’re doing great or you can do this and she helps me like understand, if I am doing something wrong.
> Interviewer: Oh, so how does she do that?
> Claire: Like tells me what I can do better…because I don't always know.

Here, Claire’s VIP not only provided information about her behavior but also helped her through the process of understanding how she can do better. Similar sentiments were shared by Skylar who described going to her teacher for questions related to information she did not understand:

> If I ask her a question she'll really make sure I understand it before letting me go and trying to do it on my own. And that's just really nice because some teachers will be like, 'Okay do you have it now?' or 'Okay here's the answer go see if you can do it' but she'll be like, 'Okay do you actually know or do you have any more questions?

VIPs also pushed younger youth to consider how various situations could potentially play out as well as helped youth approach problem solving in different ways, as described by Scooter here:

> [My church youth group leader] will give me advice about like what questions should I ask God, and like just different things about my faith. If I have a question about like things about the bible, she'll like kind of give me ideas to approach it in a different way.

Often VIP-initiated, these interactions facilitated younger youth's positive relationships with their VIPs. Helping with the "processing" of information fostered youth's sense of competence and problem solving skills. These interactions also promoted youth's sense of connection because it meant that their VIPs "cared" for them and were invested in their growth and learning.

Instrumental Support

Instrumental support is the provision of tangible and practical assistance. This type of support from VIPs provided younger youth with *practical life skills,* as Lizzy stated here about her grandmother:

> Interviewer: So she teaches you practical things [using tools, solving math problems] that you need to know. Is this important to you, that she teaches you all of these things?
> Lizzy: Yeah, because when I move out, I'm going to need to know this type of stuff to be able to live out my life. So I find it very helpful to be able to be independent like that.

Lizzy's VIP taught her practical life skills that she can see using in the future. Other younger youth described similar processes. Specifically, tangible assistance such as help with homework and school projects in combination with support to "process" information (as described above) enabled youth to apply their learning in different settings. This was apparent in Abby's description of the homework help she received from her teacher, which she said helped her develop academic skills (e.g., study habits and time management) that she was able to apply in different settings (e.g., other classes and at home). It is important to note that the provision of practical life skills was often based on VIP roles. School based VIPs were more likely to help with academic skills, coaches with athletic skills, and familial VIPs with more general like skills including (e.g., cooking, childcare, etc.). What seems to connect these skills across VIP roles was that they helped to promote youth's sense of independence. Further, there seems to be underlying lessons in these instances of VIP support, which youth found significant in terms of future application.

Whereas younger youth noted concrete, practical assistance with *"present" tasks* (e.g., homework, school projects) or during specific times of hardship (e.g., needing money), older youth noted the importance of support that helped them to *"get ahead."* At the most basic level, this theme included VIPs writing college recommendation letters for youth and giving youth work and other support and opportunities related to their career interests. Other older youth described a more non-linear process in regard to developing skills they need to achieve their goals and sense of purpose. For example, Bartholomew said "He taught me skills that has had a huge impact on my life" referring to the training he's received from his track coach and how it helped him reflect and address negative character traits (e.g., cockiness) that could potentially affect his goals of being successful and respected in the future.

Bodos, one of the few African American youth in the study, noted the significance of his teacher's efforts to "lift" minority youth:

> What's striking about her is that she cares about the minorities. She really cares about the minorities. And she supports them, and lifts them up. And yeah, I think that's amazing.

Bodos went on to describe how his teacher gave him and other minority students like him opportunities within his school's drama department and the community. A specific example included his teacher having minority students interviewed on TV instead of "the white kids," to which he responded:

> I think it's important to allow the minorities to do it because it's not often that they'll be on TV for something positive…so it's good for them to do stuff like that.

Bodos further noted that this particular event gave him ideas for the future. Bodos' VIP not only provided him with opportunities to move him forward in life but also supported his strong desire to help others like him in the future. Overall for older youth, it was important that their VIPs provided them with tangible and practical assistance that helped them move forward in life and achieve their goals. In addition, it was important that their VIPs helped them consider other factors (both internal and external) that might impede or promote success.

Discussion

Previous research has documented the importance of supportive non-parental youth-adult relationships during adolescence. However, previous work has left open the question of whether the developmental characteristics and nature of these relationships vary across adolescence. As one-way to fill this gap in the literature, this study compared five types of social support processes as reported by youth during two distinct developmental periods in adolescence.

Adolescence is marked by changes that exist across various contexts. These changes are often accompanied by shifts in adolescents' trajectories (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). For some youth, changes during adolescence may facilitate positive growth and adjustment. For other youth, however, these changes can negatively affect wellbeing (e.g., self-esteem), as well as increase problem behaviors (e.g., disengagement in schools; Symond & Hargreaves, 2014). According to stage–environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) some of these negative changes may result from a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded to them in their various social contexts. Adolescents whose contexts change in developmentally regressive ways or provide “bad fit” for meeting youth’s changing needs may lead to difficulties and less than optimal development. In contrast, adolescents whose social environments respond to their changing needs are more likely to experience positive outcomes. In line with this theoretical perspective, this study shows that social support from VIPs may help youth navigate developmental changes and contexts associated with two distinct stages in adolescence. For example, our findings link to previous research suggesting younger youth tend to have vertical (e.g., adult to youth) interactions with adults as compared to older youth who tend to emphasize mutuality in relationships (Hartup, 1989; Chu et al., 2010). According to Chu et al., (2010), vertical and horizontal relationships can have different impacts on youth and thus the social support they receive and perceive, and its effects, may be different as well.

Overall, results suggest the importance of considering the quality of “fit” between the social supports that VIPs provide youth that align with their changing developmental needs. Further, this study shows that VIPs may serve multiple functions in youth’s lives, as sources of companionship; as means to gain information, master skills and explore opportunities; and to address personal development, social competence and character development to name a few. To further elucidate these processes, this study identified key developmental differences in the characteristics and nature of social support as described by younger and older adolescents. The developmental implications of the differences between younger and older adolescents’ relationships with VIPs are discussed further below.

Developmental Implications of VIP Support in Early Adolescence

In light of the themes found within the early adolescent group, three developmental implications of VIP support seem particularly relevant to discuss: (1) the importance of scaffolding, (2) addressing self-esteem issues, and (3) challenging negative stereotypes about adolescents. The importance of scaffolding was evident in youth's descriptions of support from their VIPs that helped them "process" information and situations in order to develop problem-solving skills. Based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), scaffolding is related to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the distance between youth's "actual development levels as determined by independent problem solving" and the higher level of "potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance" (pg. 86). Adults help youth operate in the ZPD through scaffolding—providing just enough support to help the youth solve a problem without doing it for them. According to this theory, learning is inherently social. Thus, youth's interactions with supportive adults help to shape their thinking and actions. Further, this theory involves the importance of goal-directed activities that emphasizes process over product. These "developmentally instigative activities" have the potential to become progressively more complex and therefore can facilitate optimal youth development in early adolescence (Darling, 2005). Youth described VIPs engaging in scaffolding with these types of process-oriented activities, encouraging the development of skills and youth's sense of competence. Rather than focus on giving youth the "right" answer to their problems, VIPs helped youth adapt their understanding to new situations, structuring their problem-solving attempts, and assisted youth in assuming responsibility for managing problem solving. Younger youth appeared to be attracted to these developmentally instigative activities because it provided them with sensitive and appropriate scaffolding. Per Eccles's stage-environment theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), which posits the importance of structuring settings to meet youth's developmental needs, relationships with VIPs may provide an important context to meet youth's needs and promote positive outcomes.

The prevalence of receiving support for self-esteem issues was particularly pronounced in the early adolescent narratives. Several longitudinal studies have followed samples from preadolescence through adolescence, and these studies generally find that self-esteem declines in early adolescence then rises through late adolescence (Huang, 2010). However, the decline in self-esteem in early adolescence is much more pronounced for female youth (Huang, 2010). This pattern was evident in this study and may be the reason why many younger youth, particularly females, reported support from their VIPs related to self-esteem issues. As compared to older adolescents, younger adolescents reported being more conscious of how they look, what they say and how they act. They also suspected and feared that others would judge them harshly. VIPs helped to ameliorate these concerns by providing a non-judgmental space and validation support to challenge negative thinking.

Early adolescents were also acutely aware of negative stereotypes against adolescents and were sensitive about how their VIPs interacted with them. Most noted the significance of having a VIP, an adult, who didn’t align with this deficit-based thinking. This finding was not surprising given the amount of emphasis on adolescence as a period of conflict and of adolescents themselves as “problems to be managed” (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). The findings of this study show the power of seeing youth more positively and the impact that it can have on youth’s development of supportive relationships with adults.

Developmental Implications of VIP Support in Late Adolescence

Across the late adolescent group, three major developmental implications emerged: (1) the importance of mutuality, (2) the power of perceived social support and (3) support related to youth’s growing sense of identity and cognitive development. Older adolescents were much more sensitive to mutuality across the different types of support. They noted a need for give and take in the mentoring relationship in ways that early adolescents did not. They described the relationship as being more reciprocal and noted a sense of “shared efforts” with their VIPs. The significance of mutuality may reflect the developmental needs of youth in this age group. Specifically, it is well established in the literature that there is an increased need to feel autonomous and connected in adolescence, which in combination, may be especially salient in late adolescence (Inguglia et al., 2015). In line with previous studies of mentoring (e.g., Liang et al., 2008) and parent-adolescent relationships (Allen, 2008) in late adolescence, the findings of this study suggest that VIP support for mutuality that is sensitive to simultaneous needs for autonomy and connection may be especially well received by older adolescents.

Older youth perceived support, including emotional support from their VIPs despite physical distance or time apart. This finding aligns with previous studies of social support and wellbeing including a meta-analysis of 246 studies, where Chu et al., (2010) found that measures of perceived social support (as opposed to actual support received) had the strongest association with overall adolescent wellbeing, and that the effect increased with age. Additionally, this finding supports previous research on natural mentoring relationships that suggest face-to-face interactions and the amount of time spent with VIPs may be less critical among older youth (Packard, 2003; Hurd et al., 2014).

According to Arnett (2004), youth begin to develop a firmer sense of identity in late adolescence in the areas of personal relationships, education and work. Results of this study suggest that relationships with VIPs may function to facilitate youth’s growth in these areas of development. Specifically, older youth noted the importance of receiving instrumental support from their VIPs in order to achieve their education and career goals and to move them forward in life. They also noted appreciation for support related to their increasing sense of responsibility and purpose in life. According to Baxter Magolda (2008) older youth think more critically about what brings meaning to their lives. Mentoring offers a coaching mechanism that guides the discovery process by not only providing tangible assistance but also providing youth with opportunities for self-reflection. Overall, findings suggest that supporting youth's growth in these areas of development (e.g., education, work, sense of purpose) may have strong implications for the effectiveness of youth's relationships with VIPs in late adolescence (also see Crisp & Cruz, 2009: Hurd et al., 2014; Liang & Ketcham, 2017).

Lastly, older adolescents demonstrated their capacity to make finer distinctions between different aspects of their relationship with VIPs, especially when it involved the provision of informational support. They reported having more sources of support compared to younger adolescents and were much more selective about information they solicited from their VIPs. This finding aligns with older youth's increased capacity for abstract cognitive processes and may also reflect changes associated with late adolescence—a time when youth's social worlds broaden and they shift from family embeddedness to greater independence (Arnett, 2004).

Implications for Practice

In addition to the implications highlighted in the previous sections, this study has several implications for practice and research. For younger youth, one specific implication for practice involves creating spaces for shared and recreational activities. Youth noted the importance of their VIPs being physically present and available in the same space to provide them with support. At the same time, they also described the importance of having fun and humor-related interactions with their VIPs. Structuring settings and communities that are conducive to these types of natural mentoring relationships may result in more secure and enduring relationships and greater numbers of youth connected with mentors (Schwartz et al., 2013; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2014). Further, promoting these relationships may be particularly important in early adolescence, a period that is relatively dominated by peers, less populated by caring adults, and more tightly controlled and scheduled around academics (Pianta et al., 2012).

For older youth, an implication for practice is the promotion of enduring relationships. In this study, many of the older youth named VIPs they had prior to graduating from high school. It may be worthwhile to create a platform to continue to connect youth with their VIPs. This may occur organically in some relationships, but for VIPs such as high school teachers, a program to follow-up on students who have graduated can have great benefits. It may complement the significance of "shared efforts" and may continue to promote of the power of perceived social support for this population. These efforts may be especially important given that many college settings, for example, can be less conducive to the forming of new VIP relationships (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions

One strength of this study is that it examined how social support processes differed between two distinct developmental periods in adolescence. Another strength of this study is that it builds on previous literature on social support by considering different types of support that adults provide youth during adolescence. However, although this study highlighted processes specific to different types of support, it is important to note that there was often overlap in the types of support that youth described in their relationships with their VIPs. For example, emotional support was often coupled with validation support and informational support was often coupled with instrumental support. Future research should further explore these overlaps and in particular, how combinations of supports may function differently in response to different types of situations and problems (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Future research should also consider how various actors (e.g., parents, peers and other adults in addition to VIPs) in an adolescent's social network impact one another (Varga & Zaff, 2018). Indeed, emerging research shows that multiple individuals from different contexts can each be comprehensive sources of social support for youth (Varga & Zaff, 2018).

Another limitation of this study is the possibility that the differences found between early and late adolescents could also be a result of the cognitive and communicative abilities of younger versus older youth. Further, given the timing of the interviews, this study grouped together youth in the same age group to coincide with key educational transitions (e.g., middle to high school, high school to college or work) in adolescence. This method limits our findings, as there may be great variability between youth's pre and post transition experiences. Future research should explore how youth's relationships with VIPs may vary across these transition periods.

Research on natural mentoring relationships has highlighted the significance of youth's social identities (e.g., based on youth's racial and ethnic backgrounds) and its influences on the processes of social support and youth outcomes. For example, Hurd, Sánchez, Zimmerman and Caldwell (2012) found that non-parental adults helped to shape Black youth's racial identity beliefs through the promotion of youth's private regard, centrality and public regard (dimensions of racial identity; Sellers et al., 1989), which in turn was associated with stronger beliefs in the importance of school. These authors assert that non-parental adults support this process by providing adolescents supportive opportunities (e.g. safe spaces, resources) to think about the role of race in their identity (possibly leading to higher levels of centrality) and encouraging youth to hold positive perceptions of their racial group (i.e., higher private regard). Thus, understanding these social support processes for minoritized youth may be particularly important. Unfortunately, a limitation of the current study is that the sample of youth lacked diversity, with regard to race and ethnicity (78% White), which is needed to further understand these developmental processes. Future research is needed to explore the role and influences of youth's social identities in processes underlying youth's relationships with supportive non-parental adults.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study expands the body of literature on natural mentoring relationships by providing further insight into the characteristics and nature of supportive youth-adult relationships and how they vary between youth in early and late adolescence. Mentoring, at its essence, is a developmental phenomenon (Darling, 2005). This study demonstrates how a developmental perspective may elucidate the processes that characterize and underlie youth's relationships with supportive non-parental adults. Findings show a need to understand, promote and sustain these important relationships in the lives of youth.

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Table 1

Participant and VIP Information

Participant	Age	Gender	School Status	# of VIPs	VIP Role
Chief	13	M	Middle	1	Brother
DrewBrees	13	M	Middle	1	Grandfather
John	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Lizzy	13	F	Middle	2	Grandmother, Teacher
Michael	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Prime	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Red	13	M	Middle	1	Grandmother
Robert	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Skylar	13	F	Middle	1	Teacher
Swagballer19	13	F	Middle	1	Counselor
Time	13	F	Middle	1	Older Cousin
Abby	14	F	Middle	1	Teacher
Carrie	14	F	Middle	1	Church Leader
Claire	14	F	High	1	Grandmother
Jack	14	M	High	1	Family Friend
Jenna	14	F	High	1	Family Friend
Lucy	14	F	High	1	Family Friend
Missy	14	F	High	1	Coach
Molly Hooper	14	F	High	1	Counselor
Nothing	14	F	High	1	Grandmother
PhilishaQueesha	14	M	High	1	Coach
Scooter	14	M	High	1	Church Leader
Skye	14	F	Middle	1	Family Friend
Bodos	18	M	Post High	2	Teacher, Mentor
Riley	18	F	Post High	1	Mentor
Poncho	18	F	Post-High	2	Coach, Teacher
Johnny Depp	18	M	Work	1	Work
Katherine	18	F	College	1	Family Friend
Bob	18	M	College	2	Coach, Advisor
Bartholomew	18	M	College	2	Teacher, Coach
Cecilia	19	F	College	1	Family friend
Rachel	19	F	College	1	Teacher
Connor	19	M	College	1	Grandmother
Karen	19	F	College	1	Coach
McMolnakerson	19	M	Work	2	Work, Teacher
Rachel2	19	F	College	1	Aunt
Alicia	19	F	College	1	Church Leader

Note. The early adolescent sample included 23 youth and the late adolescent group included 14 youth. “Post High” refers to students who were interviewed after they graduated from high school but have not started college or work. All college students attended four-year universities.

Table 2. Codebook of Themes and Definitions

Social Support	Definition	Young Adolescents (ages 13-14)	Older Adolescents (ages 18-19)
Companionship Support	*Process of participating in social and leisure activities with youth.*	**1. Treating youth like peers.** *VIPs treating youth like peers and VIPs having teenage-like qualities. This theme also involves VIPs going against negative stereotypes about teenager.* **2. Similar personalities and/or interests.** *Youth relating to VIPs based on shared personalities and/or interests.* **3. Humor-related interactions.** *Involves exchanges of jokes, inside jokes and sharing of fun and/or funny moments (e.g., laughing together).*	**1. Treating youth like adults and friends.** *VIPs treating youth more equally as adults and friends.* **2. Similar personalities and/or interests.** *Youth relating to VIPs based on shared personalities and/or interests.* **3. Shared efforts.** *Involves the idea that friendships are two-sided and require effort and action from both youth and VIPs.*
Emotional Support	*Involves being available and listening to youth when they are having problems, while also providing indications of caring, acceptance, empathy and trust.*	**1. Youth being able to talk about personal issues with VIPs.** *Involves youth being able to talk to their VIPs about personal topics including general emotional issues (e.g., feeling sad or bad about something) as well as issues related to specific times of hardship (e.g., parents' divorce, family death).* **2. VIPs being strongly connected to youth's social network.** *Involves the idea of VIPs being strongly connected to youth's social network in terms of settings, duration of relationships and consistency and availability of support.*	**1. Youth being able to talk about personal issues with VIPs.** *Involves youth being able to talk to their VIPs about personal topics including general personal issues (e.g., relationship problems).* **2. Power of Perceived Social Support.** *Involves the idea of youth perceiving support from their VIPs despite physical distance or time apart.* **3. VIPs and youth helping each other.** *Involves the idea of VIPs and youth having a mutual relationship in terms of helping and encouraging each other.*
Validation Support	*Process of providing positive confirmation about*	**1. Highlighting youth's strengths and perspectives in the context of challenges** *VIPs providing youth with opportunities to*	**1. Highlighting youth accomplishments and strong points** *VIPs providing youth with support that highlights*

	the appropriateness of youth's behaviors. It also includes feedback or social comparison.	*showcase their strengths and perspectives, often in the context of challenges.* **2. Helping youth's self-esteem.** *VIPs providing youth with support related to self-esteem issues. Further, it involves VIPs challenging youth's negative thinking.*	*their accomplishments and strong points, particularly in relation to their education and career interests.*
Information Support	*Provision of knowledge, advice or guidance for youth.*	**1. Providing youth with different perspectives.** *VIPs providing youth knowledge, advice or guidance that is unique and/or different from peers, parents and/or other adults.* **1. Helping youth process information.** *VIPs helping youth process information in order to promote youth's problem solving skills and sense of competence.* **2. Providing youth with life lessons.** *VIPs providing youth with general life lessons (e.g., not to take things to far, it's important to help people, etc.).*	**1. Providing youth with different perspectives.** *VIPs providing youth knowledge, advice or guidance that is unique and/or different from peers, parents and/or other adults. Youth tend to be more selective of the support they receive.* *2.* **Youth-initiated support.** *Involves youth initiating support (as opposed to VIP initiated) from VIPs to gain knowledge, advice and/or guidance.*
Instrumental Support	*Provision of tangible, practical assistance.*	**1. Providing youth with practical life skills.** *VIPs providing youth with practical life skills (academics, social, etc.) that they can apply in other settings or in the future.* **2. Helping youth with present problems, tasks and projects.** *VIPs helping youth with things related to the present including help with specific tasks (e.g., homework, projects) or during specific hardships.*	**1. Helping to keep youth on-track.** *VIPs helping to keep youth on-track in order to facilitate youth's sense of responsibility.* **2. Helping youth get ahead.** *VIPs helping youth get ahead in terms of their education, career and/or sense of purpose/goals.*

Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. We are interested in learning about adults that are important in your life. **Significant adults are persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make**. Based on this description, do you have any significant adults in your life right now (other than your parents or guardians?
   a. Name of adult: ____
   b. Tell me about [VIP] *and/or* Tell me a story about [VIP]. *If not very responsive, ask participant to tell you about the last time he/she saw VIP.*
   c. Describe what your relationship is like with them.
   d. How did you meet?
   e. How long have you known them?
   f. How often do you see them?
   g. What kinds of things have they done that make you feel close to him/her?
2. What do you usually do together or talk about?
   a. Do you learn stuff from what they say or do? What kinds of stuff?
   b. Is this important? Why?
3. Does [VIP] help you with your homework? Or does he/she help you with other things?
4. Does being with [VIP] make you feel better about yourself? In what ways?
5. Do you ever talk about personal stuff with [VIP]? What types of things?
   a. How does [VIP] respond?
   b. How does it make you feel to talk about personal things with [VIP]?
6. Does [VIP] ever give you advice? How often? What kinds of advice?
7. Does [VIP] do things so that you know he/she respects you? What kinds of things?
8. Was there ever a time (or times) when you were not close to [VIP]? How did you get closer?
9. Were there ever times when you and [VIP] were not getting along? How did you get over that?
10. Has your parent met/talked with [VIP]? How did that go? How do they feel about [VIP]?
11. Is your relationship with [VIP] different from relationships with other adults? If so, how?
    a. Why do you think that is?
12. Is there anything you’d really like me to know about [VIP, or anything that you think is important for me to know about [VIP]?