

YOUTH-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS:  
THEIR IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

by

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## ABSTRACT

The current study focuses on qualitative data collected from youth and adults in two rural Kansas communities. The focal point of analysis was youth and adults' answers to questions about their experiences working with one another within community-based programs, specifically questions regarding youth's feeling of empowerment within the context of the program. Lerner's theory of developmental contextualism provided a framework for understanding how youth-adult relationships contribute to the development of youth empowerment. *Youth voice*, a construct related to the youth empowerment literature, appeared in the participants' responses across program sites. Common themes across settings were that teens who had been involved in the program the longest felt especially empowered, that youth became more responsible as a result of participating in the program, and that adults in both program sites fulfilled the six adult roles for youth empowerment that have been established in the research literature. Finally, three constructs significant in the youth development literature (confidence, connection and compassion) emerged as themes in relation to the experiences of the young people in the program. Implications of this study include exploring the impact youth-adult relationships have on adults and investigating how teens as role models or mentors for "littles" impact their feeling of empowerment. Suggestions for replication of this study are also given.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

All too often we discuss positive youth development in regard to the absence of negative or undesirable behaviors rather than focusing on the presence of positive behavior (Lerner, Alberts, Jelicic & Smith, 2006). In this deficit approach to human development, youth are seen as problems to be managed rather than resources to be developed. As a society, it is important that we begin focusing on the positive attributes of young people. In doing this, we begin to work with young people to promote their positive development. As Lerner et al. (2006) stated:

In the context of nurturing and healthy adult-youth relationships, we need to offer young people the opportunities to learn and use the skills involved in participating actively in their communities and in making productive and positive contributions to themselves and their families and society (p.21).

In order to adequately promote positive youth development in this context, society must begin viewing adolescents in regard to their potential. Developmental systems theory stresses the relative plasticity of human development and, therefore, supports the notion that there is at least some potential for systematic change in behavior (Lerner et al., 2006). It is the concept of plasticity that allows us to promote youth development as a strength-based process, which focuses on developing assets.

Youth empowerment is a fundamental asset meaning that fostering empowerment in young people contributes to their healthy development. However, adults play a pivotal role in the empowerment process. Adult perceptions of youth, as well as the role adults play in youth developmental settings, may encourage or discourage the empowerment process. Therefore, it is important to describe and understand the influence adults have in

empowering youth. In order to fully understand this effect, one must acknowledge how youth perceive adults and their role in youth development programs. According to Hilfinger Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, and Parra-Medina (2005), there is a lack of research which has addressed youth perceptions of the role adults play in community-based programs. Assessing youth perceptions may provide a more accurate examination of the relationship between adult roles in youth development programs and youth empowerment.

### *Purpose of Study*

In order to empower young people to make a difference in their own lives and in their communities, a better understanding of what facilitates empowerment in young people is needed. What experiences contribute to young people's feeling of empowerment? Are there particular features of community-based programs that facilitate empowerment? In what ways can adults contribute to the empowerment process? The answers to these questions can provide a starting point for youth development professionals to begin purposefully facilitating the empowerment process within young people.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The amount of literature available on positive youth development is substantial even though this field is relatively young. The research literature on the significance of youth-adult relationships is also extensive. The developmental assets framework even acknowledges the importance youth empowerment has on positive youth development. However, there is little literature addressing the link between young people's connection with adults and their feeling of empowerment. Because this study focuses on the positive development of young people, a brief review of the literature regarding positive youth development is presented. However, a general understanding of how we got where we are today, in regard to positive youth development, is required to understand the positive youth development framework. Therefore, a review of the literature regarding adolescence as developmental stage in life and adolescent development is presented first followed by a description of the conceptual framework guiding the current study. Once this foundation has been established the positive youth development literature as well as the literature on youth-adult relationships and youth empowerment is presented.

### *History of Adolescence*

Current views of adolescence are strongly founded in historical perceptions and presumptions about adolescence. Understanding the history of adolescence, as well as debunking myths regarding this developmental time period, is crucial to the study of adolescence today. Without understanding how the theoretical view of adolescence has transformed throughout time, it is not possible to contribute to future study of this developmental period.

“Adolescence as a period of life can be seen primarily as a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon” (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000, p. 35). However, no other life stage has engaged historians in so much debate as that period between childhood and adulthood (Hanawalt, 1992). The history of childhood and youth is difficult to trace (Alaimo, 1991). A review of essays regarding childhood and adolescence in modern European history showed that the history of adolescence is characterized by the interplay between continuity with past traditions and changing conditions in the era of European industrialization and urbanization (Alaimo). Although there are those who would argue that adolescence pre-dates industrialization, it did not exist as a separate developmental period but rather was considered to be a very quick and concrete way to bridge childhood and adulthood (Ayman-Nolley & Taira). Eisenberg (1971) suggested that although adolescence as a social phenomenon is restricted in range by biological considerations, it is primarily a function of cultural norms. He goes on to explain that “the more sophisticated the society is in its technology, the more prolonged is adolescence, since the complexity of the preparation required for the assumption of adult roles depends upon the demands the society sets” (p. 33). The struggle between adults and youth over entry and exit from adolescence and for control during that period has been a constant from the thirteenth through the twentieth century (Hanawalt). Hanawalt suggested that, although the modern period did not invent adolescence, it did modify the definition. The wide range of interpretations of the history of adolescence alone confirms the complex progression of this developmental stage of life.

Perceptions of adolescence have varied greatly throughout the twentieth century. In 1904, G. Stanley Hall initiated the scientific study of adolescence (Steinberg & Lerner,

2004) when he argued that adolescence is a separate phase of development marked by antisocial behaviors and attitudes that invariably result from a rush of hormones and changes resulting in physical development (Hall, 1904; Nichols & Good, 2004). As such, this view is linked to a biologically based deficit view of adolescence (Steinberg & Lerner). Adolescence was seen as representing a period of time when humans went from being beast-like to being civilized. Hall saw adolescence as a time of universal and inevitable turmoil (Steinberg & Lerner) and introduced the concept of adolescent *sturm und drang* (storm and stress) to explain the strangeness of youth (Hall). Hall's perceptions of adolescence shaped the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's theoretical views of adolescence as dark and dim (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000). His description of youth contributed to the commonly held belief that adolescence is a period of 'storm and stress' (Ayman-Nolley & Taira; Hall; Steinberg & Lerner) for both adolescents and the adults in their lives, which has been internalized by society as a way to describe a typical teenager (Nichols & Good; Offer & Schonert-Reichl, 1992).

This stereotype of adolescence has been difficult to reverse. In the 1960's Albert Bandura (1971) reported that published research data showed that the then popular view of adolescence as a time of storm and stress was unwarranted. "Bandura argued that, in general, teens were not excessively combative and did not experience the conflicts with parents that many assumed took place" (Nichols & Good, 2004, p. 3). The continued widespread belief in the storm and stress phenomenon can be primarily attributed to the mass media's tendency to sensationalize adolescent behavior (Bandura; Nichols & Good). A more optimistic and constructive perspective of adolescence emerged in the second half of the century (Ayman-Nolley & Taira, 2000). In the mid-1970's

developmental theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Erikson began focusing on the strengths of adolescence as a developmental stage (Aymann-Nolley & Taira; Steinberg & Lerner, 2004). Since that time, the study of adolescence has been characterized by an interest in developmental plasticity, in diversity, and in the application of science to real-world problems (Steinberg & Lerner). Beginning in the 1990's and continuing into the present, the study of adolescence has focused on contextual and life-span approaches to understanding adolescents (Steinberg, 1995).

### *Boundaries of Adolescence*

According to Lerner and Spanier (1980), adolescent development is that period within the life span when most of an individual's processes are in a state of transition from childhood to adulthood. The scientific view of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood recognizes adolescence as a distinct developmental period (Scott & Woolard, 2004) "beginning in biology and ending in society" (Lerner & Galambos, 1998, p. 414). The concept that adolescence begins in biology and ends in society also corresponds with chronological ages. For example, in the United States, the age of 12 or 13 has signified the beginning of puberty (a biological marker) and thus the beginning of adolescence; while the ages of 18 or 21 has been associated with gaining rights and thus entrance into adulthood (a societal indicator). Historically, adolescence has been most easily defined by reference to a chronological age span. Adolescence may be defined as a period that goes from 12 to 18 years or from 13 to 21 years (Lerner & Spanier). Scientists generally divide the span of adolescence into early (ages 11-14), middle (ages 15-18), and late (18-21) periods (Steinberg, 2002). The problem with a chronological definition is that it is arbitrary. Age is commonly used in the human development

literature because it is a convenient “objective term” (Lerner & Spanier). However, age is not a developmental variable. From a life-span perspective, human development is a process of change, so rather than focusing on age alone, focus is on age-related changes; therefore making age just a marker variable approximating the progression to change (Lerner & Spanier). The boundaries of adolescence may be viewed from a variety of perspectives beyond either biological or chronological. Boundaries of adolescence also may be recognized from emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, social, educational, legal and cultural perspectives (Steinberg). However, many of these are difficult to identify and vary from one individual to another which is why chronological age is often the marker used to identify adolescence.

### *Adolescent Development*

Many of the major theorists of development assume that human development progresses through a sequence of universal stages from infancy through adulthood. However, each theorist has considered a different aspect of development to be the primary force responsible for propelling the individual from one stage to the next. Freud believed these forces were primarily psychosexual, Piaget focused on cognitive advances, while Erikson understood development to be a product of the resolution of social crises related to one’s identity. The transition from childhood to adulthood, termed adolescence, is a developmental stage which most major theorists recognize or address in some way. As adolescence has become widely accepted as a distinct developmental stage, a variety of theories of adolescence have emerged.

Numerous theories of development have been presented to account for development during adolescence. These theories can be placed into three major

explanatory categories: nature theories, nurture theories, and interaction theories (Lerner & Spanier, 1980; Lerner, 2002b). Nature theories emerged first and stress biology, or nature, as the driving force in development. Although Hall's (1904) view that the human life span mirrored evolutionary adaptations of the human species is not widely supported today, it provides an example of a purely-nature based theory. Nurture theories stress experience, learning and environment as the variables primarily responsible for development. Nurture theories, such as Bandura's social learning theory, stress that behavior is a response to a stimulus (Lerner & Spanier; Lerner, 2002b). Interaction theories of adolescent development, stress the interaction of nature (biology) and nurture (environment) in shaping development. However, all interaction theories do not place equal stress on nature and nurture. Lerner and Spanier argued that there are three types of interaction theory: weak, moderate and strong.

Weak interaction theories stress the influence of one source over the other, typically nature. In this view, nature determines the sequence of development; nurture may influence the pace and continuation of development, but it in no way alters the ordering or characteristics of change. According to Lerner and Spanier (1980), Freud and Erikson's theories are classic examples of weak interaction theories. Moderate interaction theories place equal attention on nature and nurture but see the two sources as independent of one another. While nature and nurture interact to provide a source of development, neither changes the other as a result of the interaction. Piaget's theory of development serves as an example of a moderate interaction theory (Lerner & Spanier). Strong interaction theories view nature and nurture as dynamically interactive so that

each is a product and producer of the other. Lerner's developmental contextualism theory would be considered a strong interaction theory (Lerner & Spanier).

The nature, nurture and interaction theories of development have been derived from the organismic, mechanistic, and contextual developmental paradigms (Lerner & Kauffman, 1985). Nature theories fall within the organismic paradigm which views development as an idealized, normative, and goal-directed intraorganism phenomenon (Lerner & Kauffman). From this perspective, context can inhibit or facilitate developmental progression, but it cannot alter the quality of the process or its sequential universality. Nurture theories are founded in the mechanistic paradigm which views development as the process of change brought about by conditioning (Lerner & Kauffman). Development is therefore seen as a myriad of stimulus-behavior relations based on the most simplistic view of context. Interaction theories have their foundation in the contextual paradigm, which emphasizes that the transaction or "dynamic interaction" between organism and context is what evolves in development (Lerner & Kauffman). This perspective does not discount the use of universalistic principles of development, but rather emphasizes the relation between the structural and functional characteristics of the individual and the features of the individual's context. The contextual paradigm recognizes the basic role of changing context in developmental change.

#### *Adolescent Development: A Life-Span Perspective*

"The life-span view of human development attempts to describe, explain and optimize intraindividual change, and interindividual differences in such change, across the life-span" (Lerner & Spanier, 1980, p. 7). The life-span view provides a

multidisciplinary emphasis on development. A life-span approach to understanding adolescent development means more than just considering change that occurs prior to, during, and after adolescence. It instead focuses on the idea that all dimensions of change are interrelated (Lerner & Spanier). It recognizes that the many dimensions of change an individual goes through across the life-span do not occur independently of one another (Lerner & Spanier). This interrelated network extends into the relationship between the individual and his/her context. According to this perspective, the adolescent is both a product of his or her biological, sociological, psychological, and historical world and a producer of it (Lerner & Spanier). As such, this conceptualization of the nature of adolescent development is a complex one, involving a dynamic interaction among all dimensions of development across the entire life span. Viewing adolescent development from a life-span perspective allows us to acknowledge that development may be altered and changed through intervention. Lerner's theory of developmental contextualism is one such life-span theory which contributes to our understanding of adolescent development and the influence adults and communities can have on adolescents.

#### *Lerner's Theory of Developmental Contextualism*

Richard M. Lerner's developmental contextualist view of development is not limited to adolescence but encompasses the entire lifespan. Developmental contextualism is a dynamic systems theory that focuses on the interaction between the continuously changing individual and the ecological context within which that person lives (Muuss, 1996). Developmental contextualism advocates for neither nature nor nurture exclusively, but "instead emphasizes the idea that dynamic interactions and

reciprocal relationships between the individual and the context always exist and shape development” (Muuss, p. 342).

Lerner does incorporate developmental stage concepts advanced by other theorists; however, contextual relativism deemphasizes the significance of developmental stages and does not view stages as being rigidly fixed and inevitable. Instead, he suggests that contextual factors determine the manifestation of as well as progression and mastery of the developmental stages (Muuss, 1996). In other words, an individual’s developmental progression may be modified by the context in which s/he exists.

Steinberg (1995) discussed the concept of developmental trajectories which has a striking resemblance to contextualism. A developmental trajectory “is a probabilistic pathway through time and space shaped simultaneously by three sets of factors: characteristics of the developing adolescent; influences of the immediate environment; and opportunities and constraints inherent in the broader context” (p. 249). Individual variations become the cornerstone for understanding human development (Muuss). Rather than attempting to provide a universal generalization that applies to all individuals, Lerner’s theory emphasizes plasticity in human nature, individuality, and diversity, as well as the complex interconnections between individual and context (Lerner, 1996).

### *Context*

Although Lerner’s theory is typically applied to the family context, it can be extrapolated to the community context as well. The contribution of contextualism is its focus on: the continuous interaction patterns among a variety of factors; the influences of continuous change over time (historically speaking), as well as the changes from day to day; and the conceptualization that the adolescent is a major contributing factor in

shaping his or her own context (Lerner, 1982, 1984, 1995; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Lerner & Kauffman, 1985). The context in which development takes place differs from individual to individual, making it inappropriate to view development completely independent of context. “Because context always changes and because context is the variable that modifies development, ‘change’ is an inevitable part of existence that affects each individual differently” (Muuss, p. 345). Promoting positive youth development seeks to embed youth in supportive person-context relations (Lerner & Perkins, 1999). Context, while a pivotal aspect of the developmental contextual framework, is not sufficient to understanding development. To understand developmental contextualism as a theory of adolescent development, it is important to understand the principle concepts of the theory.

#### *Concepts of Developmental Contextualism*

Although developmental contextualism is a lifespan theory, concepts such as diversity and plasticity, which are characteristics important in the study of adolescence, make it particularly appropriate for gaining understanding of adolescent development. Steinberg and Lerner (2004) asserted that the study of adolescence has been characterized by these very same concepts, plasticity and diversity. Concepts essential to developmental contextualism include diversity, plasticity, integration, and embeddedness (Lerner, 1996), as well as the reciprocal relationship between the active organism and an active event (Lerner, 1991; Lerner, 1995).

#### *Diversity and Individual Differences.*

Individual differences within and across all levels of organization are seen as having core substantive significance in understanding human development (Baltes, 1987;

Lerner, 1996). The individuality of each person promotes variation in the fusions he or she has with the levels of organization within which the person is embedded (Lerner). It is these differences among individuals and contexts that promote diversity in human development. As such, the individual structural and functional characteristics of each person constitute an important source of his or her development (Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981). The diversity present among individual adolescents means that adolescents who share experiences within the same context will develop differently. Diversity is the exemplary illustration of the presence of plasticity in human development as well as the best evidence of the potential for change in the states and conditions of human life (Lerner).

*The Basic Process of Change and Relative Plasticity.*

At the most basic level, development involves change (Lerner & Hood, 1986). As stated by Lerner (1991), it is the nature of living matter to alter over time. The focus of developmental understanding must therefore be on systematic *change* (Ford & Lerner, 1992) – that is, organized, successive, multilevel, and integrated changes – across the course of life of an individual (Lerner, 1995a). Changes in the individual always occur in dynamic, bi-directional connection with changes in the context, making changes in individual-context relations the basic change process in development (Lerner, 1991). The individual and context do not change independent of one another; they are inextricably linked. Development represents a combination of processes which act to maintain constancy and of processes which serve to continually change the individual (Lerner & Hood). This continuous change is not limitless and therefore supports the notion that *relative plasticity* exists across the lifespan (Lerner, 1984).

“Developmental contextualism assumes that plasticity is an essential attribute of the human organism and that individuals are continuously in the process of changing and developing, and contextual events continuously contribute to this process” (Muuss, 1996, p. 354). The notion of plasticity across development contrasts with commonly held theoretical assumptions that human personality traits and behavior characteristics are fully developed by the end of adolescence (Lerner, 1984). Although children and adolescents are more malleable than older individuals, Lerner maintains that plasticity exists across the lifespan (Lerner). The concept of plasticity provides an optimistic suggestion that a developing person can change relatively easily through appropriate, deliberate intervention (Lerner). This idea that individual development is not fixed and environment and context are as influential as biology is essential to the foundation of positive youth development because it validates that community context can be influential in adolescent outcomes. Because individuals are capable of change, adolescents may benefit from community-based programs that provide an intervention in their lives. According to Lerner and Perkins (1999), programs that assist youth in a successful transition into productive adult roles are significant instances of interventions into youth development that may promote positive development. Changes in context, such as becoming involved in community and developing relationships with non-familial adults, can modify development of individual adolescents.

*Relationsim and the Integration of Levels of Organization.*

Theorists have suggested that the basis for change and plasticity in development lie in the relations that exist among the multiple levels of organization that make up the substance of human life (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 1996). Moreover, adequate

explanation of individual development requires recognition of the changing relations among the multiple levels of organization involved in human development (Ford & Lerner). Adequate description and understanding of individual development can only be achieved through a comprehensive view of the person's individual developmental niche including biological, psychological, interpersonal, societal, cultural, physical-ecological, and historical characteristics (Lerner, 1995a). Each of these levels is structurally and functionally integrated requiring a systematic understanding of human development (Lerner, 1996). Development must be understood as a result of the bi-directional relations among all levels of development. It is not possible to adequately understand development by considering only one aspect of the individual's developmental niche because all levels of development interact with and affect one another. All levels are necessary but alone insufficient to account for human development (Lerner, 1995a). Rather than simply dividing sources of development into nature-related and nurture-related variables, the multiple levels of organization that exist within the ecology of human development should be seen as an inextricably fused developmental system (Lerner, 1996).

*Embeddedness.*

As a result of the interaction of levels of organization, the individual and context are always embedded in one another (Lerner & Kauffman, 1985). The mutual embeddedness of individual and context means a given attribute will have different implications for developmental outcomes in different contextual conditions (Lerner & Kauffman). This means that an adolescent, whose individual attributes remain relatively constant, may develop differently in different environments. Thus, promoting positive

youth development occurs simultaneously with transforming the developmental system in which a youth is embedded (Lerner & Perkins, 1999). Therefore, interventions should be aimed at changing the developmental system within which people are embedded, rather than changing the individual (Dryfoos, 1990; Lerner, 1995b).

Because relationism and integration mean that no level of organization functions independent of the other levels, all levels of organization are integrated with historical change and are therefore also embedded in history (Lerner, 1996). History, change over time, is constant and continuous, and it is a level of organization that is fused with all other levels (Lerner). Therefore, the time period in history in which an individual experiences his or her adolescence will strongly influence that individual's development. Society continues to change and develop. For example technological advancements, such as social networking sites, have changed the way adolescents interact with their peer group. So being an adolescent at this point in time differs from the experiences of those who experienced adolescence in the 1960's. This linkage means that change is a necessary and inevitable feature of all levels of organization. The idea of embeddedness, that any level of analysis is reciprocally related to all others, leads to the idea that individuals are both a producer and product of social and cultural change (Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981).

*Reciprocal Nature of Person-Context Relationship.*

“Developmental contextualism can only be understood as a dialectic process in which environmental settings and social systems not only influence each other, but also influence and are influenced by the individual” (Muuss, 1996, p.344). Individuals have come to be understood as active producers of their own development; individuality and

diversity are concepts essential in understanding the way in which any given person is an active agent in his or her own development (Lerner, 2002a). The dynamic interactions between an individual and the various components of his/her social and physical setting constitute an essential element of development and delineate a core concept of Lerner's contextualism (Lerner, 1995a). Social context and individuality contribute to bidirectional person-context relations (Lerner, 2002a). Being involved in a youth program will contribute to an individual adolescent's development; however, an adolescent's participation in and contributions to the program also influence the program as well. These bi-directional exchanges allow adolescents to become producers of their own development (Lerner, 2002a). As an adolescent's sense of "agency" develops, he or she will be able to become an active selector and shaper of the contexts within which he or she develops (Lerner, 2002a). According to Steinberg (1995), "adolescents are active, changing agents who select and affect the environments in which they participate" (p. 248). This manifests in community-based youth programs where youth are given a voice and contribute to their own development by making decisions about things that impact them. Many of the foundational concepts of developmental contextualism are integral aspects of the positive youth development framework.

### *Positive Youth Development*

Positive youth development is comprised of three components; the *practices* that intentionally apply a set of *principles* that promote the natural *process* of youth development (Hamilton, Hamilton & Pittman, 2004). Youth development has traditionally and is still most widely used to mean a natural *process*. This process involves the growing capacity of a young person to understand and act on the

environment (Hamilton et al.). The youth development process consists of development of the physical, social, emotion, cognitive and moral domains. The term youth development also is applied as a set of *principles* that emphasize the importance of active support for the growing capacity of young people by individuals, organizations, institutions and community (Hamilton et al.). Finally, the term youth development is used to describe a range of *practices* in programs, organizations, and initiatives. As such youth development refers to the application of *principles* to a planned set of *practices* that foster the developmental *process* in young people (Hamilton et al.).

### *Process of Youth Development*

Promoting youth development is an enduring, overarching purpose, not a goal that is never achieved (Hamilton et al., 2004). The circular quality of development makes it difficult to separate goals from methods, ends from means, and process from product. Therefore, a framework of human qualities we wish to promote has been established as a guide for action. This framework maintains that development leads to the five Cs (Hamilton et al.). The five “Cs” have been supported by many (e.g. Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, Alberts, Jelicic & Smith, 2006, Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b) as key features and desirable outcomes of positive youth development. These five characteristics represent five clusters of individual attributes (Lerner et al., 2000; Powelson & Tonklin, 2005). *Competence* manifests itself in the youth’s intellectual ability as well as social and behavioral skills. *Connection* is reflected in the development of positive bonds with people and institutions. Integrity and moral centeredness are individual attributes of *character* while positive self-regard, a sense of self-efficacy, and courage are reflections of *confidence*. *Caring* or *compassion* is

represented by the presence of humane values, empathy, and a sense of social justice.

The “Five Cs” are logically linked.

Young people gain competence and character by being connected with others, especially caring adults, and their competence and character in turn help them form new connections. Confidence flows from competence, and the two mutually reinforce one another. Finally, contributions demonstrate one’s character and provide an outlet for competence. (Hamilton et al., 2004, p.6)

Collectively, these five characteristics enable an adolescent to make an optimal transition to the adult world (Lerner, Alberts, Jelicic & Smith, 2006).

Peter L. Benson and his colleagues at the Search Institute claimed that the application of the developmental asset framework will contribute to development of the five “Cs” and therefore promote positive youth development (Scales, 1999; Lerner, 2002b). Developmental assets are defined as the major building blocks that all youth need to be healthy, caring, principled and productive (Moody, Childs & Supple, 2003). The framework is grounded in major developmental strength concepts such as resiliency and competence, protective factors, and connectedness (Benson, Mannes, Pittman & Ferber, 2004). The developmental asset framework articulates the kinds of relationships, social experiences, social environments, patterns of interaction, norms, and competencies over which a community of people has considerable control (Benson et al.). Within the framework there are 40 assets grouped into eight categories and divided into internal and external attributes that youth need to thrive (Lerner). Internal assets are the values, skills and competencies young people develop as a means of self-regulation while external assets encompass the environmental, contextual and relational features of socializing

systems (Benson, 2003; Scales, 1999). The relationships and opportunities adults provide young people are necessary for their successful transition into adulthood. However, in order for adults and communities to facilitate the process of positive youth development, it is vital that they have a firm understanding of the principles for youth development.

### *Principles for Youth Development*

Using the term youth development to designate a set of principles is easier than explicitly stating those specific principles. The youth development principles that are most central and useful include the emphasis on a positive approach and universality, or the goal that *all youth thrive*; the importance of providing *challenging activities and supportive relationships* that endure and change over time; and engaging *young people as participants*, not just recipients (Hamilton et al., 2004).

#### *All Youth Thrive.*

A number of concepts contribute to the principle that all youth thrive. Concepts particularly central to this principle include a positive approach, building on strengths, and services, supports and opportunities. The positive orientation can be fully understood only in contrast to what has been the conventional deficit orientation, problem focus, of many programs for youth (Benson et al., 2004; Hamilton et al., 2004). In *Adolescents at Risk*, Joy Dryfoos (1990) recognized that there existed a division of federal funding and programs among four major types of problem behavior. The four problem behavior areas she identified were teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, delinquency, and school failure. Dryfoos (1990) showed that the presumably separate problems and solutions were actually closely related. At the time this insight was revolutionary and altered the view that youth problems should be targeted separately and one-at-a-time.

The positive youth development framework can be best summarized by the baseline belief that “problem free is not fully prepared, and that fully prepared is not fully engaged” (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003, p. 9). The positive youth development approach recognizes developmental challenges and risks but does not view the developmental process as primarily an effort to overcome these deficits and risks (Damon, 2004). According to Lerner et al. (2000), leading proponents of the positive youth development approach,

Preventing the actualization of youth risk behaviors is not the same as taking actions to promote positive youth development (e.g., the inculcation of attributes such as caring/compassion, competence, character, connection and confidence).

Similarly, programs and policies that prevent youth problems do not necessarily prepare youth to contribute to civil society. (p. 12)

Because preventing risky behavior among youth is not sufficient for promoting positive youth development, it is necessary to implement a strength-based approach to working with young people.

Another consideration is that the best way to address problems is to build on strengths (Hamilton et al., 2004). The field of positive youth development emphasizes the talents, strengths, interests, and future potential of young people (Damon, 2004). This approach has been validated by resiliency research, based on individuals raised in conditions that usually lead to serious problems but somehow manage to thrive (Hamilton et al.). By viewing youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be solved, youth are given opportunities to build on their strengths. However, even among adults

who view youth as resources, the inclination is to do things *to* youth and *for* youth rather than *with* youth (Nicholson, Collins & Homer, 2004).

An insight of the positive youth development approach is that “young people thrive when we listen to them, respect them as current contributors, and engage with them in meaningful investment in community” (Nicholson et al., 2004, p. 55). Young people are capable of making an investment in their communities only when they have access to services, supports, and opportunities. Services are provided for or administered to young people while supports include connections between youth and others, particularly adults. Youth need to be given opportunities to learn, explore, play, and express oneself (Hamilton et al., 2004). Young people thrive when they are given opportunities to engage in challenging activities and supportive relationships.

#### *Challenging Activities and Supportive Relationships.*

Challenging activities and supportive relationships are necessary for developing competence in young people. Development is generally promoted by engaging in activities that are challenging and increasingly complex (Hamilton et al., 2004). Such activities may be performed alone but frequently involve relationships with others. Relationships are most beneficial when they are regular, enduring, and reciprocal (Hamilton et al.). In other words, young people benefit most from relationships that are stable, ongoing and are equally valuable to both parties. The importance of relationships with adults is well established in the youth development literature; however, relationships with peers and with younger children also contribute to development (Hamilton et al.). Although engaging in challenging activities and supportive relationships are important

aspects of youth development, they are not effective if youth are not given opportunities to truly participate in decisions that shape their lives.

### *Youth Participation.*

This principle is known as youth voice, participation, and empowerment (Hamilton et al., 2004). Youth participation is about more than just youth being involved, it requires that youth play an active role in their own development. Because youth have different interests and needs they respond differently to the same opportunities. As a result of these differences they should have choices about which activities they participate in and should have an opportunity to help shape those activities (Hamilton et al.). When young people's ideas are listened to and respected they develop youth voice. Youth voice, as a construct, occurs when youth have an opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them. Young people are empowered when they have an opportunity to add their voices to decisions that affect them and have opportunities to make a difference in their own lives (Scales & Leffert, 1999). If the preceding principles, *all youth thrive, challenging activities and supportive relationships*, and *youth participation*, are valid then putting them into practice will promote positive youth development.

### *Positive Youth Development Practices*

It is not enough for researchers, educators and practitioners to simply understand the above-mentioned process and principles of youth development; they must be put into practice in order to impact youth development. Youth development goes beyond just helping one young person at a time. It involves the creation of a range of contexts or settings that promote youth development (Hamilton et al., 2004). Benson and Saito (2000) suggested that there are four primary settings in which youth development

principles are applied and in which youth development occurs. These settings vary from specific to general and include programs, organizations, socializing systems and community. Eight features of positive developmental settings have been developed which can be implemented regardless of the setting in which youth development takes place.

Eccles and Gootman (2002) presented a provisional list of eight features of daily settings that are important for adolescent development. Their list is based partly on theories of positive development and partly on empirical research of the many settings that youth experience; while also drawing on lists of features from other scholars and practitioners. The eight features of positive developmental settings include: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and mattering, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school and community efforts (Eccles & Gootman).

The features of positive developmental settings are grounded in fundamental human development theories such as Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of human needs and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. The features of positive developmental settings focus on developing concrete things, such as *physical and psychological safety*, and span to include more abstract concepts such as, *support for efficacy and mattering*. As such the features hold a remarkable similarity to Maslow's hierarchy of needs which begins with survival needs and proceeds to self-actualization (See Maslow, 1970 for additional information). The final feature of positive developmental settings, "integration of family, school, and community efforts," adds a complex and difficult set of issues that recalls Bronfenbrenner's recognition of the

different systems that comprise the ecology of human development and his propositions about the value of connections among them (See Bronfenbrenner, 1979 for additional information). The features also are associated with progress toward developmental goals (assets) and specifically correspond with the Search Institute's 20 external assets. While also being consistent with the principles of youth development (Hamilton et al., 2004) providing an approach to implement the principles of youth development into practice. The features are soundly grounded in theory, research, and appear to incorporate most aspects of the youth development literature. The challenge is to create programs, settings, and environments that facilitate these features.

According to Benson and Saito (2000), programs are semi-structured processes often led by adults with the intention to address specific goals and youth outcomes. A program can be considered a youth development program when it intentionally incorporates activities and experiences intended to address and advance positive development of children and youth (Benson & Saito). This includes a wide variety of programs ranging from highly structured programs to those that are more flexible with less structure but incorporate a clear focus on youth development activities.

The positive youth development approach is holistic, taking into consideration the community in relation to the youth (Damon, 2004). This approach views youth as full partners in the community, bearing a full share of rights and responsibilities (Damon). This focus on the interaction between youth and their community facilitates the implementation of the positive youth development framework in community-based youth programs. Programs that emphasize traits such as competence (self-efficacy & resilience), confidence (self-determination & positive identity), social connection

(bonding to the community), and character (belief in the future) promote positive youth development (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1999). Programs which include the “Big Three” components of effective youth development programs are most likely to instill these traits in youth participants. The three components that effective programs provide are: (1) opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of activities that (2) emphasize the development of life skills within the context of (3) a sustained and caring adult-youth relationship (Lerner et al., 2006, p. 28).

Although the approaches of community-based youth programs vary, they seem to share a variety of traits. Programs provide attention to young people’s physical, social, and emotional growth and development; informal education and skill building; meaningful relationships with nonfamily adults; and fun (Nicholson et al., 2004). To distinguish between programs that meet the criteria of positive youth development from youth programs with less ambitious goals, features of youth programming were developed. The key features of positive youth development are represented through the “five C’s”: competence, character, confidence, connection, and compassion (Lerner et. al, 2000; Nicholson et. al).

In addition, programs promote positive youth development when they provide opportunities for young people to be involved, recognize youth’s positive behavior, and establish prosocial norms and clear standards, all of which are ecological assets related to empowerment (Lerner et al., 2006). These ecological assets related to empowerment are similar to the elements found in the Social Development Strategy, a prevention based strategy used in substance abuse prevention (Center for the Application of Substance Abuse Technologies [CASAT], 2004). The Social Development Strategy is a theory of

antisocial behavior based on risk and protective factors for delinquency, crime and substance abuse (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996). This approach utilizes protective factors to assist young people in developing healthy (prosocial) behaviors. The Social Development Strategy is founded in the understanding that youth learn patterns of behavior from socializing units such as family, school, community institutions and peers (Catalano & Hawkins). Youth are socialized through processes involving four constructs: (1) perceived opportunities for involvement in activities and interaction with others (2) the degree of involvement and interaction (3) the skills to participate in these involvements and interactions, and (4) the reinforcement they receive based on their performance in activities and interactions (Catalano & Hawkins). These constructs are interrelated and are facilitated by the socializing units surrounding them. Families, schools and communities encourage young people's healthy behaviors by communicating healthy beliefs and clear standards for behavior. Young people are more likely to follow these standards if they are bonded to their families, schools and communities. These strong bonds are formed by providing youth opportunities for meaningful involvement in their family, school and community, by teaching them the skills they need to be successful in their involvement, and by recognizing them for their efforts and achievements (CASAT). In general, youth and communities benefit from well-designed, well-implemented, youth-centered programs that consciously employ a youth-development model (Nicholson et al.). Young people particularly benefit when their communities empower them to make a difference. Empowering youth to make a difference is a key aspect of positive youth development work. However, it is important

to have a basic understanding of the empowerment research in order to understand the empowerment process in youth development.

### *Empowerment*

Empowerment is a process by which individuals, organizations and communities gain mastery over issues of concern and increase understanding of their environment (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, Israel, Schulz, & Checkoway, 1992). The ecological nature of psychological empowerment implies that empowerment differs by context, population, and timing making a universal or global measure of empowerment inappropriate (Rappaport; Speer, 2000; Zimmerman et al.; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995). Psychological empowerment may be considered an open-ended construct which is composed of an interconnected system of relationships that may be tested empirically once concrete operations for the constructs in the network have been specified (Zimmerman, 1995). Although empowerment is an open-ended construct, operations, such as perceived control, skill development, participation, and community involvement (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988; Zimmerman et al.; Zimmerman, 1995), have been identified as being consistent with empowerment theory.

Psychological empowerment is a contextual concept that embraces the influence of the individual on the environment as well as the influence environment has on individuals (Zimmerman, 1990). Psychological empowerment can be conceptualized to include intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components (Zimmerman, et al., 1992; Zimmerman, 1995). The intrapersonal component refers to how people think about themselves and their ability to exert influence on the sociopolitical context. This includes constructs such as perceived control, self-efficacy, motivation to exert control, and

perceived competence (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman et al.). The interactional component refers to the transaction between individuals and environment that enables them to understand their community and associated sociopolitical issues. This component includes constructs such as decision-making, problem-solving, awareness of the environment, as well as knowledge of resources and understanding causal relationships (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman et al.). The behavioral component refers to actions taken which directly influence the environment. These actions include participating in community organizations and activities (Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman et al.). In combining the intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral components of psychological empowerment it is expected that psychological empowerment includes a sense of and motivation to control; decision-making and problem-solving skills; a critical awareness of one's sociopolitical environment; and participatory behaviors (Zimmerman, 1995). These components of empowerment are important to our understanding of empowerment in general, and more specifically, contribute to our understanding of empowerment within the positive youth development framework.

### *Empowerment in Positive Youth Development*

Empowerment is seen as the gradual increase in freedoms and responsibilities that young people should acquire as they mature (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Moody, Childs, & Sepples, 2003). Youth empowerment is facilitated by a feeling of safety, a community that values youth, and service by youth in the community. Youth empowerment can seem like an abstract concept therefore it is important to acknowledge the many terms researchers use in connection with empowerment. Terms that are often associated with

youth empowerment include autonomy, self-regulation, contributing, youth leadership, youth involvement, and youth participation (Scales & Leffert, 1999).

An increasing focus on the importance of participation--choice and voice-- for adolescents can be evidenced by the current youth development mantra “problem-free is not fully prepared and fully prepared is not fully engaged” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Pittman & Wright, 1991). The Search Institute has embraced this idea and moved beyond issues of protection and provision and has acknowledged youth’s agency by addressing the importance of youth participation (Chan, Carlson, Trickett, & Earls, 2003). “Agency in a youth development context indicates the ability to exert influence and power in a given situation” (Mitra, 2004, p. 662). A sense of agency particularly focuses on the notion that young people’s ideas are heard and respected (Mitra, 2004). Youth agency and participation are acknowledged both in external and internal assets. The *empowerment* category of external assets and the *positive identity* category of internal assets address issues of agency and youth participation (Chan et al.).

“Development is triggered by engagement - young people learn best when they are fully engaged with their heads and their hearts, and where they have real choice in the situations in which they are involved” (Pittman et al., 2003, p. 6). Engaging youth and maintaining youth participation are necessary conditions for youth empowerment (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward and Green, 2003).

Youth are empowered to the extent they feel valued, feel that adults view them as resources are given opportunities to contribute to their community, and feel free of fundamental physical and emotional threats to their safety (Scale & Leffert, 1999). The empowerment assets “focus on community perceptions of youth, seeing them as positive

contributors to community life and then giving them useful and safe roles in the community” (Benson, 1997, p. 39). The four empowerment assets are *community values youth*, *youth as resources*, *service to others* and *safety* (Scales & Leffert, 1999).

The first empowerment asset, *community values youth*, manifests in young people’s perception that community adults value youth. A key developmental need is to be valued and valuable (Benson, 1997). Youth are valued when they are respected, given opportunities to discover their strengths, and are given an opportunity to make a difference in the world (Benson, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 1999). Empowerment assets highlight the need for youth to be valuable to their community.

The second empowerment asset, *youth as resources*, which occurs when young people are given useful roles in the community, may work to facilitate the first empowerment asset (Chan, Carlson, Trickett, & Earls, 2003). The second asset is viewing youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be solved. The key idea within this asset is that youth are given meaningful roles rather than just “token” roles. It is not uncommon for youth to hold positions on advisory boards but have little or no voice in the decision-making. Young people must be valued and given meaningful opportunities to contribute in order for the youth as resources asset to be fulfilled.

When young people are viewed as resources to be developed they are given opportunities to provide service to their communities, the third empowerment asset. *Providing service to others* gives youth opportunities to be actively involved in their communities (Benson, 1997). When youth take action to improve their contexts, their efforts are empowering. According to Benson et al. (2006), “being engaged in the community and being interested in being involved are related to key youth outcomes” (p.

4). Service opportunities that are designed carefully may become a strategy to reinforce all eight categories of assets.

The final empowerment asset is *safety*. “Young people who feel safe are more likely to feel valued and able to make a difference than youth whose safety is threatened” (Benson, 1997, p. 40). Data supports this notion showing that youth who feel unsafe or have been victimized suffer socially, emotionally, and academically in addition to any physical harm they encounter (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Thus creating environments where youth feel physically and emotionally safe is an important asset building task.

Participation in extracurricular or community-based activities may influence positive youth development by facilitating key developmental processes such as identity exploration, development of initiative and goal-directed behavior, growth in emotional competencies, formation of new and varied peer network connections, development of social skills, and acquisition of social capital through developing relationships with non-family adults (Benson et al., 2006). The common thread that connects these processes is that the young people participating in youth programs that promote youth empowerment develop a sense of agency and see themselves as contributing to their own development (Scales & Leffert, 1999). This ideal is akin to the empowering process, which occurs when people create or are given opportunities to control their own destiny and influence the decisions that affect their lives (Zimmerman, 1995). As such, merely having young people involved in community programs may or may not have positive outcomes. “The odds of positive impact increases greatly when best practices in service-learning are incorporated, such as engaging young people in all phases of planning and leadership, providing opportunities for structured reflection on the experience and engaging in

projects that are meaningful for both the young people and the communities being served” (Benson et al., p. 5).

A common theme emerges when assessing empowerment and the role it plays in positive youth development. Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) summarize this role by acknowledging that empowerment-oriented programs identify capabilities and address environmental factors which contribute to social problems by providing participants opportunities to develop knowledge and skills, and by engaging community members as collaborators. It is the responsibility of adults to incorporate these aspects into youth development programs thus providing youth with an opportunity to empower themselves. Therefore, adults play a pivotal role in the empowerment process and in positive youth development.

#### *Adult Roles in Youth Empowerment*

According to Benson (1997), all adults can serve a role in empowering youth. Strong youth-adult relationships can promote youth empowerment (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Conner, 2005). Youth who are empowered become more confident, skilled and connected and find they have adult support to achieve their goals. However, because empowerment differs by context, population, and time, the role adults play in the empowerment process also may vary. In a study done by Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005), adults held multiple, overlapping roles such as advisor, friend, coach, teacher, parent, confidant, counselor and disciplinarian. The Developmental Assets Framework may provide further insight into adults’ role in youth development. External assets, those assets that focus on external structures, relationships, and activities, create a positive environment for young people (Search Institute, 2006). “The external assets include

relationships and opportunities that adults provide, such as support, empowerment, boundaries, expectations, and constructive use of time” (Moody, et al., 2003, p. 263). Empowerment as an external asset type advocates for young people’s need to feel valued and valuable (Search Institute). Youth feel empowered and valuable when the community values youth, youth are viewed as resources, young people provide service to others, and youth feel safe. Adults contribute to youth empowerment in two important ways: by valuing youth and by giving them useful roles in the community (Search Institute). Adults can do this by interceding to ensure that youth have a voice in decisions that affect them and have the opportunity to identify and act on important issues in their lives (Moody, et al.).

In a study conducted by Cargo et al. (2003), youth empowerment appeared as a transactional partnering process between youth and adults which contributed to positive youth development and promoted youth social integration into the community. Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005) found six interrelated dimensions of adult roles in youth empowerment including: putting youth first, raising the bar for youth performance, creating space and making things happen, being in relationships, exerting influence, control and authority, and connecting with the broader community. *Putting youth first* was demonstrated by adults’ commitment to youth participation, ownership, and success in the program. Adults *raised the bar for youth performance* by setting and clearly communicating high expectations for youth. Youth were expected to take responsibility within the program. *Creating the space and making things happen* means that adults provide the physical, social, emotional and creative space for youth to explore and try out

new skills, build their personal and collective capacities, and experience both success and mistakes within a safe environment.

Components of *being in relationships* with youth included adults listening, encouraging and providing advice to youth. Adults served as role models, provided guidance and direction and nurtured and protected youth. In order to form and sustain high-quality relationships, a sense of trust and mutual respect between youth and adults is necessary. Building strong relationships with youth require that adults consistently support youth voice as well as focus on the affective component of relationships with youth (Zeldin et al., 2005). In order for youth-adult relationships to be successful it is important that adults appropriately *exert influence, control and authority*. Adults do this by setting limits, monitoring, facilitating, supervising, encouraging, focusing and disciplining youth behaviors and activities. The final role adults fulfill is *communicating and connecting with the broader community*. This role is important to communicate program activities, solicit assistance and resources as well as support and encourage youth participation. These interrelated dimensions may provide a baseline understanding of significant attributes present in those adults who encourage youth empowerment. Facilitating youth empowerment is not the only aspect of positive youth development that adults need to contribute to. There are a wide range of characteristics, responsibilities, and activities adults can fulfill which will contribute to positive youth development.

#### *Adult Roles in Positive Youth Development*

There is a general consensus among scholars that adults play an important role in youth development (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2005). Supportive relationships with non-parental adults are considered to be among the key developmental assets predicting

positive youth outcomes (Rhodes and Roffman, 2003a). More specifically the Search Institute has identified three primary ways that non-familial adults contribute to the healthy development and well-being of youth. These include *supportive relationships with three or more adults, adult role models and adults in community value youth* (Benson, Leffert, Scales & Blyth, 1998).

Benson (1997) identified core competencies present in adults who develop and maintain quality relationships with young people. In doing so, he established characteristics of asset-building adults which are divided into two categories of *being* characteristics and two categories of *doing* characteristics. The *being* characteristics are personal qualities such as attitudes toward youth as well as the character and competencies of the adult. *Doing* characteristics involve behavior and action such as relationships with young people. Asset-building adults show respect for youth and confidence in young people which is developmentally appropriate. They also value young people by celebrating their gifts, commitments and enthusiasm (Benson, 1997).

Effective youth programs offer youth opportunities to form relationships with caring adults (Lerner et al., 2006). Rhodes and Roffman (2003b) argued that the success of any youth program depends on the presence of close relationships between youth and adults in the program; there should be a mutual sense of trust and being understood, liked and respected. Without a connection to adults in the setting it is less likely that youth will want to return or fully engage in the activities of the program (Rhodes & Roffman, 2003b).

Rhodes and Roffman (2003b) have proposed that relationship based interventions affect youth outcomes through the provision of opportunities for youth to bond with

caring non-parental adults. Significant relations with non-kin adults tend to be characterized more by instrumental components than by affect (Darling, Hamilton & Niego, 1994). Research shows that engaging youth in challenging, goal-directed joint activities facilitates their development (Darling et al., 1994) by enhancing youths' social skills and emotional well-being, by improving youths' cognitive skills through instruction and conversation, and by serving as role models (Rhodes & Roffman, 2003b). The effectiveness of each of these processes is related to the quality of relationships which exist between youth and adults in the program setting (Rhodes & Roffman, 2003b). The types and quality of relationships which exist between youth and adults in community-based settings vary widely; however, youth-adult partnerships have been identified as the ideal situation in which youth and adults interact with one another.

#### *Youth-Adult Partnerships*

Youth-adult partnerships have been promoted as a key strategy to promote positive youth development and community building. Strong youth-adult relationships emanate from reciprocity in leading and learning between youth and adults (Zeldin et al., 2005). At their core, youth-adult partnerships are about power sharing (Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005). This idea is represented in the core components of youth-adult relationships, mentioned by both youth and adults, as being respect and equality. Equality between youth and adults is ideal; however, being equal does not necessarily mean being the same (Camino, 2000). This equality does not necessarily mean that adults should give up their power. Young people desire to share responsibilities and tasks with adults and typically welcome adult participation through coaching, guidance, modeling of behaviors and sharing tasks (Camino, 2005).

Camino (2000) found that youth-adult partnerships were successful only after both youth and adults developed skills to work with each other. The skills essential for successful youth-adult partnerships were communication, teamwork and coaching (Camino, 2000). Effective communication produces mutual insight and deepening of respect between youth and adults. Teamwork was another important aspect of successful partnerships which tended to have flexible roles for both youth and adults, tolerance for differences, and appropriate responses to developmental challenges. One of the most difficult skills for adults to actualize was coaching. Adults struggled to sustain the balance between providing legitimate opportunities for youth to take on meaningful roles in the partnership while also holding them accountable (Camino, 2000). In general, youth-adult partnerships require an emphasis on cooperation rather than competition, a balance between youth and adult voices, and the enactment of openness and flexibility (Camino, 2000).

#### *Primary Purpose of the Study*

The findings of this research will help people understand the nature of youth-adult relationships and recognize how to address issues of youth empowerment (Patton, 2002). This purpose most closely aligns with the concepts of applied research that attempt to understand how development actually occurs in the ecology of human life (Lerner, 2002) as well as tries to uncover the nature and sources of human and societal problems (Patton, 2002). Applied researchers “conduct studies that test applications of basic theory and disciplinary knowledge to real-world problems and experiences” (Patton, p. 217). A review of the literature on youth-adult relationships and positive youth development guided all aspects of my study and was instrumental in the development of my research

questions. This study will enable me to describe the youth-adult relationships that exist in community-based programs and explore how those relationships affect youth empowerment.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine how youth-adult relationships in community-based youth programs influence youth empowerment (youth leadership, youth voice, youth feel valued, youth are given opportunities to be involved and adults set appropriate expectations for youth). More broadly speaking, I hope this study will contribute to efforts toward adults facilitating empowerment in young people who will become adults who will do the same. Toward that end, the following research questions are proposed:

- What are the experiences of youth and adults in the New Community Project (NCP) sites?
- How do youth and adults interact within the confines of the NCP program sites?
- In what ways do the youth feel empowered by their involvement in the NCP program?

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The methodology chapter will clearly identify, for the reader, the purpose and direction of the study. It will describe the theoretical orientation, which guided all aspects of the study, as well as explain how the theoretical framework applies to youth-adult relationships. The chapter will also describe the participants of the study and outline the proposed procedure for the study. Finally, it will outline the plan for how the data will be analyzed.

This study aims to describe how youth-adult relationships in community-based youth programs influence youth empowerment. This overarching research question guides all aspects of my study. I have identified four specific research questions which contribute to answering the overarching research question. Assessing the experiences of youth and adults in the New Community Project (NCP) sites will enable me to gain understanding into the individual realities of youth and adults in the program. Evaluating how youth and adults interact within the confines of the NCP program will give me insight into the youth-adult relationships which exist within each program. Understanding which type of youth-adult relationship characterizes each site will allow me to compare and contrast the programs. Finally, I plan to assess what ways youth feel empowered by their involvement in the NCP program. In combination, these research questions will illuminate the answer to my overarching research question: “How do youth-adult relationships in community-based programs influence youth empowerment?”

### *Theoretical Orientation*

A qualitative paradigm provided guidance for this study. A paradigm is essentially a worldview, a framework of beliefs, values, and methods within which

research takes place. There are two paradigms widely discussed in the literature: the qualitative and quantitative paradigms (Creswell, 1994). According to Creswell (1994) “a qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 1-2).

Within the qualitative paradigm it is essential that a theoretical framework is selected to organize and guide fieldwork and interpretation. Establishing a theoretical perspective provides the researcher and audience with clarity and focus for all aspects of the study. A theoretical perspective should be selected based on the strengths and limitations of the approach and its “fit” with the purpose of the study. For the purpose of this study, the constructionist perspective was selected because of the emphasis on illuminating and validating the experiences of all participants.

#### *Constructionist Perspective*

The theoretical perspective most appropriate for the topic of youth-adult relationships is the constructionist framework, which includes both constructivism and social constructionism. This framework operates from the premise that the human world is different from the natural, physical world and must be studied differently (Patton, 2002). Because human beings have the capacity to interpret and *construct* reality, human perception is not real in an absolute sense, but is created and shaped by cultural and linguistic constructs (Patton). This approach encourages an in-depth examination of individual “realities” as well as exposes shared meaning that exists among group members. By focusing on individual perceptions, it is possible to capture the divergent realities of teens and adults. The shared meaning, which exists among members of the

group, will reflect the way the individuals in the group, particularly the youth and adults, interact.

Constructivism focuses on the meaning-making activities of individuals. The central question related to constructivism deals with the reported perceptions, “truths”, explanations, beliefs, and worldviews of the individuals involved (Patton, 2002). W. I. Thomas, a distinguished sociologist and a founding symbolic interactionist, formulated what has become known as Thomas’s theorem: “What is defined or perceived by people as real is real in its consequences” (Patton). This statement that perception is reality and real in its consequences, contributes to understanding the value of focusing on individual perceptions and how those individual perceptions impact interaction with others. The impact that individual perceptions have on behavior exemplifies a second central question related to constructivism, which is to describe the consequences of individuals’ constructions of reality for their behaviors and for those with whom they interact (Patton). Teens may perceive that the adults do not value their contribution even though in reality (or at least the adults’ reality) the teens’ contributions are valued. If youth do not perceive that they are valued and have meaningful opportunities to be involved, they will react or respond in a way that is consistent with this belief.

Social constructionism is related to the shared meaning or impact society has on how we view the world (Patton, 2002). Historically society has viewed adolescence as a time of “storm and stress.” Teens have been depicted as problems to be solved rather than resources to be developed (Lerner et al., 2006). This social construction of adolescence impacts both youth and adults. Adults who view youth as incapable, unwilling and distant will likely resist giving teens meaningful opportunities to be

involved. Teens often perceive that they are unvalued by adults, because their past experiences working with adults have confirmed this “reality.” Socially constructed views of adolescents have a profound impact on youth-adult partnerships because they influences how adults view youth and how youth view themselves. These perceptions then influence how youth and adults interact.

The constructionist framework emphasizes the validity of all realities and promotes all perspectives as valuable. It gives a voice to the voiceless and, in so doing, addresses inequitable power dynamics. Because of their young age and lack of experience, youth are often voiceless among adults. Many adults prefer to retain power over teens and often resist allocating or sharing power with them. However, equitable distribution of power among youth and adults is a necessary aspect of youth-adult partnerships. Youth-adult partnerships aim to give youth a voice and empower them to contribute to their own development and make a difference in their lives. The constructionist framework captures the perspectives of all participants and as such aligns seamlessly with the ideals of effective youth-adult partnerships, making it a sound fit with this topic.

#### *Application of the Constructionist Framework to Youth-Adult Relationships*

The constructionist perspective guided my research in many significant ways. The constructionist perspective expects that different stakeholders hold different experiences and perceptions of the program, each of which is real and deserves equal attention (Patton, 2002). The constructionist researcher strives to capture these different perspectives through in-depth, open-ended questions. I utilized focus groups to explore individual perspectives and shared meaning. This allowed me to examine the

implications of the multiple realities on individual youth development as well as the impact on youth-adult relationships. The constructionist perspective also influenced the development of research questions. Questions were created to help me gain insight and understanding into the experience or reality of teens in the program as well as those of the adults in the program. Research questions also explored the interaction between youth and adults and how that is impacted by the multiple realities present in the group.

### *Research Questions*

The overarching research question for this study: “How do youth-adult relationships in community-based youth programs influence youth empowerment?” has guided all aspects of this study. I established three specific research questions that helped me address this overarching research question. The first research question: “What are the experiences of youth and adults in the New Community Project (NCP) sites?” allowed me to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of both youth and adults in the program. The second research question: “How do the youth and adults interact within the confines of the NCP programs?” provided insight into the type of youth-adult relationship present in the group. The final research question: “In what ways do youth feel empowered by their involvement in the NCP project?” provided understanding to what extent and in what ways youth feel empowered. Together, these three research questions illuminated how youth-adult relationships in the NCP programs are influencing youth empowerment.

### *Procedure*

I conducted applied research as a method to achieve the purpose of this research, which is to contribute knowledge that will help people understand the nature of youth-

adult relationships within community-based programs (Patton, 2002). I employed a focused group interview design to obtain data on youth-adult relationships, which illuminates this purpose. Interviewing participants enabled me to “enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, p. 341). Through interviews I was able to gain insight into the feelings, thoughts and intentions of the participants as well as understand how the participants organize their world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the program.

### *Interview Design*

I utilized focused group interviews to capture program participants’ experiences within the program. Group interviews are conducted to obtain a variety of perspectives in a short amount of time. Patton (2002) described focused group interviews as a one to two hour interview with a small group of people, typically six to ten participants with similar backgrounds. “The object is to get high-quality data in a social context where people can consider their own views in the context of the views of others” (Patton, p. 386).

The power of focus groups is their being focused (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of my study, the topic was narrowly focused on participant reactions to their shared experience within the program. The discussion focused primarily on the overarching research question: “How do youth-adult relationships in community-based programs influence youth empowerment?” To maintain the integrity of focus group interviews, every aspect was specifically focused. “The groups are focused by being formed homogeneously. The facilitation is focused, keeping responses on target. Interactions among participants are focused, staying on topic. Use of time must be focused, because

the time passes quickly” (Patton, p. 388). The inherent focus of focused group interviews forced me to be structured in my approach, which as a new interviewer was extremely valuable to me.

Focus groups are a collectivistic rather than individualistic research method that has emerged as an empowering approach (Patton, 2002). This type of approach is particularly appropriate with youth whose views and voices are often suppressed or ignored. The potential of focused group interviews to provide safety in numbers will empower youth, by giving them confidence and a sense of camaraderie (Patton), which supports them in sharing their stories and experiences within the program. The collectivist method as an empowering approach is supported by Lerner’s developmental contextualism theory, which stresses the dialectic process in which the setting and social system both influence and are influenced by the individual (Muuss, 1996). Youth feel supported and empowered in a setting comprised of peers who have similar experiences and feelings.

#### *Interview Data Collection Approach*

I utilized a general interview guide approach, which required me to predetermine a set of issues to be addressed during the focus group interview? This approach provided a variety of advantages, which are specifically related to my purpose, audience and design. Patton (2002) asserted that, “a guide is essential in conducting focus group interviews for it keeps the interactions *focused* while allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge” (p. 344). Using an interview guide provided me with a framework that outlined the topics or subject areas I wanted to explore while still giving me the opportunity to probe and ask questions to illuminate subject areas of particular

interest. This allowed me to tailor each interview to focus on situational needs or issues identified by the participants in each focus group. It also permitted me to establish and maintain a conversational style, which I believe is especially important when working with youth. My experience working with teens has shown me that they are more likely to be engaged if I utilize a conversational approach as opposed to if I use a fully structured interview instrument. A final advantage of using an interview guide was that it enabled me to carefully utilize the limited time available during each focus group interview session.

I first established research questions and then developed interview guides for both youth and adults based on those questions (see Appendix D). The interview guide is divided into main concepts or ideas and includes questions aimed at extracting information related to each concept. Because I felt it was important to maintain a conversational approach, I did not strictly follow the wording and order of the questions. I also included some additional questions and probes to obtain additional information. However, the guide was very helpful when discussion began to stray and ensured that each major concept was addressed.

I facilitated all five of the focused group interviews. I was accompanied by a content recorder who was responsible for focusing on the content, making notes on who said what, and watching the time. On average each focus group lasted 45 minutes.

I completed a total of three focus groups at the Site A site. The Site A After-school youth and adult focus groups were conducted one after the other, during the end of after-school. There were six youth and five after-school adults involved in the Site A focus groups. I then completed a focused group interview with the community change

team adults the following week. There were six adults present at the change team focus group. One adult, the Director of the After-school Program, was involved in both adult focus groups.

The Site B youth and adult focus groups were also conducted one after the other following after-school. There were six youth involved and three adults involved in the focus groups. Site B does not have a change team in place, so I only conducted two focus groups in Site B.

### *Participants*

The participants for this study were recruited through a Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR), New Communities Project (NCP) grant awarded to Kansas State Research and Extension from United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The project, entitled Kansas Teen Leadership for Physically Active Lifestyles, addresses obesity and inactivity by utilizing the power of youth to promote physically active lifestyles. The primary aim of this project is to reduce/prevent obesity among rural, at-risk teens through an in-depth mentoring and community youth development program delivered in the out-of-school hours. Through a multi-level system (state team, local change team, and on-site programming in after-school sites) at-risk youth located in isolated rural communities learn, model and adopt the skills necessary to incorporate regular physical activity into their lifestyles. The participating communities coordinate the project through the local Research and Extension offices and “change teams” comprised of targeted youth, school administrators, business and civic representatives. Teens earn stipends as they provide physical activity programming to existing after-school sites serving elementary school-age youth. As teens learn and master skills to

increase physical activity for the younger children, they increase their own physical activity and will adopt a more physically active lifestyle. In addition to providing programming for physical activity in after-school, the teen mentors/leaders will work with the change team to conduct community-wide campaigns, events and information dissemination to change the policies, practices and perceptions of physical activity throughout the entire community.

The NCP grant is disseminated in the form of sub awards to sites in three Kansas counties. The criteria USDA established for selecting these new communities was that community projects should focus on children, youth, and families who are at risk for not meeting basic human needs. Please see Appendix C for the specific county selection criteria for each New Community Project site. The CYFAR/NCP selection criteria were used to define “at-risk.” The information presented in Appendix C was also used to identify “at-risk” teens. Teens that were identified “at-risk” by school counselors were then recruited, screened and provided a paid mentor position to work in the after-school program. Teen leaders are trained to implement physical activity curriculum such as CATCH- Coordinated Approach to Child Health- and SPARK- Sports, Play, Recreation for Kids- in local after-school programs (New Communities State Project Report, 2007). These curricula train teens to lead younger children in fun games that encourage vigorous exercise. The core state team, of which I am a part, provides training and technical assistance to the program sites. County Extension agents function as local intermediaries to manage resources and promote community collaborations that support the physical activity promotion work of the local teens (New Communities State Project Report, 2007). Teen leaders are given tools and leadership roles to: help younger children be

physically active in after-school, lead community campaigns that promote physical activity, and partner with adults in community planning and promotion efforts (New Communities State Project Report, 2007). Adults within the sites supervise the activities of the teens within the after-school program and provide assistance in planning and implementing community events. Youth and adults work collaboratively to achieve the goal of increasing physical activity within their individual communities.

Two county sites were selected for participation in this study. Description of both communities and the definitions of “at-risk” used in this study can be found in Appendix C. There is very little interaction between the youth and adults at the two sites. Youth and adults from both sites attend the New Communities Project Institute “Health Fest” once yearly for a two day in-depth training. However, this is the only opportunity the youth and adults within the after-school programs have to interact with one another. The only interaction that occurs outside of the annual institute is with the members of the state team and between the Extension agents from each community. Youth and adults within these sites were appropriate participants for this study because their experiences working together within the program make them representative of youth-adult relationships in community-based programs. A brief description of the after-school program design at both program sites is provided below.

#### *Site A After-School Program Design*

The after-school program at this site was born from an existing child-care program, which then morphed into a teen health program when the CATCH curriculum came along. The after-school program meets Monday through Friday afternoons

following the school day and runs from 3 pm to 6 pm. The site has an employed Director of the After-school Program as well as a number of adults who work in after-school.

The “littles” are divided into age groups based on their grade in school. After-school begins with a healthy snack which the adult leaders facilitate. Following snack the “littles” get free time outside, giving the teens an opportunity to arrive at the elementary school. Because the current after-school program evolved from an existing after-school program it involves a homework component everyday. Following homework on Monday and Wednesday afternoons individual teens lead enrichment classes ranging from crafts to dance. Teens who lead enrichment classes are responsible for all aspects of the class including preparing for and leading the class. On Tuesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons the teens lead “littles” in CATCH and/or SPARK games. The teens are typically responsible for planning and leading the “littles” in games and activities during the CATCH/SPARK section of after-school. While the teens are leading the games a few adults stand around supervising and providing additional discipline if necessary.

Site A’s after-school program provides high-quality child care that incorporates the goal of spending at least 30 minutes in fun, moderate to vigorous physical activity three days a week. This after-school program provides the community affordable, quality child care for only \$3 a day. In 2007, there were 168 kindergarteners through sixth graders who participated in the after-school program (New Communities State Project Report, 2007). In the same year there were 27 teen leaders and 10 adult leaders. This site allows teen leaders the option to commit either to specific seasons or the entire

school year. Giving teens the opportunity to work seasonally allows them to participate in sports or work around other responsibilities such as working on the farm.

This site has a strong Community Change Team comprised of the after-school teen leaders, the project coordinator, and adults from the community. The Director of the After-school Program coordinates and organizes the meetings, which take place the first Monday of the month, every other month for an hour. Youth and adults serve on committees together each with a focus on projects that expand their work into the community. Youth and adults who serve on committees together meet in between change team meetings, if necessary, to plan or work on their project. The change team is responsible for extending the work of the teens into the community and sustaining the program at the completion of the grant.

Table 1

Description of Site A Youth Participants

	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Length of Time in Program</u>		
			<u>Volunteer</u>	<u>Worker</u>	<u>Total</u>
Youth 1	Junior	Female	0 years	3 years	3 years
Youth 2	Freshman	Female	3 years	1 year	4 years
Youth 3	Junior	Female	0 years	3 years	3 years
Youth 4	Senior	Female	3 years	4 years	7 years
Youth 5	Senior	Female	2 years	4 years	6 years
Youth 6	Senior	Female	0 years	1 month	1 month

Table 2

Description of Site A After-school Adults

	Role in Program	Gender	Length of Time in Program
Adult 1	Work in after-school program	Female	4 years
Adult 2	Work in after-school program	Female	2.5 years
Adult 3	Work in after-school program	Female	5 years
Adult 4	Director of After-school Program	Female	8 years
Adult 5	Work in after-school program	Female	7 years

Table 3

Description of Site A Change Team Adults

	Occupation	Gender	Length of Time in Program *
Adult 1	Retired	Female	8 years
Adult 2	Director of After-school Program	Female	8 years
Adult 3	County Extension Agent	Female	10 years
Adult 4	Superintendent for the school district	Female	8 years
Adult 5	Elementary school principal	Female	4 years
Adult 6	Elementary school principal	Female	4 years

\* Includes time involved in the after-school program before the NCP grant

*Site B After-School Program Design*

The Site B teen leaders and adults promote physical activity to address overweight and physical inactivity in their county. This program focuses on implementing physical activity curriculum both days and does not incorporate any other

aspects, such as homework, to the program. This program employs an after-school coordinator and one other adult leader who are responsible for organizing and managing the program as well as monitoring teens and “littles.” The County Research and Extension agent is also involved with after-school but from more of a removed administrative position rather than daily involvement in the after-school sessions.

This after-school program meets twice weekly on Monday and Thursday afternoons following the school day from 3:15 until 5 pm. The “littles” are separated by age (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders, and 5<sup>th</sup> graders and some aggressive 4<sup>th</sup> graders) into teams (red, blue, yellow, green) of 15-18 kids. Teen leaders are paired and assigned an age group to lead in CATCH and SPARK games. Each team of “littles” will participate in two different games during each after-school period. Each teen or pair of teens is responsible for leading two different age groups in a game or activity during after-school. The after-school program time is divided into two sessions; one session includes game 1 and a snack and the second session includes only games. The teens are responsible for rotating each team of “littles” at the appropriate time. The teens are assigned an initial team of “littles” to work with and then will switch to another age group half way through the session. The after-school coordinator is often inside managing snack while the teens lead their groups. The other after-school adult typically floats from group to group or will provide additional assistance if the teens need it. At the completion of after-school the teens are responsible for planning activities and games for the following after-school session.

The primary goal of Site B’s after-school program is to promote healthy nutrition and physical activity behaviors. Currently there is no charge for this program as the New

Communities Project grant funds all aspects of the program. According to the New Communities State Project Report (2007), there were 12 teen leaders and 65 “littles” (kindergartners through sixth graders) who participated in the program during the past year. Teen leaders may commit for specific sessions or for the entire year. This allows those teens involved in sports to also be a teen leader for the after-school program during the off season. Although a Community Change Team existed during the first years of the project, it accomplished its original goal and has since dissipated.

Table 4

Description of Site B Youth Participants

	Age	Gender	Length of Time in Program
Youth 1	Senior	Female	2 years
Youth 2	Senior	Female	3 years
Youth 3	Eighth grade	Female	1 year
Youth 4	Junior	Male	3 years
Youth 5	Freshman	Female	1 year
Youth 6	Freshman	Female	1 year
Youth 7	Freshman	Female	1 year

Table 5

Description of Site B Adult Participants

	Role in Program	Gender	Length of Time with Program
Adult 1	After-school Program Coordinator	Female	4 years
Adult 2	Assists in After-school program	Female	2 years
Adult 3	County Extension Agent	Male	5 years

*Sampling Strategy*

My study focuses on obtaining detailed information from a relatively small sample selected purposefully. A small purposeful sample can provide very valuable information if the cases are information-rich, which provide in-depth understanding about an issue of significance to the purpose of the study. “Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). The focus on depth rather than breadth in my study supports the use of purposeful sampling to obtain information-rich cases which provide detailed insight into the variety of youth-adult relationships which exist among the sites.

The sample I used for my thesis is a convenience sample of people with whom I have worked and therefore to whom I had easy access. However, I believe that my sample also would be considered a stratified purposeful sample. Stratified samples are defined as “samples within samples” (Patton, 2002, p. 240). Each strata or group should consist of a homogenous sample. Patton described the purpose of stratified purposeful sampling as capturing the major variations, which exist among groups rather than to

identify a common theme. I utilized this sampling method by studying two programs, located in different communities, which are part of the same initiative. Each group is a fairly homogeneous sample in that the participants in each group have experience within the same program. The purpose, then, was to capture variations of youth-adult relationships, which exist among the two groups. As such, the selection of these programs serves a distinct purpose for my research even though they may be considered a convenience sample.

### *Data Analysis*

#### *Unit of Analysis*

For the purpose of my study, programs or sites were the unit of analysis. “The analytical focus in such multisite studies is on the variations among project sites rather than on variations among individuals within projects” (Patton, 2002, p. 228). Therefore, I identified variations of youth-adult relationships, which exist among sites. The information allows me to identify which aspects of each site contribute to where the group is positioned on the youth-adult relationships continuum.

#### *Organizing the Data*

The focus group voice sessions were recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Patton (2002) described how transcribing provides a transition between fieldwork and analysis. I had a transcriptionist complete the initial transcription of the focus group data. Once I received the transcribed data I checked the transcription against the voice files and made any additions, corrections and formatting that needed to be done. This experience enabled me to generate emergent insights and “get a feel for the cumulative data as a whole” (Patton, p. 441).

Once the data had been transcribed and organized, I utilized a case study approach which enabled me to describe the various settings or sites before doing cross-setting pattern analysis (Patton, 2002). Beginning my analysis by completing a case study for each site was beneficial because it allowed me to initially organize my data in a manageable way. Once I had completed a case study for each site, I used an analytical framework approach to analyze patterns across sites. Patterns and differences between groups were then organized and described by using the research questions used in guiding my fieldwork.

#### *Coding Data: Finding Patterns, Themes and/or Categories*

According to Patton (2002), content analysis “involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data, which essentially means analyzing the core *content* of interviews and observations to determine what’s significant” (p. 463). I coded my data by simply reading through the data and developing coding categories or a classification system. I began by reading through all of the focus group transcription and attaching Post-it tabs that enabled me to begin organizing the data by specific research question. Passages that illustrated more than one theme or pattern were identified accordingly by use of multiple colored tabs. I then began underlining concepts within the transcription and noting specific topics and labels in the margins. I read through the data several times before all were completely indexed and coded. In order to analyze youth empowerment I read through the focus groups writing down constructs and concepts related to youth empowerment that appeared in each focus group. Once I did this I was easily able to identify themes that existed within and across program sites.

### *Verification: Convergence and Divergence*

I first used convergence and then divergence as a means of verifying my data. Analyzing my data for convergence allowed me to develop codes and categories by figuring out what things fit together. I began by “looking for *recurring regularities* in the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 465). The regularities exposed patterns in the data that I then sorted into categories. I verified the categories by assessing internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. The first criterion, internal homogeneity, assesses the extent to which data that belong in a category are similar and hold together. External heterogeneity, the second criterion, concerns the extent to which differences among categories are obvious (Patton). Convergence is especially helpful for verification purposes because, according to Guba, “the existence of a large number of unassignable or overlapping data items is good evidence of some basic fault in the category system” (Patton, p. 465).

Once I had analyzed the data for convergence, I examined divergence in the data. This required me to expand upon the patterns or categories I had established. “This is done by a process of extension (building on items of information already known [this maybe previous research or other ways of knowing]), bridging (making connections among different items), and surfacing (proposing new information that ought to fit and then verifying its existence)” (Patton, 2002, p. 466). Divergence also includes careful examination of data that do not seem to fit the dominant identified patterns. A sense of verification was achieved once sources of information had been exhausted, categories had been saturated and become redundant, clear regularities had emerged and felt integrated,

and the analysis began to “overextend” beyond the boundaries of the purpose of the analysis.

### *Substantive Significance*

The qualitative analyst’s effort at uncovering patterns, themes and categories relies on his or her ability to make a judgment about what is really significant and meaningful in the data. As such, qualitative findings are judged by their substantive significance. To determine substantive significance I considered questions such as “how solid, coherent, and consistent is the evidence in support of my findings?” “To what extent and in what ways do the findings increase and deepen understanding of the phenomenon studied?” “To what extent are the findings consistent with other knowledge?” “To what extent are the findings useful for addressing the problem?” (Patton, 2002). These questions provided me with one way of establishing substantive significance in my data. I also strived to obtain consensual validation of the substantive significance of my findings by first trusting in my own intelligence, experience, and judgment to appropriately present the findings and conclusions

### *Sensitizing Concepts*

I used sensitizing concepts from the literature during the later stages of my analysis. My priority was to focus on the participants’ words. I used sensitizing concepts to facilitate my understanding of the data. The sensitizing concepts served as a general reference and provided direction in my analysis (Patton, 2002). Sensitizing concepts were derived from the literature on positive youth development and youth empowerment. The “five C’s” (competence, connection, character, confidence, and compassion) were used as sensitizing concepts of positive youth development. Concepts from the youth

empowerment literature such as youth leadership, youth voice, youth feel valued, youth are given opportunities to be involved and adults have appropriate expectations for youth allowed me to examine youth empowerment within and across program sites.

### *Researcher as Measurement Tool*

According to Patton (2002), within qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument for measurement. As such the researcher's knowledge, experiences and accompanying biases become part of the data during analysis and interpretation. In order for the reader to understand the interpretations made and conclusions drawn, the researcher must explicitly state the assumptions and biases with which he or she approaches the study. Therefore, I will briefly clarify my own values and experiences relevant to the present study before presenting the results of my analysis.

As a family life educator, I believe that families, schools, and communities are sociocultural contexts within which young people develop and therefore all contribute to positive youth development. The findings of this study must be considered within this context understanding that community, and thus the community programs assessed, are only one context in which development occurs and cannot be wholly credited for the development of these young people.

As a human ecologist, I believe that interactions between the individual and sociocultural contexts are essential to youth development and that enhancing understanding of those interactions is necessary for facilitation positive youth development. Thus, I also believe that interpretations based on this study will have implications for the field of positive youth development and the role non-familial adults serve in youth development.

As a proponent of life-span development, I believe that growth and development continue throughout the life course and that individuals have the ability to change through the life span. As such, appropriate intervention in young people's lives may contribute to positive youth development. The findings of this research may be used to contribute to our understanding of how to appropriately intervene in young people's lives and promote positive youth development.

As an advocate of positive youth development, I view youth as resources to be developed rather than problems to be solved. I value the contributions which youth can make in their community and see them as important stakeholders in community. I believe young people need community adults to give them opportunities to make meaningful contributions which promote youth empowerment. Finally, I believe when youth are given opportunities and have a sense of empowerment they will develop into adults who will make positive contributions to society.

These perspectives have greatly impacted my view of this project and therefore impacted my data analysis. I attempted to consider these perspectives during data collection, analysis and interpretation in an attempt to remain neutral. It is equally important, however, that readers of my study understand that "data from and about humans inevitably represent some degree of perspective rather than absolute truth" (Patton, 2002, p. 569) and take this into consideration as they draw their own conclusions, based on the presentation of the results and discussion.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Qualitative analyses revealed a number of themes regarding the youth-adult relationships and young people's feelings of empowerment within the program sites. The results are presented first by research question. Themes related to each research question were then identified, and described by program site and finally by cross-setting analysis.

*What are the experiences of youth and adults in the New Community Project (NCP) sites?*

Youth and adult experiences within their respective program sites cannot be fully understood without an explanation of the design of each after-school program.

Therefore, a brief description of each program site was given in Chapter 3 to provide the reader with a basic context for the experiences of the youth and adults in each site.

Recall that Site A was better established, operated five days a week, had a functioning change team, and the youth in the program interacted with a larger number of adults. The Site B site was more recently developed, operated twice a week, did not have a change team, and included a much smaller number of adults in which the youth had an opportunity to interact.

Several common themes emerged among individual youth and adults within program sites as well as between youth and adults across the program sites. Both youth and adults within program sites seemed to identify with one another's experiences in the program, signifying that youth and adults perceived experiences similarly. A common theme that appeared across sites was that both youth and adults' experiences with one another in the program changed the youth's perceptions of adults and the adults' perceptions of youth. Responses from youth and adults across sites revealed that as a

result of their experiences within the program youth had become more outgoing, built friendships with peers they otherwise would not have, and gained a sense of compassion.

*Role of youth and adults in the program.*

This theme emerged as a way to identify the primary roles the teens fulfilled in the program as compared to the roles of the adults. The teens' primary role was to lead the "littles" in games and activities. Adults appeared to fulfill a supervisory role; providing additional support for the teens when necessary and ensuring the safety of both "littles" and teens.

*Site A.*

Adults talked about their role in the program by saying, "We're more here for supervisors, to keep things under control and keep the ["littles"] who are out of control out of the group and handle those things where the teens just kind of keep things rolling." The adult went on to describe that "[the teens] still have somebody they can go, you know, look to for authority but not be getting after them so much." This passage also seems to imply that the teens' role is to lead the "littles". Another adult alluded to this when she said, "[The teens] are supposed to start a game or song or something to keep the kids occupied." The change team adults identified their role in a little different way. One adult explained, "[The teens] bounce ideas off of us. We're a little bit older, so...we give them a little bit of guidance there." Another change team adult alluded to this guidance when she said, "Sometimes we have to give them a different path to get to that end result."

*Site B.*

In order to explain the role youth and adults have in the program, the County Extension agent provided an analogy based on a major league baseball program. He began by describing the youth's role: "They're more like the coordinator...they're more like the coach...they're pretty much running the team." He continued by describing the other adult who assists in the program as the "general manager" and the After-school Program Coordinator as "the assistant vice-president." He continued and described himself as "the owner" because he buys the equipment. The other adults agreed with this analogy confirming that the teens are in charge of facilitating the games and activities with the "littles" and the adults are primarily there for supervision.

The youths' description of their experiences working with the adults in the program seemed to confirm this analogy. When asked what the role of adults in the program is, one youth answered, "the mastermind of it." Another youth expanded by saying, "They're kind of like the supervisor. We have control over the kids, but they have control over us and maybe a little bit greater control of what our activities are." One youth also described the teens' role in the program by saying, "We're leaders and role models because...the kids do what we do." When specifically asked what their role or job in the program is the teens responded, "making sure that [the littles] have lots of fun," "keep them active," and "keeping them safe." Based on the youths' and adults' responses it appears that the teens are in charge of the "littles" and the adults are primarily supervisors.

*Youths' and adults' experiences of ownership.*

As a theme, youths' and adults' experiences of ownership provided some insight into the amount of ownership the teens and adults have in the program as a whole and their degree of ownership within specific aspects of the program. This theme also established a way to determine the degree to which the teens' and adults' perceptions of ownership in the program aligned or differed. In general, the teens and adults experiences of ownership seemed to align providing some support for the validity of the findings.

*Site A.*

Youth and adults had similar responses when asked how much ownership each had as a whole in the program. One of the seniors in the program responded, "I would say 60% for adults and 40% for us teens." Another senior agreed saying, "In general, I mean you have the days where its going to be like us 0% them 100%, and then other days the adults are tired and they're like just take them. Honestly, I think that 60/40 is about right, in general." The after-school adults responded in the same way. One adult said, "Overall I would say 60/40 with the adults 60 and the teens 40 because they do a lot of work but its not all necessarily their idea to do it but they do a lot of work." Another adult added, "because the adults are here before the teens get here. Its not quite 50/50 but I'd say 60/40 is pretty close. But they do a lot." The change team adults did not quantify youth ownership, but said, "I think they identify with the students and I think that they identify with any successes, any outside activities, that's their activities." Ownership was then divided assessed by different aspects of the program. When asked to rate the percentage as far as the change team meetings and their ownership in those, teens

responded, “80-20. Eighty percent for the adults and 20% for us.” One youth said, “I feel like we’re kind of, we do kind of get told what to do change team wise...we don’t get a lot of say on what we’re doing...we come up with ideas but usually the adult are really, they kind of tell us what to do.” However, she went on to say, “which is ok with me.” When the adults were asked about youth ownership of the change team, one adult responded hesitantly, “Um, I don’t, I don’t know. I think their input is valued when they give it. Most of the time they’re usually discussing what they’ve done or are getting ready to do.” In response to the power up P.E. component of after-school, the youth said, “Power up is like, pretty much ours. It’s like our section of the day.” One of the experienced seniors said, “Honestly, my [CATCH] day when I lead the game and when I teach a class I feel like its 90% me.” One of the adults agreed saying, “The CATCH side is 90% theirs...they come up with the plan, they choose the games, they do at least 90% of that if not more.”

*Site B.*

When asked how much ownership the youth have in the program as compared to the adults one teen responded, “I think that it’s kind of 50/50 because the leaders listen to us a lot about what we want to do.” When asked the same question the after-school program coordinator answered, “it’s probably changed as the program has developed and grown. In the beginning it was probably 75 [adult]/25 [youth], maybe the first year. And then it’s just progressed to where I would say now, of course I feel strong ownership, but I know my high school youth...I would say 90, I mean I think they probably feel very responsible and very in charge. And take a lot of credit.” The county extension agent agreed saying, “I think they take a lot of ownership.”

### *Adult's perceptions of young people*

Adult's perceptions of youth changed as a result of working with the teens in the after-school program. Sub themes which appeared were that adults saw teens as positively contributing rather than just causing problems, adults realized how busy teens' schedules are, and recognized that if given the chance, all (even "at-risk") youth are capable of making positive development.

#### *Site A.*

Participation in this program changed some of the views that the adults in the program previously held about youth. A couple of primary themes emerged in the adults' response to, "In what ways have your perceptions of youth changed as a result of working with the teens in this program?" The first theme found in both groups of adults, after-school and change team, was that the teens provide a positive example of what young people are doing rather than the negative view that adults often think of in regard to adolescents. An after-school adult said, "I think it helps [adults] keep in check that even though [we] see all those kids out there...who aren't doing anything after school and then...this group of kids come in...and they have a job. They have a focus." One of the change team adults said something similar. "We always hear about the bad students that are in the paper...but we don't hear about all these good kids that are busy and have responsibilities at home and have activities and things, and they still have a job and they are still willing to come [to] other things." The adults seemed to associate a positive focus on youth with their active involvement in positive activities. Adults recognizing the number of activities these youth are involved in is the second theme.

The second theme that emerged with adults in both focus groups was that they recognized just how busy teens are and how many things they have going on in their lives. An after-school adult said, “They amaze me...how many things they juggle in life, along with going to school, along with this job, family, activities, but I mean its just amazing all the things they juggle in their life.” One of the change team adults made a similar observation. “I’ve seen more first hand how busy they are and how much they have on their plates, just as much as we do.”

The third theme that appeared in both adult focus groups was, “you can’t judge a book by its cover.” As one of the change team adults mentioned, a majority of the youth who participate in this program are not traditional 4-Hers, meaning they are typically higher risk teens many of whom have less parental support. So to see their growth and change as a result of the program has been exciting. Another after-school adult later said that through her experience with youth in the program, “I can see that every kid is capable of doing things they never thought they could do. There’s some teens that when they started I would have never thought that they’d still be here and have grown so much.” She went on to expand the potential for growth to all youth by saying, “I think that any kid could do that ...who wanted to, if they were put in that situation they could do what is asked of them.”

*Site B.*

When asked how their perceptions of youth had changed as a result of participating in this program, one adult responded, “I feel like I have found leaders in people I would have never expected...so I think my perception of just your stereotype of what kids are or aren’t and then coming into the program and realizing what they can

do.” She went on to provide some specific examples of youth who are strong leaders in the program that she would have never guessed would be. The Extension Agent also explained that he has learned that “the kids do a better job of planning if you give them a chance to plan.” In other words, he has found that young people are capable if they are given an opportunity to do so.

#### *Young people’s perceptions of adults*

The teens’ perceptions of adults also changed as a result of participating in the after-school program. Teens became more comfortable and confident around adults and came to view them as not so different from themselves. Teens also gained a greater understanding of and appreciation for adults both inside and outside of the program.

#### *Site A.*

The teens also changed some of their views of adults as a result of participating in this program. Youth revealed that they have become more comfortable around adults as a result of their experiences within the program. A senior in the program noted that she “used to be more nervous around adults than [she is] now.” She went on to explain that she used to be afraid that she would “mess up” in the presence of adults. One of the change team adults even noticed this initial discomfort around adults and noticed how the youth had grown in this aspect. “I think they’ve become more comfortable with adults through the process because as I see them evolve, they’re more willing to share, where before maybe they would just huddle together.”

Another senior in the program described how her view of adults had changed. From her description it seems she previously viewed adults as being far removed from teens; almost as if adults were placed on a pedestal. However, she went on to say, “I

have come to view adults more like people...I really feel like I can talk to them...they're relatable." The other senior agreed. "They're just really relatable and I have more understanding of adults." This enhanced understanding of adults appeared to extend beyond the scope of the adults involved in the program as evidenced by this teen's explanation. "When they discipline me, or at school especially when I see kids acting up, I understand their feelings more and I understand why they get frustrated. And when they get upset with somebody I understand it more having worked around them, than if I would have just worked around teens." This enhanced understanding of adults has impacted their interactions with adults as well. Another teen added, "I really feel like it has helped me with my relationships with other adults, like teachers." One of the experienced seniors went on to add, "I don't feel as offended when adults correct [me] now." When asked why they felt less offended now the other senior added, "Cuz I've corrected other kids before. I've had to be the teacher. I've had to be the mean one...so when somebody tells me something like that I understand that that's their job to tell me that." The way these young people's views of adults changed as a result of participating in the program may be summarized by this quote from one of the seniors in the group, "So just really respect and understanding of adults has changed."

*Site B.*

Teen's perceptions of adults also changed as a result of participating in this after-school program. After working with the adults in the after-school program, one of the youth said, "[Adults] don't have to be as...always uptight." Another youth added, "Not all adults are stressed out about everything." The teens continued by saying that the adults in the program "are a lot more fun" and that "they're not as serious about things."

When asked what suggestions they would give to other youth who would be working with and interacting with adults the youth said, “just be yourself” and “don’t be afraid of them.”

#### *Areas of growth and change*

Participants in both program sites identified areas in which teens had grown and changed during their time in the after-school program. Common sub themes included that the teens became more outgoing and formed friendships with peers they would not have otherwise interacted with. Teens also developed a sense of compassion for the “littles” which appeared to extend to include being more compassionate toward others outside the program.

#### *Site A.*

Youth grew in a few areas as a result of their experiences within the program. A couple of the youth noted that they had become more outgoing as a result of their experience in the program. The freshman of the group said, “I think I’ve become a lot more outgoing. I’ve been willing to talk to other people.” One of the other youth confirmed this change by saying, “Yeah, [she] used to be a turtle. She’s out of her shell.” One of the experienced seniors also implied that she had become more outgoing when she said, “I was kinda shy when I first started working here.” Becoming more outgoing may have been, at least in part, related to the friendships formed with peers with whom they otherwise would not socialize. The change team adults mentioned this as they described that the program includes some at-risk youth. One adult explained, “We brought some of [the at-risk] kids in and then mixed them with everybody else so I think

there's been some friendships formed that wouldn't have happened before. They don't run in the same group and they don't hang out with the same people."

Finally it seemed that the experiences youth had within the program contributed to the development of one of the "five C's" of positive youth development, compassion. The after-school adults explicitly mentioned this construct during their focus group. One adult said, "I see, sometimes, a lot of compassion in the youth for the kids." Later in the discussion the adults mentioned that each teen seems to have a niche with a few "littles" and further explained that "its not so much of a baby[ing] situation...but its more of a compassion and compatibility and help situation...instead of babying them they're helping them." One of the change team adults shared a story that exemplified the compassion the teens have for the "littles" in the program:

I have a student, just recently, who works in the after-school program who came to me and asked me if she could go on a field trip with one of the [littles], just because of the relationship she has formed with that individual and his parents never attend anything or not able to go no field trips...The fact that she still wanted to go above and beyond what she sees with that individual after-school I thought was really special, because she's very much an at-risk child herself. But I think she could identify with the fact that his parents never went on field trips or never came to school, so she wanted to be that significant other for him.

One of the teens also alluded to how working in the program has made her more compassionate toward others. She said, "I used to think all people were like, everybody was the same as me...and then when [I] start[ed] working with the little kids, [I] realize[d] that everybody doesn't have the same home life that [I] do. [I] realized that

maybe there's reasons why they act the way they do...and so [I] kind of sympathize more and I understand people more. I understand why they're the way they are."

*Site B.*

When asked in what ways they have changed as a result of participating in the program one youth, a senior in the group, simply replied, "I've become more outgoing than I was." She went on to explain that "[we] kind of have to be outgoing. [We] have to be able to be loud and talk and be fun" in order to lead the littles in activities. When asked about their interactions with one another, the same senior said, "I've gotten to know all three of them more. Because I didn't know them since they're freshman."

Another senior added that the program employs "a variety of high school students...freshman, junior, sophomore, seniors...and also we got junior high kids coming in, like sixth through eighth grade." The adults also acknowledged the development of these friendships. According to the after-school program coordinator:

They're forced to make friends with someone different than they would probably ever have. You know to see the kids come together. You have eight or nine kids and they wouldn't hang out with that particular person at school. But here where they're forced to change partnerships and be leaders together they learn that, "Oh, she's fun, she's nice." It stretches them to step out of their box and socialize with other kids, older or younger.

The adults in the program also identified compassion, one of the "five C's" of positive youth development, as an area of development resulting from the teens' experiences in the program. When asked in what ways they saw the youth grow or change, one of the adults said, "They've had to learn how to listen, to us and the kids.

Not only that, but their compassion. Because the kids will...if a kid gets hurt” another adult interjects and imitates how youth show compassion toward the “littles.” “It’s like, ‘Oh, it is ok. You are going to be ok. Come and sit with me.’”

### *Cross-setting Comparison*

In spite of some fundamental differences in the design and implementation of the after-school programs, a number of themes in relation to youth and adults’ experiences within the program appeared across settings. The roles that youth and adults served in the program were similar across program sites. The teens were primarily responsible for leading the “littles” in games and activities, while the adults served as supervisors and provided guidance when needed. Adults’ perceptions of youth also changed similarly across settings. Adults in both program sites found strong leaders in teens they would not have expected and had come to appreciate how busy teens are. A common theme that emerged among youth was that their perceptions of adults changed as a result of participating in the program. Youth from both sites realized that adults can be fun and are not all intimidating. As a result of their experiences within the program youth from both sites became more outgoing, formed friendships with other youth that would not otherwise have been formed and became more compassionate.

A variety of differences also appeared between the two sites. The design of the program sites is different resulting in a fundamental difference between the experiences of participants at each site. Site A operates additional days during the week and employs more adults within after-school than Site B. Site A also includes a community change team comprised of even more adults giving youth from this site the opportunity to interact with more adults, in a variety of settings. The youth from Site A also have more

opportunity to interact with the adults because they spend more time facilitating after-school. This experience working with additional adults resulted in the youth having a more diverse set of experiences to pull from but did not appear to change the themes found in the focus groups.

*How do youth and adults interact within the confines of the NCP program sites?*

A variety of major themes were identified within the context of youth-adult relationships present in the program sites. The first theme identified was that youth and adults held similar perceptions of the program and their relationships with one another. Youth and adults from both program sites agreed that the youth-adult relationships present in the program were comfortable or good. Yet another theme that emerged from both program sites was a mutual feeling that youth are treated as adults within the confines of the program. Participant responses related to the interactions between youth and adults in the program revealed another theme, one of the “five C’s” of positive youth development, connection.

*Youth and adults’ relationship and interactions*

This theme captured how the teens and adults viewed their relationships with one another. The young people and adults in both program sites agreed that their relationship with one another was good. The other sub theme that appeared was that the adults in both program sites treated the teen workers as co-workers rather than as subordinates.

*Site A.*

Youth and adults within the program held similar views of the program and of their relationships with one another. Both youth and adults felt their relationship was “good” and “very comfortable” this year. When asked to describe their relationship with

adults in the program one youth responded, “I would say that we get along pretty well for the most part.” Another teen continued saying, “all of them are people that we can have fun with, like when we just have staff activities we can usually have a lot of fun at those.” When asked to describe their relationship with the teens in the program one adult responded, “I think it’s really good this year.” The adults continued to explain that there are not any youth that they are unwilling to work with. “We’ll take any one of them. Any one of the youth to work with.”

The youth and after-school adults also addressed similar issues, although at times from different perspectives. The primary issues that were mentioned by the youth and both after-school and change team adults were calling in sick, needing a day off from after-school, and scheduling change team meetings around the teen’s school schedules. The youth felt that at times the adults have more lenient rules than the youth when it comes to things like cell phone use and calling in sick. The youth noted that, “if we call in sick at the last minute we get in big, big trouble” and went on to explain that when the adults are late or call in it seems not to be a big deal. They went on to explain that when they are going to miss after-school, the director of the after-school “always wants details if we’re gone, like if we tell her we’re going to be gone ahead of time.” Another youth added, “The adults don’t have to do that. They just say they need the day off” and are given it without question. The after-school adults addressed this same issue, without being prompted, by explaining some of the youth had to develop a stronger work ethic. One adult used the example of a youth calling in sick or, “I just don’t want to come in today, because I want to get a new puppy.” The adults viewed the issue of calling in sick

from the standpoint of building work ethic in the teens while the teens saw it as an issue of fairness or equality between themselves and the adults.

Another issue that was mentioned by both youth and adults was scheduling the change team meetings. As one youth noted, “at the beginning of the year we had our meetings for change team during the day so we were taken out of certain classes.”

Another youth went on to add that the class hour they were taken out of was commonly when the more difficult classes are scheduled. They shared their difficulty balancing their responsibilities as students to their teachers and as workers to the program. The youth primarily discussed this issue in a negative way. When the change team adults addressed the same issue they framed it in a positive way. One adult noted that, “when [the teens] decided...that meeting at noon wasn’t good for all of them because...they were missing important classes...they brought it to us.” The youth suggested that the change team meetings be changed to a different time during the day. The adults seemed very supportive of changing the time of the meetings to accommodate the teens’ schedules. Again, the adults seemed to focus on the positive aspects of this situation while the teens focused more on how the situation negatively affected them without much consideration to other aspects of the situation. While both youth and adults addressed these same issues, completely independent of one another, they addressed them from different perspectives based on their own experiences.

Another common theme that emerged among both youth and adults was that youth within the program are treated more as adults than as teenagers. One of the juniors simply stated, “I feel like they treat me like an adult. They talk to me like I am not just a teenager [who doesn’t] know what [she’s] talking about.” Although the other junior

disagreed stating “I still feel like I am being treated as a kid.” The freshman in the group, who volunteered in the program before she was old enough to work at after-school, noticed there was a change in the way the adults treated her based on her position in the program. She shared, “when I was volunteering then they treated me more as a kid, and then since I started actually working here then I’ve been treated more as an adult.” One of the experienced seniors said, “I really feel that I have as much say as an adult does.” The adults echoed this sentiment. When asked to describe their interactions with the youth, an after-school adult responded, “Its no different really than my interactions with the adults. I don’t feel like I have to talk down to them at all.” In fact, another after-school adult said, “sometimes you forget they are still teenagers.” The change team adults expressed this notion that youth are treated as adults in a little different way. One change team adult said, “I consider [the teens] our partners.” One of the other adults echoed this idea by saying, “We want them to be as much a part of it, like a partnership with the adults.”

*Site B.*

One of the adults said, “I think we have a good relationship with all of [the teens].” Youth and adults recognized a couple of constructs that contributed to this good relationship. Respect was identified by both the teens and adults as an important aspect of their relationship with one another. The teens recognized the importance of respecting adults when one youth noted, “[Teens] still need to be respectful [of adults] because they are older than [us].” Another teen previously implied an inherent respect for adults based on their greater experience. The County Extension Agent also recognized that “the [teens] really respect...the adults. We wouldn’t have such a good turn out of [teens]

wanting to come back if they didn't respect our adults." The idea that the young people viewed the adults within the program as fun was also identified by both groups. One teen said, "The adults in [the after-school program] are way more fun than the ones I work with [outside of the program]." She later reiterated that "they are fun to be around." The after-school coordinator said, "I think the [teens] find us to be very cool, and funny, and friendly, and not intimidating or not mean or bossy. I think that they just feel very accepted and very well liked."

When asked to describe their interactions with youth in the program, one adult said, "Just like co-workers. I feel like. I don't necessarily feel like I'm their boss. I think I very rarely have to, once in awhile I'll have to say, 'Hey, what are you doing over there? Come on.' But I just feel like we're co-workers and I think we have good relationships with all of them." The youth echoed this notion that they are treated as co-workers in a couple of ways. When asked to describe their relationships with adults in the program, one youth answered, "It's pretty much as we're just one of the adults too." This youth perceived that adults treated the youth as though they were adults. A couple of the other youth viewed their relationships with adults in the program in a slightly different way. One youth responded, "They're just like one of us." While the other said, "They have taken that step and came down to our own level." Both of these youth describe their relationships with the adults in the program as them being willing to meet the youth where they are.

#### *Connection established between youth and adults*

This theme was derived from the positive youth development research literature which places an emphasis on the importance of young people feeling connected to

community adults. *Connection* is one of the “five C’s” of positive youth development and is reflected in the development of positive bonds with people and institutions. The teens in both program sites appeared to form stronger connections to the adults within the after-school program, than they had with adults outside the program.

*Site A.*

Another theme related to the “five C’s” of youth development that appeared in the data was connection between the youth and adults in the program. One of the change team adults mentioned that “it helps me in making a connection with the students...If we’re at the grocery store we don’t hesitate to speak.” Later the change team adults noted that “some of [the teens] don’t have parental support,” but noted that other adults in the community provide support for the teens. Another change team adult said, “Perhaps its not the traditional adult support that you think...the old traditional mom and dad showing up.” When asked if they saw other adults in the community taking on that role the response was, “Right here! And others too outside this group.” When asked to describe their relationship with the adults in the program, one youth responded, “I feel pretty close to most of the adults, like not parent type, but I feel like if I had a problem...that most of them I feel I could talk to.” The youth also acknowledged this connection with adults by explaining the ways in which adults in the program support them. One of the experienced seniors in the group said, “They kind of take care of you, I really feel like they care about me, like as me, not just as a worker.” Another youth shared a story. “My mom just started a new job...and she hasn’t been getting home in time to get [my brother], so like [one of the adults in the program] will take me and my brother home.” She went on to say, “they just kind of look out for [us].”

*Site B.*

The after-school program coordinator linked the youth feeling accepted, possibly valued, with developing a connection with adults. “I think they feel very accepted and very well liked...so I think they just feel close.” The adults provided an example of this connection with the youth in the program when one adult said, “I get graduation announcements from them all.” One of the other adults added, “I got a couple of graduation announcements too. That’s the only way that I know them, is through this program.” The youth also alluded to a connection with the adults in the program when one youth said, “You know the adults in the program a lot more than you do [adults outside]...it’s easier to tell them more.” Another youth expanded on this idea by explaining that the adults in the program provided guidance to the youth whereas many adults outside the program were more prone to criticize them. The youth’s connection with the adults in the program was also made apparent when a youth said, “We will a lot of times go to adults for problems and stuff.” Another youth expanded on this saying, “We pretty much tell [the after-school coordinator] everything.” Although this quote provides an example of the connection between the youth and adults in the program it needs to be placed into context. It is likely that the youth who made this comment was exaggerating some. It is unlikely that the youth tell the after-school coordinator absolutely everything. Within the context of the focus group this comment was related to the comment of another youth who suggested that the youth feel more comfortable around the adults in the after-school program than they do adults outside the program. Placed within this context I would suggest that the youth actually meant that youth in the

program reveal more to the after-school program coordinator than they would to adults outside the program.

### *Cross-setting Comparison*

A common theme that emerged across sites was that youth and adults in the program had a good or comfortable relationship with one another. The adults felt comfortable with each teen and the teens also felt comfortable interacting with the adults. Youth across sites described the adults they worked with in after-school as being “fun”. Youth and adults in both sites also viewed that youth and adult interactions inside the program are similar to relationships between co-workers. The youth and adults in both programs also appeared to have made a connection as a result of their interactions within the program.

Although youth and adults across sites agreed that adults treat youth similarly to how they treat one another, the way youth described these interactions varied across site. Youth from Site A said they felt as though adults treated them like adults within the confines of the program. Although one youth from Site B mentioned this, the remainder of the youth described their relationship with adults by stating that the adults “lowered” themselves to meet the youth where they are rather than elevating the youth to adult status.

### *In what ways do the youth feel empowered by their involvement in the NCP program?*

Sensitizing concepts derived from the literature were used to identify youth empowerment within the program sites. Constructs such as youth leadership, youth voice, youth feel valued, youth are given opportunities to be involved, and adults have appropriate expectations for youth were used to conceptualize youth empowerment. The

principal theme recognized in relation to young people's feeling of empowerment was that youth who had spent the most time in the program, most commonly older youth, felt more empowered than their younger counterparts. This theme was present within sites, but was even stronger during cross-setting analysis. Youth and adults also identified similar constructs related to positive youth development and empowerment that youth gained with more time in the program. The construct that was identified by all five groups was responsibility. Confidence, another one of the "five C's" of positive youth development, was explicitly mentioned by four of the five focus groups.

#### *Constructs associated with youth empowerment*

Five constructs were selected from the research literature on youth empowerment and used as sensitizing concepts to guide analysis. The five constructs selected were *youth voice*, *youth feel valued*, *youth are given opportunities to be involved*, *adults set appropriate expectations for young people*, and *youth leadership*. *Youth voice* appeared across program sites whereas *youth feel valued* and *youth are given opportunities to be involved* emerged as sub themes within Site A and *adults set appropriate expectations for young people* and *youth leadership* appeared as sub themes within Site B.

#### *Site A.*

Constructs often associated with youth empowerment such as *youth voice*, *youth feel valued*, and *youth are given opportunities to be involved* were found to be present in the after-school program at Site A. The teens perceived that they are valued by the adults in the program. For example, one youth said "[the adults] definitely care about what we think." This youth also addressed the issue of youth input or voice in the program by asserting "we have some say." One of the juniors in the group expanded by saying that

the amount of input youth have in the program is dependant upon the aspect of the program. She explained that “it really depends. Like at homework time a lot of us are basically on our own with our own group of kids and so at homework time I’d say we have a lot of say, and then [CATCH] we have a lot of say cuz we’re the ones teaching the games.” One of the experienced seniors further explained that “I have a lot of input in classes.” She went on to explain that while enrichment classes are usually taught by a teen and adult together “I have been by myself for awhile and I get to choose what I want to teach...So I feel like I have a lot of input around the after-school program.” The same senior spoke of the opportunities she has been given based on her experience in the program. “I think that a lot of opportunities would have passed me by” if she had not participated in the program. The freshman in the group, added, “We have a lot of opportunities to do stuff outside of the after-school program.” A senior expanded further by providing examples of these opportunities such as CYFAR and Walk Kansas saying, “We get to go to a lot of things that other kids don’t get to.” One of the juniors continued by sharing her experience attending and presenting at the national CYFAR (Children, Youth, and Families at Risk) conference in Chicago.

*Site B.*

Constructs that the youth development literature associates with youth empowerment that emerged in Site B include *youth leadership, youth voice, and adults set appropriate expectations for youth*. Youth leadership emerged as a common theme identified by both the teens and adults within this program site. One teen declared, “We are a leader in [the after-school program] and leader out of [the after-school program].” Another teen revealed that the expectations the adults have for the teens contribute to the

teens developing leadership. “They expect us to try and deal with [issues] as much as we can that way they don’t want us going to them for everything since they want to teach us leadership.” The adults echoed this focus on developing leadership skills in the teens. When asked what skills the teens had acquired during their time in the program, one adult answered, “management, leadership, organization.” Another adult replied, “the way they give direction and manage their groups.” The adults identified the development of leadership skills as a goal of youth’s participation in the program. One adult attributed the development of leadership to their experience leading “littles” in games and activities. He said, “They’ve had to get up in front of a group of kids...and tell them how to pick up jump ropes around a cone.”

The concept of youth voice also appeared in discussion with both youth and adults. A teen addressed the idea of youth voice when asked what they hoped to take away from their experience in the program. She said, “knowing that your ideas can really make a difference if people are willing to listen to you.” It seems that she is saying that teens can make a difference if adults are willing to listen. One of the adults also identified the importance of giving young people a voice as he described his experience within the 4H program. “Dealing with a lot of 4H kids you get a lot of parents that do a lot of speaking for the kids so you don’t hear a lot of the kids’ opinions...if you give [teens] an idea of what we want to do the kids could probably achieve it if you just let them voice their opinion.”

Expectations for youth were another theme that emerged strongly among the adults and was also mentioned by the youth. The after-school coordinator explained that “our expectations, during the interview, the process, we usually say this is what you’re

expected to do.” She said, “We try to set a level of expectation when we have a new [youth] coming in. That’s just something right up front that we let them know. ‘Hey, the kids will follow you and listen to you’...So its just an expectation that we set for them.” She continued saying that their expectations of the youth are “pretty high.” One of the youth expanded on what the adults expectations of the youth are when he said, “They expect us to actually lead, try and handle as much as we can until...we can’t handle it.” When asked to describe how adults’ expectations of them differ within the program and outside the program one youth responded, “[The after-school adults] give us like a little bit more freedom that what our parents probably would.” The youth later explain that this additional freedom is balanced with additional responsibility.

#### *Empowerment by amount of time in the program*

A primary theme in relation to young people’s feelings of empowerment that surfaced was that teens who had more experience in the program felt more empowered. More experience within the program was conceptualized by length of time spent in the program rather than by age. Although this theme was present within Site A, it was much stronger during across site comparison.

#### *Site A.*

The youth who were older and more experienced with the program appeared to feel more empowered than their counterparts. The older more experienced youth spoke more throughout the focus group and also were the ones to state they felt their input was highly valued by the adults. When asked how much ownership or input they have in the program one of the experienced seniors responded, “I feel like it’s more by person. Like I am a really leadership type so I feel like I have a lot of say but you can have as much or

as little as you want.” This idea may be supported in that there was one youth, a junior, who seemed to have a different and almost opposite experience than the rest of the youth present at the focus group. The idea that youth with more experience in the program feel more empowered is also evidenced by a counter-example. One youth, a senior who had only been a part of the program for a month at the time said, “since I just started working here I have some say but probably not as much as others.”

### *Responsibility and confidence*

Two other concepts related to youth empowerment, responsibility and confidence, appeared as strong themes across sites. Responsibility was mentioned by participants in all five focus groups; it appeared as the only concept that was common among all groups. *Confidence*, another of the “five C’s” of positive youth development, was the second most commonly referred to concept. Four of the five focus groups acknowledged the development of confidence (positive self-regard, a sense of self-efficacy) within the teen leaders.

#### *Site A.*

When asked to describe ways the youth had grown or changed during their participation in the program, adults in both groups spoke about responsibility. An after-school adult said, “Oh, so responsible.” Another adult listed attributes the teens had gained and “responsibilities” was at the top of the list. A change team adult also identified this when she said, “I think they’ve become more responsible.” Later the same adult shared that when the teens have not followed through on something during committee reports at the change team meetings, she senses “more of a sense of guilt, disappointment” from the youth. It seems they recognize that it was their responsibility

and they neglected it. One of the youth confirmed this when she said, “I think [my mom] views me as...having more responsibility and taking responsibility if I do something wrong or mess up something.” One of the seniors described this additional responsibility when she said, “I have more responsibility I feel. Or I’ve taken more. I think that being responsible means more to me than what it was before.”

Confidence, one of the “five C’s” of positive youth development, was another strong theme that was explicitly mentioned by both adult groups and teens. When asked to expand on some ways that they had seen growth in the teens as a result of participating in the program, one of the after-school adults answered, “self-confidence...the confidence is there.” Later in the focus group one of the other after-school adults made a link between the acceptance the youth feel in the program and confidence when she said, “They feel accepted...so that gives them confidence.” Confidence was a strong theme mentioned by the change team adults as well. “I think confidence is something I’ve seen the most growth in for the teens, especially the ones that I’ve seen start from eighth grade and go through. The confidence to be able to stand up and lead an activity.” Another change team adult gave an example of one of the youth who presented at the CYFAR conference in Chicago. When she first joined the program would not have been confident enough to get up in front of that many people and present but did a fabulous job. Another adult on the change team went on to discuss how the confidence the teens have gained as a result of participating in the program could help them achieve their goals. “They see they can do things that they didn’t think they could but with a little bit of help along the way, now they are doing it.”

*Site B.*

When asked how they had changed as a result of participating in the program, one youth replied, “I have gotten more responsible.” Another youth expanded on how the responsibility was developed: “You have to watch for the [littles], you have to be responsible and make sure you have games planned, so yeah it makes you more responsible. Because you have a lot to worry about and if you don’t have it then nobody else does.” The adults echoed this sentiment by saying, “[The youth] are responsible for planning their games, and getting their equipment and problem solving.” When the adults were asked how they saw expectations of the teens differing within the program and outside of the program, one replied, “[outside the program] they don’t have to be responsible.” Another adult added, “and some don’t have to be accountable to anything.” Ultimately the adults hope that youth who participate in the program develop “some responsibility” as a result of their participation.

Youth empowerment sometimes manifests itself in confidence. The adults noticed that quite a few youth had gained confidence throughout their time in the program. The after-school coordinator gave an example of one youth:

When [she] started she was anti-social, she was shy, she didn’t hardly speak to anybody, and when we were at that conference she was the leader of our group...she wanted to be the spokesperson of our group and she was in charge. She has really, she used to kind of stand back and let everybody else do it because she didn’t feel confident enough to just do it herself but she has really come full circle.

The other adult who works in the after-school program added, “There is quite a few of them that have done that.” The development of confidence and therefore the ability to step in and take on leadership roles appeared as a theme within Site B.

#### *Cross-setting Comparison*

Youth empowerment constructs that were derived from the literature and used as sensitizing concepts were present in both program sites. Constructs such as youth leadership, youth voice, youth feel valued, youth are given opportunities to be involved and adults have appropriate expectations for youth were used to conceptualize youth empowerment and found to be present in the program sites. Three of these constructs, youth voice, youth feel valued, and youth are given opportunities to be involved, were present in Site A. Three youth empowerment constructs also appeared as themes within Site B, youth leadership, youth voice, and adults set appropriate expectations for youth. The only youth empowerment construct that appeared in both program sites was youth voice.

Youth who had been involved in the program longest appeared to be more empowered than their younger counterparts. This theme was found to be strongest across settings. In general, the youth from Site A were older and therefore have more experience within the program than the youth from Site B. The youth from Site A also seemed to be more articulate and more confident in voicing their opinions than the youth from Site B.

Two other concepts which appeared in both program sites were responsibility and confidence. Responsibility was explicitly mentioned by both youth and adults in all five focus groups. Confidence was either explicitly mentioned or alluded to by four of the

five focus groups. The youth from Site B were the only group that did not refer to confidence during their focus group.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The results of this analysis confirmed much of the research literature regarding both youth-adult relationships and also youth empowerment. Discussion focuses on themes that emerged from the data within the context of the research literature. Empowerment is understood as a balance between freedoms and responsibilities; participant responses provided some interesting considerations of this balance. Differences that emerged between the sites were explored. Five sensitizing concepts related to youth empowerment were selected from the literature and are compared against the findings of this study. Adult roles in youth empowerment also are assessed and compared against the six interrelated dimensions of adult roles identified by Hilfinger Messias, Fore, McLoughlin and Parra-Medina (2005). The link between strong relationships and youth empowerment also are considered. Finally a strong theme regarding the length of time young people were involved in the program and their feeling of empowerment is discussed. Implications of this study are discussed and findings put into the context of the limitations and unique contributions of this study.

### *Empowerment as Freedoms and Responsibilities*

Empowerment is seen as the gradual increase in freedoms and responsibilities that young people should acquire as they mature (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Moody, Childs, & Sepples, 2003). It is important to consider that empowerment requires a balance between freedoms and responsibilities. In other words, freedom without responsibility or responsibility without freedom may not result in empowerment. Surprisingly freedom was mentioned during the focus groups only once, by the teens from Site B, while

responsibility was explicitly mentioned by all three adult groups and both groups of young people.

The teens from Site B mentioned freedom in reference to how expectations of adults in the program differ from those of adults outside the program. This may imply that adults within the program have higher expectations of the teens and give them more responsibility than do other adults. Higher expectations and more responsibility then require that the young people are given greater freedom in order to meet those expectations and responsibilities. It is likely that the context of the program site as well as the program design also contributed to teens from Site B mentioning freedom during their focused group interview whereas the teens from Site A did not. Recall from the description of the sites previously given that Site A had a pre-existing after-school program and is therefore a more developed and structured program. Because Site B is a newer program, it inherently is less structured providing more freedom for the teens in the program. Another component of the after-school design that likely impacted young people's feeling of freedom within the program was the number of adults employed in after-school at each site. (Site B employed two adults where Site A employed at least six.) Youth at Site A were constantly accompanied by adults during the after-school program whereas the youth from Site B were not. This very basic difference in program design could lead the youth at Site B to mention additional freedom than the youth from Site A.

Responsibility was mentioned by all five groups. The teens spoke of attaining a sense of responsibility. Adults also referred to the young people's development of responsibility. The focus on responsibility rather than freedom may imply that

responsibility is the key component of empowerment. The strength of responsibility as a theme across program sites and focus groups may indicate that responsibility is the central construct necessary for an adolescent to develop a sense of empowerment. Freedom appearing as a weak theme in this study may suggest that while freedom is beneficial toward facilitating the empowerment process it is not as essential as developing in teens a sense of responsibility. Future research should consider the association between freedom and responsibility in relation to empowerment.

#### *Developmental Stages and Youth Empowerment*

It is vital to consider youth empowerment within the context of the developmental stages of adolescence. Each adolescent has different needs, unique developmental tasks to perform, and is in a different stage of development (Jurich, 1979). Jurich outlined four stages of adolescent development that may provide some insight into youth empowerment within the context of development. The four stages of adolescence include preadolescence (age 10-13), early adolescence (junior high), middle adolescence (age 15-17), and late adolescence (completion of high school). Within this study early and middle adolescence are the stages that best represent the developmental stages of the youth participants. Although Jurich's work with adolescent development was in relation to parents, much of what he asserted can be applied to teenagers' relationships with non-familial adults as well. During the early adolescence stage, young people begin to think more abstractly and develop hypothetical ideas. Adolescents reach a level of intellectual understanding in which they are no longer satisfied with accepting an "order" from adults; instead they want a logical explanation for adults' demands. This was exhibited within program Site A when youth and adults addressed the same issues from different

perspectives. The teens felt that some rules and consequences were applied unequally to youth and adults in the program, often favoring the adults. The adults in the program did not do an adequate job articulating the reasons behind the rules set in the program. As a result, the teens felt the rules or demands were not adequate or unjust.

A number of the older more experienced youth from Site A spoke of becoming more comfortable with themselves as a result of participating in the program. Although this may indicate an increase in self-confidence and the development of empowerment, it may also be representative of the developmental stage the adolescents are in. According to Jurich (1979), middle adolescents leave behind the cult of conformity imposed by their peer group and start to become their own persons. It may be this maturation process that contributed most strongly to the teens' acceptance of themselves. In other words, teens in the program felt better about themselves and accepted who they are as a result of their progression through developmental stages rather than as a result of their experience in the program. I would suspect that it was a combination of these forces that contributed to the young people's sense of self-acceptance. It would be inaccurate to associate the teens' gains in self-confidence to feeling empowered without first considering their progression through developmental stages. This is why it is so important to consider the acquisition of constructs such as empowerment within the context of developmental stages.

#### *Double Standard vs Misunderstanding*

The youth and adults within program Site A addressed some of the same issues during their focus groups but from different perspectives. The youth felt that some of the rules were applied unequally to youth and adults within the program site. The teens felt that they received harsher punishment and more severe questioning than adults for being

late to after-school, calling in sick, or using their cell phones during the after-school program. Some of these issues may be misunderstandings between the youth and adults in the program, whereas other issues may be double standard. According to Merriam-Webster (misunderstanding, 2008), a misunderstanding is “a failure to understand.” In cases where a misunderstanding occurred, it is likely because the adults did not take the time to explain the reason for the difference so that the teens have an understanding. A double standard is defined as “a set of principles that applies differently and usually more rigorously to one group of people or circumstances than to another” (double standard, 2008). A double standard occurs when adults apply the established principles differently (more strictly) for the teens based on their status as adolescents.

It is possible that the issue of cell phone use during after-school is an issue of misunderstanding between youth and adults. It may be that when youth are allowed to carry their cell phones at the after-school program they become distracted by text messages and are less attentive to the “littles.” One of the teens even mentioned that she does not bring her cell phone into after-school because she is too tempted to send and receive text messages when she does. It is likely the adults are allowed to carry their cell phones in the case of an emergency at the after-school program or to be accessible to their families. However, if adults begin to abuse their use of cell phones during after-school (for example, using them for personal reasons) this becomes an issue of a double standard between youth and adults in the program site.

Young people in this program site felt that they got in more trouble than adults when they called in sick at the last minute or were late to the after-school program. This would appear to imply that when adults call in at the last minute or are late to the

program they are automatically assumed to have a valid reason. Whereas when the teens do so, it is assumed that their reasons are because of irresponsibility or laziness. This seems to be a double standard between the youth and adults in the program.

The teens also revealed that they are questioned more than adults when they need to miss a day of the after-school program. If a teen will be gone for the after-school program they get questioned about why they are missing and where they will be. When adults need a day off they are simply given the day off with very little question. This seems to be a double standard between the young people and adults. It would seem that the teens are questioned to determine the validity of their excuses for being gone. The Director of the After-school Program revealed that in the past teens would call in to after-school saying they “wanted to get a new puppy.” According to adult standards, that is not a valid excuse for missing work; however, for teens getting a new puppy may be just as important as an adult who needs to miss after-school to stay home with a sick child. These considerations need to be made in order to avoid having a double standard for youth and adults in the program.

In situations where misunderstandings occur between youth and adults in the program site, it would be useful for adults to explain why different rules are in place for the youth and adults in the site. If the rules are truly just and appropriate the teens will likely accept the rules. However, in situations where a double standard exists between youth and adults in the program, adults should consider whether the standards they currently have for the teens in the program is developmentally appropriate.

### *Differences between Sites*

Of the five youth empowerment constructs identified and used as sensitizing concepts, only three appeared in each site. The only construct that appeared across sites was *youth voice*. This provides some verification for the presence and importance of this construct. The construct, *youth are given opportunities to be involved*, was strongest within Site A. However, the inherent nature of the after-school program provides young people with opportunities to be involved both inside and outside of the after-school program. Young people at Site A had a wider variety of opportunities to be involved within the program than did the young people at Site B. Within Site A youth had the opportunity to develop and lead enrichment classes and also had opportunities to serve on committees with the change team adults. This gave the youth additional opportunities to be involved in projects that extended into their communities. Because the youth at Site B lead only CATCH and SPARK activities and did not have an opportunity to serve on a change team it is likely they did not mention opportunities to be involved because they did not have additional opportunities within and outside the after-school program.

Another empowerment construct, *youth feel valued by adults*, also appeared as a theme in Site A but not in Site B. This is likely a result of program design differences between the two program sites. I would expect that the young people at Site B inherently know how valuable they are to the program because without the youth the after-school program could not exist; whereas the adults at Site A could probably continue the program without the youths' participation. It is important that the youth in Site A feel valued in their positions because if they did not it is probable that they would leave the program. It is possible that the teens from Site B feel valued by adults but in such an

intrinsic way that it did not occur to them to mention this during the focus groups. It is not uncommon for individuals to overlook items that are central to their experiences because they are so involved in their situation that it is difficult to recognize all aspects that contribute to that experience.

*Youth leadership* was a theme that appeared only in Site B. However, the nature of the program requires youth leadership at its very core. The teens in the after-school program are responsible for leading “littles” through games and activities. So, although it was not explicitly mentioned by the participants from Site A, it is a fundamental aspect of the after-school program. With that being said, it is likely that the youth in Site B felt a stronger sense of youth leadership within the program site because this site employs fewer adults. Because there are fewer adults to defer to, the young people in this program site must take responsibility themselves to lead the “littles.” The young people in the program must take on a strong leadership role in order to maintain control and stability within the program. Fewer adults to rely on likely leads to a stronger feeling of youth leadership within the after-school program at Site B.

The final theme that appeared within Site B was adults *set high expectations for youth*. I believe this theme found in Site B but not in Site A is also a result of the difference between the two program designs. Because there are fewer adults to supervise at this site, the adults in the program must rely more on the youth and therefore have higher expectations of them. It is not that adults at Site A do not have high expectations of the youth from that program site, but that those expectations are not as necessary for the program to be a success

### *Constructs Associated with Youth Empowerment*

The youth empowerment literature is besieged with constructs that are associated with developing a sense of empowerment in youth. Constructs such as *youth voice*, *youth feel valued*, *youth are given opportunities to be involved*, *adults have appropriate expectations for youth*, and *youth leadership* were used in this study as sensitizing concepts providing a conceptualization of youth empowerment. Each concept was identified in at least one of the program sites while youth voice appeared to be the central construct that appeared in both sites. Even though youth voice was the only construct identified in both sites, it is likely that the other constructs also existed in both sites but youth and adults within each site, either consciously or unconsciously, focused on specific aspects of the program.

Adults can contribute to youth empowerment by interceding in young people's lives to ensure that youth have a voice in decisions that affect them (Moody et al., 2003). When young people are given an opportunity to provide input into a program and when their ideas are heard and respected by adults, *youth are given a voice*. Because the adults in these program sites valued input the young people's input and listened to their ideas, the young people at these sites were empowered.

*Youth feel valued* was identified as a construct of empowerment because it is one of the empowerment assets. The asset is actually community values youth, which manifests in young people's perception that community adults value them. Benson, (1997) identified young people being valued and valuable as a key developmental need. Youth are valued when they are respected and given opportunities to contribute (Benson, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 1999). Therefore, youth feel valued and youth are given

opportunities to contribute are constructs that overlap some and both contribute to youth empowerment.

When *young people are given opportunities to be involved* and are given useful roles in the community they are treated as resources (Scales & Leffert, 1999; Search Institute, 2006). Youth as resources is yet another empowerment asset. Youth are treated as resources to be developed when they are given an opportunity to make a difference in the world and are given opportunities to discover their strengths (Benson, 1997; Scales & Leffert, 1999).

*Adults have appropriate expectations for youth* is yet another construct that is associated with youth empowerment in the research literature. The external assets, within the Search Institute's framework, provide insight into how the relationships and opportunities adults provide, such as boundaries and expectations, contribute to youth empowerment (Moody, Childs & Sepples, 2003; Scales & Leffert, 1999). The Search Institute (2006) maintains that young people need clear rules and consistent consequences for breaking rules. Two specific assets within this external asset type, *adult role models* and *high expectations*, appeared as strong themes within the Site B after-school program. Adults serve as role models when they model positive, responsible behavior (Search Institute). According to the Search Institute, high expectations are exhibited when adults encourage young people to do well. Based on the responses from the youth and adults, it appears that youth in the after-school program at Site B were empowered as a result of the expectations that the adults in the program had in place.

Providing service to others gives youth opportunities to be actively involved in their communities (Benson, 1997). When youth take action to improve their contexts,

their efforts are empowering. However, simply giving youth opportunities to be involved in their communities is not enough. Young people should be engaged in all phases of planning and leadership in order to increase the odds of positive impact (Benson, Scales, Hamilton & Sesma, 2006). This is where the final construct, *youth leadership*, was derived from the research literature.

It is important to consider that these constructs are all contingent upon adults in the community validating the important role that they serve in empowering young people. In many ways, adults are the gatekeepers to youth empowerment. It is up to adults, who are more socially powerful, to concede some of their power to young people. Adults may do this by giving youth opportunities to be involved and develop leadership skills, setting high expectations for them, valuing young people and allowing them to have a voice in decisions that affect them. However, adults must be both willing and capable of doing these things. Some adults, although willing to empower youth, are unsure how to do so.

#### *Adult Roles in Youth Empowerment*

Various authors have identified the presence of caring, non-familial adults, as a key component of youth development (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson & Ward, 2003; Hilfinger Messias, Fore, McLoughlin & Parra-Medina, 2005). However, operationalized definitions of what constitutes a caring adult involvement in relation to the processes and outcomes of empowerment are necessary to be able to facilitate empowerment in young people (Hilfinger Messias, Fore, McLoughlin & Parra-Medina, 2005). Hilfinger Messias and colleagues conducted a study to identify the roles of adult leaders in youth empowerment programs. They found that adult leaders in youth empowerment programs

are complex and multidimensional, but were able to identify six interrelated dimensions of adult roles.

The first role they identified was *putting youth first* which is demonstrated by adults' commitment to youth participation, ownership, and success in the programs (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2005). Adults in both program sites appeared to apply this philosophy or pragmatic dimension of adult leaders' role in youth empowerment. Adults in both program sites appeared to *put youth first* within the program.

The second role identified was that program leaders *raised the bar for youth performance* meaning they set and communicate high expectations for youth participating in the program (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2005). Adults do this when they expect youth to take responsibility for their own actions and for program activities and expect that youth develop and use their leadership skills. Again this adult role appeared in both program sites. The expectation that youth be responsible within the confines of the program has been well established. The teens in both sites are responsible for leading "littles" in games and activities which requires the development and use of leadership skills. The participants in Site B especially focused on the high expectations the adults have for the teens. Overall, adults within both programs appeared to *raise the bar for youth performance*.

The third role identified by Hilfinger Messias et al., (2005) was *creating the space and making things happen*. Often the responsibility for keeping the programs alive and thriving falls in large part to adults (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2005). This was acknowledged by one of the members of the Site A change team who acknowledged her role was to secure resources to sustain the program. Adults fulfill this role when they

“provided the space (physical, social, emotional, and creative) for youth to explore and try out new skills, build their personal and collective capacities, and experience success- or make mistakes- within a safe environment” (p. 327). Again the inherent nature of the NCP programs provided the teens an opportunity to explore and develop new skills and build personal and collective capacities. Both sites built collective capacities by encouraging youth to work in teams with a variety of their peers in the program. The adults in both programs *created space and made things happen*.

The fourth adult role identified was *being in relationships* (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2005). As they interacted with youth, adults listened, encouraged, and provided advice; served as role models; and gave directions, instructions and guidance. Again, adults at both program sites engaged in this type of relationship with the youth. Adults in the program sites *being in relationships* with teens was a primary theme of this study.

The fifth adult role that contributes to youth empowerment is *exerting influence, control, and authority* over program activities and participants, setting boundaries and monitoring youth behaviors and keeping youth on track (Hilfinger Messias et al., 2005). One of the after-school adults from Site B explained that she will step in and assist if one of the teens’ games are failing. This shows that while the youth are given leadership opportunities ultimately the adults have authority over the program activities and participants. This was also apparent in Site A as one teen described the process for teaching an enrichment class. Teens develop a plan for their class and submit it to the Director of the After-school program. She decides whether or not the enrichment class will be offered. Again, while the teens are given opportunities to lead, the adults have the ultimate influence and authority over the program.

The final adult role identified by Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005) was *communicating and connecting with the broader community*. Adults also play an important role in connecting and communicating with diverse audiences in the broader community. This role includes the concept behind the community change team which was to extend the work the youth are doing within the program out into the community. One of the change team adults from Site A suggested a possible collaboration between the after-school program and the program for careers at the high school explaining that high school students who were interested in becoming teachers could complete an internship with the after-school program to gain experience working with children. The adults in the program sites fulfill this role by organizing community-wide events that encourage other youth and adults in the community to connect with the after-school programs.

Based on the responses of the adults and youth in the program sites, it appears that the adults in both program sites fulfilled all six adult roles in community-based youth empowerment programs as identified by Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005). This verifies the six roles they identified and also provides additional support that youth in the program sites are empowered by their experiences with adults in the program. When the six adult roles identified by Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005) are conceptualized they include a myriad of constructs from the positive youth development literature. For example, putting youth first is conceptualized by youth participation, ownership and success in the program. Youth participation is well established as a principle of youth development and is a concept used in relation to empowerment and youth voice. Youth ownership and success in the program are also related to young people's feelings of empowerment. This

link between the six adult roles and concepts from the youth development and empowerment literature provide support for the important adults play in the youth empowerment process. As was shown in this study, adults must facilitate the development of empowerment in young people by allowing them to *voice their opinions, develop leadership, by making them feel valued, providing opportunities for them to be involved, and setting high expectations for youth.*

#### *Connection Between Relationships and Youth Empowerment*

Strong relationships can promote youth empowerment – youth become more confident, skilled, and connected, and find they have adult support to achieve their goals (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O’Conner, 2005, p.3). The findings of this study confirm this notion. The strong relationships that exist between youth and adults in the program sites resulted in youth becoming more confident and better connected. Confidence was either explicitly mentioned or alluded to in four of the five focus groups. Although youth at Site A did not use the word confidence, their stories and experiences confirmed that they had become more confident as a result of participating in the program. The youth also were able to connect with adults in the program. Another of the change team adults seemed to exemplify the importance of this connection for the teens when she said, “Some of [the teens] have had a positive experience, a connection with adults and maybe have a goal a little farther down the road because of their success.” Many of the teens and adults also shared stories of their experiences with one another that seemed to support the notion that the teens have built a connection with some of the adults in their community as a result of their experiences in this program.

The connections that youth formed during their time in the program exceeded that of relationships with adults. Although the focus of this study was on youth-adult relationships, an unexpected theme emerged, that of the relationships between the teens and “littles.” One of the adults from Site B noted that “[the teens] have just learned to connect.” She went on to explain ways in which the teens had connected with the “littles” they work with each day. The after-school adults at Site A also acknowledged the connections that formed between teens and “littles” when they spoke of each teen’s “niche” with certain kids and their ability to work with them. Teens and adults across sites also referred to young people as “role models” or “mentors” to the kids. This connection between the teens and “littles” appeared as a strong theme in this study. However, because this theme was outside the parameters of the research questions established for this current study, this data was not included in the results or analyzed. However, I believe this theme to be an important consideration that warrants further exploration into the link between young people serving as role models for “littles” and its impact on teen’s feelings of empowerment.

#### *Youth-Adult Relationships vs Youth Taking on Adult Roles*

The purpose of this study was to determine how youth-adult relationships influence youths’ feelings of empowerment. However, as the teens discussed ways in which their views of adults had changed as a result of participating in the program, a different theme emerged. Teens spoke of gaining a greater understanding of adults as a result of being in situations where they were in charge. As teens gained experience being the teacher or leader in the after-school program they began to understand and respect the roles adults fill inside and outside of the program. It seems that it was through this

opportunity to take on the role of an adult, rather than the relationships with adults, which allowed them to gain a new perspective of adults. However, adults must be willing to allow young people to fulfill these roles, meaning that in a fundamental way the relationships with adults contributed to this finding.

#### *Youth Empowerment and Length of Time Spent in the Program*

A theme that appeared across program sites was that length of time involved in the program affected the degree to which youth felt empowered. In general, youth who had been involved in the program longer felt more empowered than their counterparts. Length of time in the program appeared to be associated with the teens' age in that older teens had the potential to be involved in the program for a longer amount of time than younger teens. However, age was not a predictor of how long the teens had been involved in the program. Within Site A there was a freshman who had been involved in the program for four years while a senior had only been involved with the program for a month.

The young people from Site A, on average, had been working in the program for 2.7 years and had been involved in the program; including time spent volunteering before getting hired, for 4 years. The young people from Site B, on average, had been involved in the program for 1.7 years. The Site A teens had been involved in the program considerably longer than the teens from Site B. A quick review of the transcription from both focus groups reveals that youth at Site A provided detailed accounts and experiences while the youth from Site B gave short, brief answers. The teens from Site A seemed to have an easier time articulating how they had changed as a result of participating in the

program than the teens from the other site. The teens from Site A also either explicitly mentioned or alluded to empowerment constructs more often than did the Site B teens.

This theme also was verified within Site A. The two experienced seniors responded most often to questions during the focus group. This can be seen in the results section as a majority of the quotes used were from these two youth. One of the change team adults seemed to sustain this theme by saying, “I think confidence is something I’ve seen the most growth in for the teens, especially the ones that I’ve seen start from 8<sup>th</sup> grade and go through.” This data seems to support the idea that length of time in the program is a significant contributing factor to youth empowerment.

Length of time spent in the program appeared to be more significant to empowerment than was the teen’s age. This was evidenced by the freshman in Site A who had been involved in the program for four years appearing more empowered than the senior who, at the time, had only been involved in the program for a month and one of the juniors who had been involved in the program for three years. Although this provides some substantiation of the theme, it is likely that the natural development process also contributed to teens’ feelings of empowerment. As such, this theme may warrant more concerted focus, comparing length of time in the program with the teens’ ages and developmental stages, in another study to determine its validity.

### *Implications for Research*

Much of the literature regarding adult roles in youth empowerment has been completed in community-based youth empowerment programs. However, youth and adults work in conjunction with one another in community-based programs that are not specifically designed to promote youth empowerment. Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005)

said, “The quality and characteristics of intergenerational relations, communication and connections are of interest not only in the context of youth empowerment programs, but also in a multitude of other family and community health settings” (p. 336). This study confirmed that adults working with youth in community-based programs and contexts are capable of facilitating the development of empowerment within young people. As was first identified by Hilfinger Messias et al. (2005) and I will echo here, further study should seek to uncover perspectives of youth and adults who are not involved in such programs. Comparing these perspectives with those of youth and adults involved in community programs may provide some basis for generalization beyond the program sites studied.

Future research should consider the association present between freedom and responsibility in relation to empowerment. A quantitative study that measures the degree of freedom teens feel they have in the program, the amount of responsibility they are given, and that measure their feelings of empowerment would provide some insight into this relationship. Such a survey could also measure the teens’ perceptions of the degree of freedom and responsibility they are given as well as their feeling of empowerment in other contexts (such as at home, in school, etc). Not only would this provide more insight into the association between freedom and responsibility in regard to empowerment, but it would also provide some interesting data regarding empowerment in context. A quantitative study like this would illuminate youth empowerment in context. It would provide some insight into whether individual’s feelings of empowerment extend across contexts or whether it is specific to the context in which it was developed.

The youth development research literature has clearly established the impact relationships with adults have on youth development. However, there is little research on how having relationships with young people impacts adults. This study confirmed that adults changed their attitudes and beliefs about youth as a result of having relationships with young people in the program sites. Further research should explore other ways relationships with young people impact adults. Such studies also may explore how adults' relationships with young people affect family, community, and cultural values of young people.

The Search Institute's assertion that strong relationships are key to positive youth development appears to be supported by this study. "Strong relationships between adults and young people, young people and their peers, and teenagers and children are central to asset building" (Search Institute, 2006, p. 8). It is widely acknowledged in the youth development literature that relationships between young people and adults are of utmost importance to youth development. The importance of peers is also well established in the youth development literature. However, less often noted is the importance of young people building relationships with children. It is not known, based on this study, how the young people's role as mentors and role models for the "littles" influenced their feeling of empowerment. Is it important to have adults role modeling for teens as they are role modeling for younger children? Can young people become empowered only by fulfilling a role where they mentor "littles" or is the feeling of youth empowerment stronger when both relationships are present? These are important considerations which warrant additional exploration into the connection between relationships and youth empowerment; and more specifically the link between teens as mentors to "littles."

Yet another potential implication for future research would be to consider the more recently developed sixth C of positive youth development. The original 5 C's of positive youth development were used in this study because of their association Richard Lerner; however, recently a sixth C, contribution, has been added to this list. Contribution is characterized by young people's development into adulthood and the contributions they make as such. Assessment of contribution would require a longitudinal study where the young people are followed into adulthood and their contributions evaluated. The goal of positive youth development is that all youth thrive. Youth who thrive then are expected to become adults who contribute. Therefore, measuring the degree to which individuals who participated in this program contribute as adults may provide some support for the other "five C's" of positive youth development.

Implications for replication of this study would be to include a pilot study. Piloting the focus group questions would have allowed me to reassess and make necessary changes to my questions before beginning the study. This can be especially useful when working with adolescents, because it allows the researcher to ensure that questions are worded in such a way that young people understand what is being asked and therefore provide information that the researcher is interested in. I also would have liked to include observational data which may be useful in confirming the responses of the participants. Observation also provides data from another source, the researcher, and may contribute to triangulation which will strengthen the study. A final suggestion for replication of this study would be to complete individual interviews in addition to the focused groups. Participants may respond differently during individual interviews than

they would in focus group interviews. This would provide an opportunity for younger youth and participants with different perspectives to share their experiences.

Other research implications for this study would be to complete a quantitative and/or mixed methods approach. An option for a quantitative study would be to complete a quick survey about ownership distributed to all participants. Participants may be given a survey with a 100 point scale that has adults on one side and youth on the other and asked to identify where along the continuum ownership in the program lies. Ownership of specific aspects of the program could be assessed. Ownership could also be assessed by each individual's feeling of ownership in comparison to the youth/adult ownership in the program as a whole. Another potential item may assess where participants would ideally like the youth and adult ownership to lie. Using a quick survey tool like this would allow for more participants to contribute. Youth who may not be working within the after-school program during the time the survey is distributed may be more inclined to complete a quick survey where they would not have the time to participate in a focus group. This study could easily become a mixed methods study by including a quantitative tool. The continuum of youth-adult relationship model (Jones & Perkins, 2005), which "includes five key categories to identify groups consisting of varied levels of youth and adult involvement" (Jones & Perkins, 2006, p. 94), could be used to examine the youth-adult relationship present within community sites. This could then be compared to the qualitative data obtained through focus groups to determine if the type of youth-adult relationship present in the site has any impact on youths' feeling of empowerment.

### *Implications for Practice*

The double standard which seemed to be present between the expectations for youth and adults in Site A provides insight into an important implication for practice. Adults should set an appropriate level of expectation for “responsible” teens. Too often adults set expectations for young people based on adult standards. Developmentally this is not appropriate for the young people they are working with. Teens are not yet adults and, therefore, should not be expected to act like adults. Adults should consider where teens are developmentally and provide young people with an appropriate level of expectations accordingly. Not doing so will result in a double standard for teens and adults in the program, which may result in teens who are dissatisfied with the program. Teens who are dissatisfied may cause disruptions in the program or decide to leave the program all together.

While it is inappropriate to set adult standards for youth, it is also important to establish high expectations for young people. Young people grow when they are given opportunities to face and overcome challenges. Adults in community-based youth programs should attempt to provide such opportunities for teens. This will likely require that adults be sensitive to and aware of the strengths and weaknesses of individual teens. What is an appropriate challenge for one youth may be inappropriate for another. Therefore, building relationships with youth and really knowing them is an important aspect of setting appropriate expectations.

Another important implication for practice that is derived from this study is the importance of adults encouraging youth to take on leadership roles within community-based programs. Adults should give young people a safe environment to develop

leadership skills. This means providing them with developmentally appropriate challenges and giving them opportunities to learn from experiencing successes and failures. This process becomes difficult to facilitate in a highly structured program where adults are more concerned about failures than on providing young people with learning experiences.

#### *Limitations and Unique Contributions of the Study*

The limitations of this study were primarily a result of the limitations of any qualitative design. Its sample population was small, only 13 youth and 14 adults were involved in this study. The participants of this study also comprised a very homogenous sample. Primarily all the participants were Caucasian, all were from rural Kansas communities, and only two males were involved. As such, the experiences of the youth and adults in these programs do not represent the experiences of all youth and adults working together in community-based programs. However, they do provide support for previous research done on adult roles in youth empowerment programs.

Utilizing the constructionist perspective also limited the generalization of this research. Because this perspective does not acknowledge one single truth or one reality, it is difficult to generalize beyond the environments in which the research takes place. A difference among participant perspectives was also challenging. One youth in particular had experiences different from the rest of the youth. The constructionist perspective maintains that all realities are equally valuable so it is difficult to determine the truth, because there is not a truth. However, for the purpose of my study, these limitations are acceptable because the primary strength of the constructionist perspective, validating and recognizing all perspectives as valuable, allowed me to give a voice to youth whose

perspectives are typically overlooked or ignored by adults. Although this study cannot be generalized to all youth-adult relationships, it will contribute to our understanding of the impact youth-adult relationships may have on youth empowerment.

Another drawback in this study occurred during data collection. During the focus group with the after-school adults from Site A both the digital voice recorders ran out of storage space for the digital files and shut off prematurely. The researcher attempted to prevent this from happening by taking two digital voice recorders but to no avail.

Fortunately, only answers to the final question asked to the Site A after-school adults were not recorded. This resulted as a loss of some of the data. Although the content recorder continued to take notes, the notes were not direct quotations and were, therefore, subject to the content recorder's interpretation of what was said. As such this data was not included in the results or discussion sections of this paper. However, this data was obtained from Site A adults during the focus group with the change team still providing data from both youth and adults in this community.

Another potential limitation of the study is the potential for participants to be affected by social desirability during the focus groups. Although focus groups may empower youth by giving them confidence and facilitating a sense of camaraderie, it may also be disempowering to youth who have different experiences. Young people who have different perspectives than their peers may decline sharing these differences in favor of providing socially desirable responses that align with the responses of other participants. Because peers become increasingly important to the early adolescent (Jurich, 1979), the younger youth in the group may choose to conform to the answers of the older teens in their peer group. In this way, focus groups also may be disempowering

to younger youth as they may choose to defer to the perspectives of the older youth in an attempt to maintain social desirability.

The inherent design of the after-school programs provided another limitation. Because the after-school programs allow the teens to work seasonally it was only possible to assess the perceptions of the youth who were working in the programs at the time the focus groups were completed. Although the perspectives of the youth who would have been present at the sites were captured it was not possible to capture the perspectives of the young people who participated in the programs during the other seasons of the year. Therefore, the perspectives of all youth who participated in the program in the past year were not assessed.

An additional shortcoming of this study is that no member checks were completed. Because interpretations of the participants' experiences were not returned to the participants to assess their accuracy, it is possible researcher bias occurred. By offering the participants the opportunity to challenge inaccurate descriptions and further explain their responses, member checks provide the researcher and readers an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the descriptions.

An advantage of the study is that it included "at-risk" youth, defined by one of the change team adults from Site A as "possibly a single parent, or a brother or sister didn't finish high school, or someone that the school was concerned about." In general, at-risk youth are young people who would not likely be empowered by their circumstances, providing some verification that the teens in this study were not empowered by situations outside of the program. This substantiates that the young people's experiences with adults in the program contributed to their feeling of empowerment.

A strength of this study was its use of both site and source triangulation. Use of a cross-setting comparison between two program sites provided confirmation for many of the themes identified. The sites were a part of the same program with the same goal but had different designs and were therefore implemented differently. It was clear that variation existed across program contexts, structures, and adult leaders. Finding similar themes across program sites that took place in different communities and were operated differently provides additional verification that the themes identified are valid. The study also used source triangulation by assessing the perspectives of both youth and adults within the program sites. Triangulating the responses of youth and adults provided verification for the themes found within and among sites.

A final unique contribution of this study was its inclusion of youth perspectives. Too often in the research literature youth development is assessed only through the perspectives of the adults who work with them. However, this leaves out an important consideration, the young people's experience. By assessing both youth and adult perspectives in this study, it was possible to corroborate themes by comparing the responses of the youth and adults within site against one another.

In summary, the present study's results must be considered within the limitations presented. Issues related to the small sample size, data collection, and researcher bias requires that interpretations be made with caution. However, despite its limitations, the present study confirmed current research and provided insight into a number of directions interested scholars could pursue in future research. Furthermore the study began to uncover links between youth and adult relationships, youth empowerment, and positive youth development.

### *Conclusion*

This study has confirmed that adults can and indeed do facilitate youth empowerment in community-based programs that do not identify empowerment as a goal of the program. Although the findings in this study cannot necessarily be generalized to all youth-adult relationships it does provide some additional confirmation for the adult roles in youth empowerment already established in the literature. It also provides some implications, which if explored further, may strengthen the research literature on the relationships between young people and children and could possibly add to the research literature on youth empowerment. As an advocate for positive youth development I have always seen the important role adults play in young people's lives. While this study strengthened this belief, it also reverberated in my mind that positive youth development is complex and a variety of components contribute to the outcome of healthy, productive youth. Youth-adult relationships are only one pathway to positive youth development and it is important to continue considering other components that contribute to the positive development of youth.

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# APPENDIX A

## **40 Developmental Assets® for Adolescents (ages 12-18)**

Search Institute® has identified the following building blocks of healthy development—known as **Developmental Assets®**—that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.

### External Assets

Support	<b>1. Family support</b> —Family life provides high levels of love and support
	<b>2. Positive family communication</b> —Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents.
	<b>3. Other adult relationships</b> —Young person receives support from three or more nonparent adults.
	<b>4. Caring neighborhood</b> —Young person experiences caring neighbors.
	<b>5. Caring school climate</b> —School provides a caring, encouraging environment.
	<b>6. Parent involvement in schooling</b> —Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
Empowerment	<b>7. Community values youth</b> —Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth.
	<b>8. Youth as resources</b> —Young people are given useful roles in the community.
	<b>9. Service to others</b> —Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week.
	<b>10. Safety</b> —Young person feels safe at home, school, and in the neighborhood.
Expectations & Boundaries	<b>11. Family boundaries</b> —Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.
	<b>12. School Boundaries</b> —School provides clear rules and consequences.
	<b>13. Neighborhood boundaries</b> —Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.
	<b>14. Adult role models</b> —Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
	<b>15. Positive peer influence</b> —Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.
Constructive Us of Time	<b>16. High expectations</b> —Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.
	<b>17. Creative activities</b> —Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theater, or other arts.
	<b>18. Youth programs</b> —Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
	<b>19. Religious community</b> —Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
	<b>20. Time at home</b> —Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.

## Internal Assets

Commitment to Learning	<b>21. Achievement Motivation</b> —Young person is motivated to do well in school.
	<b>22. School Engagement</b> —Young person is actively engaged in learning.
	<b>23. Homework</b> —Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every school day.
	<b>24. Bonding to school</b> —Young person cares about her or his school.
	<b>25. Reading for Pleasure</b> —Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.
Positive Values	<b>26. Caring</b> —Young person places high value on helping other people.
	<b>27. Equality and social justice</b> —Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.
	<b>28. Integrity</b> —Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.
	<b>29. Honesty</b> —Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”
	<b>30. Responsibility</b> —Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.
	<b>31. Restraint</b> —Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.
Social Competencies	<b>32. Planning and decision making</b> —Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.
	<b>33. Interpersonal Competence</b> —Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.
	<b>34. Cultural Competence</b> —Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.
	<b>35. Resistance skills</b> —Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.
	<b>36. Peaceful conflict resolution</b> —Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.
Positive Identity	<b>37. Personal power</b> —Young person feels he or she has control over “things that happen to me.”
	<b>38. Self-esteem</b> —Young person reports having a high self-esteem.
	<b>39. Sense of purpose</b> —Young person reports that “my life has a purpose.”
	<b>40. Positive view of personal future</b> —Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

**APPENDIX B**  
**FEATURES OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL SETTINGS**

<i>Descriptors</i>	<i>Opposite Poles</i>	
Physical and Psychological Safety	Safe and health-promoting facilities; and practices that increase safe peer group interaction and decrease unsafe or confrontational peer interactions.	Physical and health dangers; fear; feeling of insecurity; sexual and physical harassment; and verbal abuse.
Appropriate Structure	Limit setting; clear and consistent rules and expectations; firm-enough control; continuity and predictability; clear boundaries; and age-appropriate monitoring.	Chaotic; disorganized; laissez-faire; rigid; overcontrolled; and autocratic.
Supportive Relationships	Warmth; closeness; connectedness; good communication; caring; support; guidance; secure attachment; and responsiveness	Cold; distant; overcontrolling; ambiguous support; untrustworthy; focused on winning; inattentive; unresponsive; and rejecting.
Opportunities to Belong	Opportunities for meaningful inclusion, regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities; social inclusion, social engagement, and integration; opportunities for sociocultural identity formation; and support for cultural and bicultural competence.	Exclusion; marginalization; and intergroup conflict.
Positive Social Norms	Rules of behavior; expectations; injunctions; ways of doing things; values and morals; and obligations for service	Normlessness; anomie; laissez-faire practices; antisocial and amoral norms; norms that encourage violence; reckless behavior; consumerism; poor health practices; and conformity.
Support for Efficacy and Mattering	Youth based; empowerment practices that support autonomy; making a real difference in one's community; and being taken seriously. Practice that includes enabling, responsibility granting, and meaningful challenge. Practices that focus on improvement rather than on relative current performance levels.	Unchallenging; overcontrolling; disempowering; and disabling. Practices that undermine motivation and desire to learn, such as excessive focus on current relative performance level rather than improvement.
Opportunities for Skill Building	Opportunities to learn physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills; exposure to intentional learning experiences; opportunities to learn cultural literacies, media literacy, communication skills, and good habits of mind; preparation for adult employment; and opportunities to develop social and cultural capital.	Practice that promote bad physical habits and habits of mind; and practices that undermine school and learning.
Integration of Family, School, and Community Efforts	Concordance; coordination; and synergy among family, school, and community.	Discordance; lack of communications; and conflict.

## APPENDIX C

### OVERVIEW OF NEW COMMUNITY PROJECT COMMUNITIES

#### Site A County Selection Criteria and Definitions of “At-Risk” (determined by the team of state and area Research and Extension Specialists)-

- 2,321 population; 168 (7.2%) ages 15-19 (US Census 2000)
- 21.2% of household incomes below \$15,000 (US Census 2000)
- Identified as “high need” medically underserved/frontier by KS Dept. of Health and Environment
- 342 students (grades 9-12) enrolled in high school
- 30.86% of high school students “Economically Disadvantaged” (Kansas State Department of Education, Report Card 2002-2003)
- 33.65% of high school students “eligible for free or reduced meals” (Kansas State Department of Education, Report Card 2002-2003)
- 36.2% of county adolescents have used alcohol in the past 30 days (Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, 2002)
- 4.3% projected population growth rate between 2000 and 2030 (University of Kansas Policy Research Institute, 2002).

#### Site B County Selection Criteria and Definitions of “At-Risk” (determined by the team of state and area Research and Extension Specialists)-

- 2,965 population of city; 175 (5.9%) ages 15-19 (US Census, 2000)
- 28% of households have incomes at or below \$15,000 (US Census, 2000)
- Identified as “high need” medically underserved/frontier by KS Dept. of Health and Environment

- 231 students (grade 9-12) enrolled in high school
- 22.17% of high school students “Economically Disadvantaged” (Kansas State Department of Education, Report Card 2002-2003)
- 18.18% of high school students “eligible for free or reduced meals” (Kansas State Department of Education, Report Card 2002-2003)
- 65.5 rate of juvenile court filings of county adolescents (Kansas Juvenile Justice Authority, 2002)
- 4.6% projected population growth rate between 2000 and 2030 (University of Kansas Policy Research Institute)

## APPENDIX D RESEARCH AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Overarching research question:

- How do youth-adult relationships in community-based youth programs influence youth empowerment?

Specific research questions:

- What are the experiences of youth and adults in the New Community Project (NCP) sites?
- How do youth and adults interact within the confines of the NCP program?
- In what ways do the youth feel empowered by their involvement in the NCP program?

Focused Interview with Youth  
Interview Guide

Opening Question:

What grade in school are you and how long have you been associated with (program name)\_\_\_\_\_?

Introductory Question:

What made you decide to participate as a youth leader in (program name)\_\_\_\_\_?

How much ownership do you (youth) have in the program? Adults?

Transitional Question:

What is the best part of participating in this program?

Key Questions:

I. Youth Involvement

a. What kind of input do you have in the program? (In what ways do you participate in the program?)

Probes: Planning activities? At change team meetings? During After-school?

b. In what ways do adults include your ideas?

c. How much influence do you have in decisions related to (program name)\_\_\_\_\_?

II. Interaction with adults

a. How would you describe your relationship with adults in the program?

b. In what ways have your perceptions of / interactions with adults changed throughout your time in the program?

c. How do your interactions with adults in (program name)\_\_\_\_\_ differ from your interaction with adults outside the program?

III. Self-Reflection

a. How does your role in (program name)\_\_\_\_\_ differ from your role outside the program?

b. In what ways have you changed as a result of participating in (program name)\_\_\_\_\_?

- c. How have your perceptions of other youth changed as a result of participating in this program? Adults?

Ending Question: What do you hope to take away from your experience in the program?

## Focused Interview with Adults

### Interview Guide

#### Opening Question:

How long and in what ways have you been associated with     (program name)    ?

#### Introductory Question:

How did you become involved in this program?

How much ownership do you (adults) have in the program? Youth?

#### Transitional Question:

What do you enjoy most about working with youth?

#### Key Questions:

##### I. Youth Involvement

- a. In what ways do you encourage youth to participate in aspects of the program?

Probes: Planning activities? At change team meetings? During After-school?

- b. How important do believe it is to include youth input in the program?
- c. How much influence do you believe youth have on decisions regarding     (program name)    ?

##### II. Interaction with Youth

- a. How would you describe your relationship with youth in the program?
- b. In what ways have your perceptions of / interactions with youth changed throughout your time in the program?

##### III. Self-Reflection

- a. In what ways have your beliefs about youth changed as a result of participating in the program?
- b. How have your expectations of youth changed as a result of your participation in this program?

#### Ending Question:

What do you hope youth will take away from their experience in the program?