

Rigor, Relationships, and Religion: Exploring Youth's Experience in After-School Programs

by

Alan English

B. A., Bethany College, 2006

M. L. S., Fort Hays State University, 2009

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Manhattan, Kansas

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study addressed an existing gap in research on after-school programs, a lack of qualitative research. It consisted of a case study, conducted through a phenomenological theoretical framework, aimed to explore the experiences of four youth enrolled in a privately-funded, faith-based after-school program in an urban Midwest community. Unlike most after-school programs, the program studied provides services to youth that run continuously from sixth grade through high school graduation. Research was conducted primarily through observation at both the youth's public school affiliated with the program and at program events outside of school, as well as both group and individual interviews. The Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois (2011) conceptual framework of the role of comprehensive after-school programs on youth, the Rhodes (2005) Model of Youth Mentoring, and the philosophy of positive youth development were key to this study.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

While they are certainly not new, there has been a dramatic increase in youth mentoring programs in America in recent years (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011, p 57). Mentoring programs have been seen as a potential remedy for a host of ailments commonly seen in youth today. In an effort to prove their effectiveness and justify their cost, much of current literature has been focused on the development of mentor/mentee relationships (Deutsch & Jones, 2008; DeWit, DuBois, Erdem, Laros, & Lipman, 2016; Jones & Deutsch, 2011; Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborne, 2004; Rhodes, 2004). For example, extending mentoring relationships for at least twelve months has shown significant benefits (DeWit et al., 2016). These long term relationships have been demonstrated to be associated with lower rate of youth drug usage (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005). Additionally, it has been shown that youth involved in strong mentor/mentee relationships are better able to develop strong interpersonal relationships with their parents, friends, and other adults (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005; Thomson & Zand, 2010). The most effective mentor/mentee relationships have been shown to be those that provide both engaging activities and structure for the youth similar to that of a good parent rather than that of a peer. These engaging yet structured relationships have shown the greatest degree of social, psychological, and academic advancements in youth (Langhout, et al., 2004).

Clearly, not all youth programs are created equal. Youth programs that have specific expectations of mentors and target youth with environmental and/or individual risk factors have been shown to be more effective (DuBois et al., 2011). Furthermore, it has been shown that mentors that are given sufficient training display greater confidence and satisfaction in their relationship (Martin & Sifers, 2012).

As with any heavily-studied subject, current literature has not demonstrated a unanimous cry of support for public funding of mentoring and after-school programs. For example, while Rhodes and DuBois (2008) showed a statistically significant improvement in, “academic performance, perceived scholastic efficacy, school misconduct, and attendance” as compared to non-mentored youth, the effect size was slight (p. 255). Additionally, students enrolled in after-school programs have not demonstrated statistically significant improvements in externalizing behaviors such as displaying disruptive behavior, substance abuse, and school delinquency (Kremer, Maynard, Polanin, Vaugn, & Sarteschi, 2015).

Despite this apparent robust and continually growing body of literature of youth programs, existing literature demonstrates two significant gaps. First, because of an increased tendency for public dollars to be spent on youth programs, there has been a drive for studies to identify if such programs are cost effective and what the specific attributes of such effective programs are. Consequentially, the overwhelming majority of existing literature on youth programs are quantitative studies focused on objective “proof” of after-school programs’ effectiveness (Cohen & Piquero, 2008; DuBois et al., 2011; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Kremer et al., 2015; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). However, as Deutsch and Spencer (2009) have argued, “Whereas objective markers of relational factors may be useful, it is likely the protégé’s perception of such factors that has the greater influence on outcomes.” (p. 56). While quantitative studies in search of objective evidence are indeed valuable for assessing the most effective usage of public funds, they fail to pause and consider the experiences of the youth involved. Therefore, it is important to consider and study how enrolled youth perceive their experience and how they believe it is impacting their lives. Indeed, mentors and other adults can carry out whatever methods of interventions they like, but if students do not perceive them to be



of value, there is little likelihood that there will be significant youth engagement into the program. Therefore, it is unlikely that the program will be effective in a meaningful way. Perhaps the most important outcome that any mentoring program can strive for is to create engagement from its youth.

Secondly, this study was important because the program being studied is unique. There is little existing literature of similar youth programs. While all programs undoubtedly have attributes to be admired, the program studied is distinctly unique because membership is considered a privilege that a youth can keep through high school graduation with good behavior and voluntary attendance, its membership is capped at each grade, its unique ability to fund exciting reward trips and engaging “track” activities, low staff to student ratio, and its Christian faith-based foundation. More than anything, the story of these youth and their experiences should be told. While telling their story, however, perhaps other youth groups will gain insight which will translate into best practices specific to their program.

### **Rationale for Study**

As youth programs have become more prevalent in America, so too has the existing literature on their effectiveness. Youth programs have been shown by numerous studies to be associated with a host of benefits which have attempted to justify their public cost (Deutsch & Jones, 2008; DeWit et al, 2016; DuBois et al, 2011; Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010; Langhout et al, 2004; Rhodes et al, 2010). While quantitative studies justifying public expense of youth programs are important, there exists a gap in existing literature which has largely ignored the experiences of enrolled youth. Quality exceptions to this pattern include Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois (2011) and Jones and Deutsch (2011). Nevertheless, there is considerable room in existing literature for a greater understanding of the lives of youth enrolled in youth

programs. Furthermore, this study is important because of the unique characteristics of the studied program that could potentially prove useful for still developing youth programs.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this research project is to explore four youth's perceptions of a privately-funded, faith-based youth-mentoring program in an urban Midwest community. The program provides services to youth that run continuously from sixth grade through high school graduation. They emphasize but do not exclusively serve youth of color. Data was collected through both group and individual interviews as well as direct observations of the youth in program activities.

### **Research Questions**

The specific questions of interest for this study are:

1. How do youth in the program perceive the services they receive and their influence on their lives?
2. How do youth in the program perceive the value of the relationships created with mentors, youth, and other staff within the program?
3. To what extent do youth in the program perceive the association between their level of engagement with the program with the influence that the program will have on them?

### **Operationalization of Constructs**

1. *Rhodes model of youth mentoring* - This model emphasizes that significant mentor/mentee relationships are only created in an environment of mutuality, trust, and empathy. These relationships result in three categories of benefit: social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development (Rhodes, 2005; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

2. *PARC Profile* – A means of tracking the program, activity, relationships, and culture of an after-school program and organizing the impact that the program may have on a youth at any particular time.
3. *Positive youth development* – Philosophy of youth development which emphasizes the need to nurture a youth's, "social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development" rather than exclusively try to discourage negative behaviors (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins, 2004, p. 100).
4. *After-school program* – For the purposes of this study, I will use this term broadly. This will describe any program that primarily meets outside of school aimed at giving youth opportunities to develop relationships with responsible, non-family adults, provide safe places for youth to spend time after school, develop skills useful to a productive adult life, or address specific problems facing youth today. Examples of programs studied in previous literature include: Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008), Boys and Girls Clubs (Fredricks et al, 2010), and Twenty-first Century Community Learning Centers (Kremer, Maynard, Polanin, Vaughn, & Sarteschi, 2015).
5. *Long-term mentoring relationships* - I will describe long term mentoring relationships as those lasting longer than twelve months due to evidence of increased benefits associated with this duration and potential risks of those cut short (DeWitt, et al, 2016).
6. *Track* - A series of planned lessons taking place in the program studied over usually four to eight consecutive weekly sessions aimed at building skills or interests in a common area. Tracks are used with the middle school but not high school youth in the program. Previous tracks have been in areas such as culinary arts, personal fitness, nutrition,

robotics, resume/interview skills, synthesized music programming, craft projects, service projects, improvisational acting, and computer programming.

### **Methodological Framework**

For this study, I used a phenomenological theoretical framework. This framework states that things are things in and of themselves, which people are able to experience and come to understand (Crotty, 1998/2004, p. 79). Because consciousness is always consciousness of an object (also known as a phenomenon) we are inseparable from objects (Husserl, 1931, p. 242). This consciousness of objects around us is called intentionality, which Husserl (1931) called, “a concept which at the threshold of phenomenology is quite indispensable as a starting-point and basis (p. 245). We must understand phenomenon if we are able to understand our consciousness and each other (Crotty, 1998/2004, p. 79). With this ability to refocus ourselves to the phenomenon around us, comes the opportunity to “set aside all previous habits of thought” (Husserl, 1931, p. 242). Phenomenon must be studied as they are and void of the limitations of preconceived socially constructed definitions or assumptions. (Crotty, 1998/2004, pp. 79-80). This is why Husserl (1931) says that phenomenologists must “attempt to doubt anything and everything, however convinced we may be concerning what we doubt” (pp. 107-108). Researcher’s primary tool to “doubt” is to “bracket” those assumptions and subjectivities as much as possible and draw meaning from phenomenon directly (Husserl, 1931, p. 108).

One of the difficulties of working with phenomenological framework, as with many other theoretical frameworks, is that there has been significant splintering through history. It is complicated to even determine what “branch” of phenomenology one prescribes to. Phenomenology was founded by Edmund Husserl. Husserl developed most of the basic tenets of phenomenology including investigating phenomenon as a means to understanding consciousness

and bracketing assumptions and socially-contrived meanings (Bhattacharya, 2015, p. 59).

Amedeo Giorgi, Adrian van Kaam, and Herbert Spielberg all were among the key figures in transforming traditional phenomenology into an American breed that was distinctly unique and blended with aspects of symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. This new, North American phenomenology is much more subjective and less critical than its European counterpart. The result has been that, in North American phenomenology, the experience of phenomenon tends to be seen as much more individualized and impervious to criticism than its European counterpart (Bhattacharya, 2015, pp 59-60; Crotty 1998/2004, pp. 84-85).

Phenomenology best answers questions of the meaning and significance of human experience, even those that seem the most unnoteworthy, mundane, or normal.

Phenomenologists believe that underneath these experiences is a nature or essence that must be discovered (deMarrais, 2004, pp. 56-57). This essence is entirely subjective in nature. Husserl (1931) says,

The acts of cognition which underlie our experiencing posit the Real in *individual* form, posit it as having spatio-temporal existence, as something existing in this time-spot, having *this* particular duration of its own and a real content which in its essence could just as well have been present in any other time-spot; posits it, moreover, as something which is present at this place in this particular physical shape (or is there given united to a body of this shape), where yet the same real being might just as well, so far as its own essence is concerned, be present at any other place, and in any other form, and might likewise change whilst remaining in fact unchanged, or changed otherwise than the way in which it actually does. (pp. 52-53)

In order to discover this essence, the researcher must be able to filter out socially-contrived understandings and look at phenomenon with a new, fresh approach (deMarrais, 2004, pp. 56-57). This framework lent itself to my research question because it effectively allowed me to explore the phenomenon of the after-school program and how youth experience it. I hoped to explore the daily experiences of these youth and discover the meaning of these experiences and what meaning the youth give those experiences. I had many assumptions about the program and how youth experience it already. Using the technique of bracketing, my hope was to be able to take a fresh look at the program outside of the limitations of those assumptions.

One of my key methods of collecting data was through interviews. Deutsch and Spencer (2009) emphasized the importance of and potential for interviews in closing the existing literature gap on after-school programs. They argued, “Yet, periodic, targeted interviews or focus groups with mentors or protégés could help programs assess the challenges faced in maintaining high-quality relationships and provide information on needed supports and resources” (p. 59). Phenomenological interviews require the participant to give thick, descriptive accounts of experiences in their lives in order to discover the essence of the phenomenon. The researcher ideally asks a small number of broad questions only to get the participant started and then allows the participant to control the direction and content of the interview. Questions of “why” are avoided because they encourage the participant to analyze their actions rather than describe in detail. Instead, many phenomenological interview questions begin with “Tell me about a time...” or “What was it like for you when...”. Such questions encourage detailed descriptions and stories that allow for a phenomenological analysis (deMarrais, 2004, pp. 56-57). I foresaw this as somewhat problematic when interviewing fourteen and fifteen year old youth. I anticipated their answers to be more often than not short and lacking description. To try to give

them content to build their stories and accounts upon as well as understand the role that the after-school program plays in their lives, I planned two planned activities during the first two interviews. The first, used during the first individual interview, was a social network activity, where youth were asked to draw a web of those that are most important to their lives, with the strongest relationships being closest to them and more distant relationships being on the outer edges. People involved in the after-school program were indicated as such. After the youth completed the activity, the youth and researcher discussed each of the people represented in the web and their relationship to the youth. The ensuing conversation was recorded and transcribed as part of the first individual interview.

The second activity was a photography activity. During the initial group interview, youth were provided a disposable camera and instructed to take pictures during the following weeks of anyone or anything particularly meaningful in their lives. The subject of the photographs was not necessarily involved in the after-school program. During the second individual interview, we reviewed the developed photographs and discussed each of them. The ensuing conversation was recorded and transcribed as part of the second individual interview. One copy of the photographs were given to the participants while another copy was kept by the researcher as photographic data.

While these efforts aimed at giving youth content to discuss, they did not address one of the most important factors in a successful phenomenological interview, trust. Eyring (1998) describes that the detail of a phenomenological interview creates vulnerability in the participant that will only be successful if the interview process has a climate of mutual trust and respect (p. 142). Many youths enrolled in the program come from experiences where adults in their lives have not proven to be trustworthy. Consequentially, I needed to work diligently to build trust

with my participants and rely on the relationships I already have with them as a mentor. Still, Eyring (1998) describes how having multiple relationships with participants can make the research project more complicated due to issues such as uncertainty of how to best handle confidentiality issues or confusion about what information was gained about a person in what relationship (pp. 144-145). As a former mentor, former teacher, and current researcher of these youth, this additional complication was relevant to this study. Detailed notes, organization, and a commitment to confidentiality were essential in being able to conduct a successful and ethical research project.

As with many theoretical frameworks, I find the splintering and disagreement of definitions that exists in phenomenology confusing and problematic. Largely, I think that my struggles are a bi-product of my experiences of vocabulary being a largely objective knowledge base. Words have agreed-upon definitions, and a speaker or writer can't go outside those definitions if they expect to be understood by his or her audience. That is the very purpose of and rationale for dictionaries. Certainly I have experience with words having alternative meanings. The word, "score" takes on a very different meaning depending on if one is reading a sports rule book, in a music production, taking a cooking class, or reciting the Gettysburg Address. Still, meanings that are actually contradictory make it difficult to know anything concretely.

Additionally, I struggle with the concept of "bracketing" one's subjectivity in order to obtain new understanding of phenomenon. While I understand the concept, I'm just not sure that it can be done. Similarly, Peshkin (1988) described subjectivity as, "like a garment that cannot be removed" (p. 17). Bhattacharya (2015) also pointed out that a criticism of phenomenology is that it is, "difficult to claim bracketing experiences to be more than reflexivity" (p. 60). Relevant



subjectivities I bring into my research include (but are undoubtedly not limited to) a patriotic belief in the American constitutional system that (while still imperfect) allows for people to rise from their life position if they can only realize their own potential, a fervor toward the Christian message, a disposition toward middle-class values, and an approval of the program's privately-funded status that largely avoids government regulation. I'm not sure that I can bracket these from my consciousness as I explore the experiences of youth in the program. They are part of my belief system and what ultimately drew me toward working with and wanting to study the program. What more, I'm not sure that I need to block out my subjectivity if I'm honest with myself, my participants, and my readers. As Peshkin (1988) said, "I do not thereby exorcise my subjectivity. I do, rather, enable myself to manage it—to preclude it from being unwittingly burdensome—as I progress through collecting, analyzing, and writing up my data" (p. 20). Therefore, my subjectivity is not something to be avoided or blocked out but rather an aspect of the study to be recognized, considered, and explored. Simultaneously, I hoped to use the technique of bracketing to take a fresh look at the after-school program, challenging my assumptions I previously made and questioning my experiences.

Within the theoretical framework of phenomenology, I utilized an instrumental case study methodology. This allowed me to have an intense and holistic focus on my case of four youth enrolled in the program. My expected duration of study, one school semester, was also appropriate for what is standard in case study methodology. I did not expect generalizability. Aside from the fact that qualitative research generally is not aiming at generalizability, my sample size of four and the relatively unique nature of the program among after-school groups prevent me from having such expectations. Still, I chose an instrumental case study methodology because I did foresee that understanding the experience of these youth could

provide transferability for program staff and directors as well as other after school organizations or those researching them.

### **Limits and Possibilities of Study**

While I anticipated that this study would provide rich data and insight on the experiences of youth in the program, it was with its limitations. First, one of the central questions that this study hoped to answer was how the youth themselves experience the program and how they believe it is influencing their lives. It was possible that the youth, displaying typical ranges of maturity and a lack of foresight, may not have a clear picture of how the program was influencing their lives. It is important to note, however, that this study strove, not necessarily for an accurate representation of how the program is shaping the youth's lives but rather an understanding of the youth's perception of its effect.

Second, because of practical limitations, my data was collected over the course of a semester. It is possible that a longer term study would produce more complete data and an appreciation for the growth and maturation of the youth throughout the study. This study served, therefore, as a snapshot of the youth in a moment of time (relatively speaking) rather than a complete picture of their experience in the program throughout 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the growing trend of after-school programs as well as the existing gap in literature. Because the majority of existing literature emphasizes the end product of after-school programs, they are primarily quantitative in nature. While this is important, there is much to be learned about after-school programs that cannot be quantified. Rather than statistically evaluating the effectiveness in after-school program, this study aims to explore the experiences of youth involved in the program, how they perceive the services they are receiving,

how they see the program influencing their lives, and if they are able to associate their level of involvement in the program with its effectiveness.

A phenomenological theoretical framework was established, allowing me to explore the phenomenon of after-school programs and how youth experience it. The primary means of collecting research was through observations, occurring both at the youth's public school that associates with the program and at program events outside of school and interviews. This data should provide significant insight into after-school programs and how youth experience it. In the next chapter, existing literature on after-school programs will more thoroughly be discussed.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter is a review of the current literature on after-school programs. More specifically, it will demonstrate that while there is a relatively robust and quickly-growing body of literature on after-school programs, much of this literature has been quantitative in nature, attempting to understand the modality and extent of the effectiveness of after-school programs. Consequentially, there is a gap in existing literature and a need for greater understanding of how youth experience these programs and perceive their influence on them. Furthermore, the unique characteristics of the after-school program being researched justify a closer look at how youth experience it.

### **Positive Youth Development**

One of the fastest growing areas within child psychology is positive youth development (PYD). This psychological philosophy or strategy optimistically argues that children possess remarkable plasticity. With proper psychological assistance, even the most adverse situation can be overcome. Therefore, emphasis tends to be placed on encouraging proper development along a natural progression rather than removing undesirable behaviors (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). Larson (2000) advocates PYD and argues that void of this optimism of the capabilities of youth, the primary problems facing youth today are boredom and disengagement. Larson (2000) says, “A central question of youth development is how to get adolescents’ fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives” (p. 170). He goes on to recommend that youth need experiences of high intrinsic motivation and concentration. Typically, a youth’s experience in a classroom is one of high to moderate concentration and low intrinsic motivation. Time spent with peers is, more often than not, low in concentration while high in intrinsic motivation. One of the few times youth

experience high levels of both factors is during what Larson describes as structured voluntary activities (Larson, 2000). While Larson was not writing specifically about after-school groups, his research is a powerful recommendation of the potential of after-school groups and an important illustration of the complementary nature of PYD and after-school groups. In fact, it is not uncommon to read studies on after-school groups that sound remarkably influenced by PYD. For example, in a meta-analysis of literature on after-school groups, the Wyoming Department of Health (2012) said,

With the knowledge that young people are not yet adults, mentors should have respect for individual outlook and attitudes. Youth learn and grow in age-appropriate ways.

Mentors should respect their mentee's youthful perspectives and their need to have fun and engage in challenging activities; it is also important that each youth mentoring plan be designed based on goals and needs as defined by the mentee. (p. 42)

This respect for youth in their particular stage of development and belief that if positive growth is encouraged, youth can continue on a natural progression of development is almost certainly directly or indirectly influenced by positive youth development.

In recent years, various studies involving PYD programs have been able to produce promising results in demonstrating growth in youth (Catalano et al, 2004; Ciocanel, Power, Eriksen, & Gillings, 2017; Larson, 2000; Worker, Iaccopucci, Bird, & Horowitz, 2018). Catalano et al (2004) were able to develop a list of comprehensive objectives for PYD programs. Through literature review and consultation with various scientists, practitioners, and policy makers they determined that PYD programs' objectives should include:

1. Promotes bonding
2. Fosters resilience

3. Promotes social competence
4. Promotes emotional competence
5. Promotes cognitive competence
6. Promotes behavioral competence
7. Promotes moral competence
8. Fosters self-determination
9. Fosters spirituality
10. Fosters self-efficacy
11. Fosters clear and positive identity
12. Fosters belief in the future
13. Provides recognition for positive behavior
14. Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement
15. Fosters prosocial norms (Catalano et al, 2004, p. 101-102)

One of the most important developments in PYD was the Lerner Model of Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2005). In this Model, the “5C’s” of PYD were expressed: caring/compassion, confidence, character, connection, and competence. These “5C’s” provide a framework for understanding and defining the various goals of programs implementing PYD (Lerner et al, 2005). Lopez, Yoder, Brisson, Lechuga-Penna, and Jenson (2015) were then able to advance this work further by developing Bridge-PYD, a reliable instrument to measure growth in these “5C’s”. This instrument opens exciting opportunities for program evaluation and further advancement of theoretical frameworks.

## **Outcome-focused Research on After-School Groups**

While the modern surge in after-school and youth mentoring programs has been recent on a historical scale, it has allowed enough time for a relatively robust, albeit still blossoming, body of literature. Much of the existing literature has been quantitative in nature. Of this literature, much quantitative data has been aimed at determining the degree of effectiveness of after-school programs. Despite the strong public enthusiasm for after-school programs, the results have been mixed. For example, after-school programs, which provide a supportive environment, as measured by observed positive interactions between youth and program staff were associated with higher math and reading scores (Leos-Urbel, 2015). Supporting these results, a study on a multi-site after-school program was able to demonstrate not only statistically significant improvement in reading scores but increased improvement the second year as staff training efforts were increased (Sheldon, Arbretton, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010). Additionally, in a study involving 196 middle school students in three Mid-western states, participating in an after-school program was demonstrated to lead to higher English grades (Shernoff, 2010).

Demonstrated positive outcomes in after-school programs have not been limited exclusively to academic measures. An intervention program focusing on promoting physical activity and nutrition was implemented in sixteen after-school program sites. Sixteen control group sites were also observed. Statistically significant increases in physical activity were demonstrated in the experimental sites, indicating that the intervention program was successful (Gortmaker et al, 2011). Additionally, a national survey of 859 youth involved in Big Brothers Big Sisters demonstrated that youth involved in a mentoring relationship that lasted longer than twelve months were less likely to express a depressed mood and social anxiety (DeWit, DuBois, Erdem, Larose, & Lipman, 2016).

While these results seem promising, there is also a body of literature that encourages caution and a tempering of expectations when implementing after-school and mentoring programs. For example, a study which utilized the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that youth which responded that they had a mentoring relationship demonstrated a decrease in gang membership and fighting as well as higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, and use of birth control. Despite these positive correlations, the effect size was too low to offset exposure to associated individual or environmental risk factors (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). In another random assignment study involving 1,139 youth in US ten cities, youth involved in a mentoring relationship demonstrated better academic performance (as indicated in teacher surveys), self-perception of academic abilities (as measured by youth surveys), and were more likely to report having a “special adult” in their lives. Improvements were not demonstrated, however, in classroom effort or problem behaviors (as reported by teacher surveys), global self-worth, or relationships with parents and teachers (as reported by student surveys). Additionally, academic improvements that were made failed to be sustained the following school year (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011).

Furthering the evidence to reserve expectations for after-school programs, a meta-analysis of 24 after-school programs indicated no statistically significant impact on school attendance or externalizing behaviors such as substance abuse, delinquency, and disruptive behavior (Kremer, Maynard, Polanin, Vaughn, & Sarteschi, 2015). Another meta-analysis was able to demonstrate a positive correlation to a wide variety of factors including high school completion, college attendance, future employment, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and gang membership. The effect size of all these factors, however was low, prompting the authors to



emphasize that restraint of expectations of mentoring needed to be exercised (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

Beyond failing to demonstrate positive outcomes, it has also been demonstrated that if an after-school program is unstructured, it can actually lead to negative effects on youth through deviancy training via other youth. In more structured activities, however, youth demonstrate less violent behavior and respond less positively to deviance (Rorie, Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, & Connell, 2011). This body of literature should caution policy-makers, voters, researchers, and anyone involved in after-school or mentoring programs of not only having realistically limited expectations but also to take care in structuring programs in a way as to bring about the best chance for success.

Despite these calls for a moderation of expectations, it also seems as though after-school programs don't need to influence a large number of youth's lives to be deemed successful in an economic sense. In fact, the typical "high-risk" youth will cost the public between \$4.2 and \$7.2 million when various costs such as legal fees, police, jail, and prison costs, unemployment, and low productivity are accounted for (Cohen & Piquero, 2009). These high costs led a study specific to Big Brothers and Big Sisters (BBBS) in Melbourne, Australia to conclude that, "To 'break even' or pay for itself, the BBBS-Melbourne program would need to avert between 1-2% of cases of 'high risk' youth out of the 1,104 modelled for Melbourne" (Moodie & Fisher, 2009). While no after-school program director would be satisfied with only "saving" 1-2% of high risk youth in their program, it seems that from a strictly economic sense, what it means to be a successful program should be rethought.

## **Characteristics of an Effective After-School Program**

Many quantitative studies have attempted to identify what the characteristics of an effective after-school program are and how best to determine if a specific program is indeed effective. While it has been hypothesized that program attendance may be an effective way to gauge program effectiveness under the assumption that youth would “vote with their feet” and attend the most engaging and otherwise effective program, this has been put in to question. For example, in a study including 29 after-school programs and 5,108 grade school youth, program quality measures were compared to program attendance. The degree of supportive environment structured interactions observed, and purposeful engagement were all not statistically significant predictors for program attendance, indicating that the “vote with their feet” hypothesis is incorrect (Leos-Urbel, 2015, p. 697). Numerous other studies have demonstrated that program quality is much more closely tied to positive youth outcomes than program dosage as measured by attendance (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010; Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010; Kahne et al, 2001; Shernoff, 2010).

One factor that has been demonstrated as significant for program quality is duration of mentoring relationship. For example, a study involving 928 youth enrolled in Big Brothers and Big Sisters highlighted the importance of long term mentoring relationships. Matches that lasted twelve months or longer were associated with numerous social and health benefits including a decrease in youth frequency of substance abuse and improved youth perception of parental relationships (DeWit, DuBois, Erdem, Laros, & Lipman, 2016; Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005). A meta-analysis that included 73 studies on mentoring tried to identify factors of an effective mentoring relationship. It also identified relationship duration as an important factor among many others such as mentors with backgrounds in helping people, clear communication

of mentoring expectations, program support, parental support of the mentoring relationship, and training for mentors (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011).

### **Personal Relationships in After-School Programs**

A distinct strength of the current literature on after-school and mentoring programs is strong body of literature on the importance of building strong personal relationships. In a review of existing literature, Deutsch and Spencer (2009) emphasized the importance of studying at both the program and relationship levels. Simply identifying successful programs and therefore assuming that they had quality relationships within them was insufficient. They also identified key characteristics that were useful in assessing the quality of a mentoring relationship based on current literature. They included duration, frequency, and consistency of contact, quality of connection, and the mentor's approach to the relationship. Generally, mentorships that meet for long durations of time and frequently and where the mentee reported a strong bond with the mentor are generally more effective. Furthermore, mentors that utilized a developmental, rather than prescriptive, approach that emphasized acceptance and building an emotional connection were generally more effective.

Various models of youth-mentor relationships have been created to attempt to understand them as well as the avenues with which they produce youth outcomes. For example, Rhodes (2005) proposed a conceptual model of the importance of relationships in after-school programs. These relationships, characterized by, "mutuality, trust, and empathy" are a prerequisite for positive youth outcomes (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). When such relationships are established, relationship development can generally be characterized into social-emotional, cognitive, and identity forms. One distinctive aspect of this model is the belief that socio-emotional development specific to the after-school program can be generalized, thus giving the youth

opportunity to develop stronger relationships with those around him or her. Additionally, the model recognizes that a host of contextual factors such as family history or program practices can influence the youth's development. These three categories of development (social-emotional, cognitive, and identity) can in turn lead to a host of positive emotional, academic, health, and behavior outcomes (Rhodes, 2005). This model led Rhodes to propose that all decisions made by after-school program directors should be based on how they will influence the relationships that youth have with program staff. See Figure One for a visualization of the Rhodes (2005) model of youth mentoring.

In a qualitative study completed with 17 teenage youth, Jones and Deutsch (2011) proposed specific strategies that can be used to develop these relationships. First, it is useful to minimize relational distance by hiring young staff that share factors like neighborhood, race and ethnicity with youth. Secondly, staff should practice active inclusion by modeling positive interpersonal relationships and going out of one's way to invite youth, particularly ones new to the program, into group activities. Finally, staff must build proximal relation ties. This includes building connections with a youth's friends and family and the willingness to use these connections to build a relationship with that youth.

Not all youth-mentor relationships are built alike, however. After conducting a study involving 1,138 youth enrolled in Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborn (2004) concluded that youth-mentor relationships could be divided into the following categories: moderate, unconditionally supportive, active, and low-key. Their conclusion was that,

Participants who characterized their relationships in terms of 'moderate' levels of activity and structure reported the largest number of benefits, including decreased alienation from parents, decreased conflict and inequality with friends, and an improved sense of self-

worth and school competence relative to the controls.” (Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborn, 2004, p. 303)

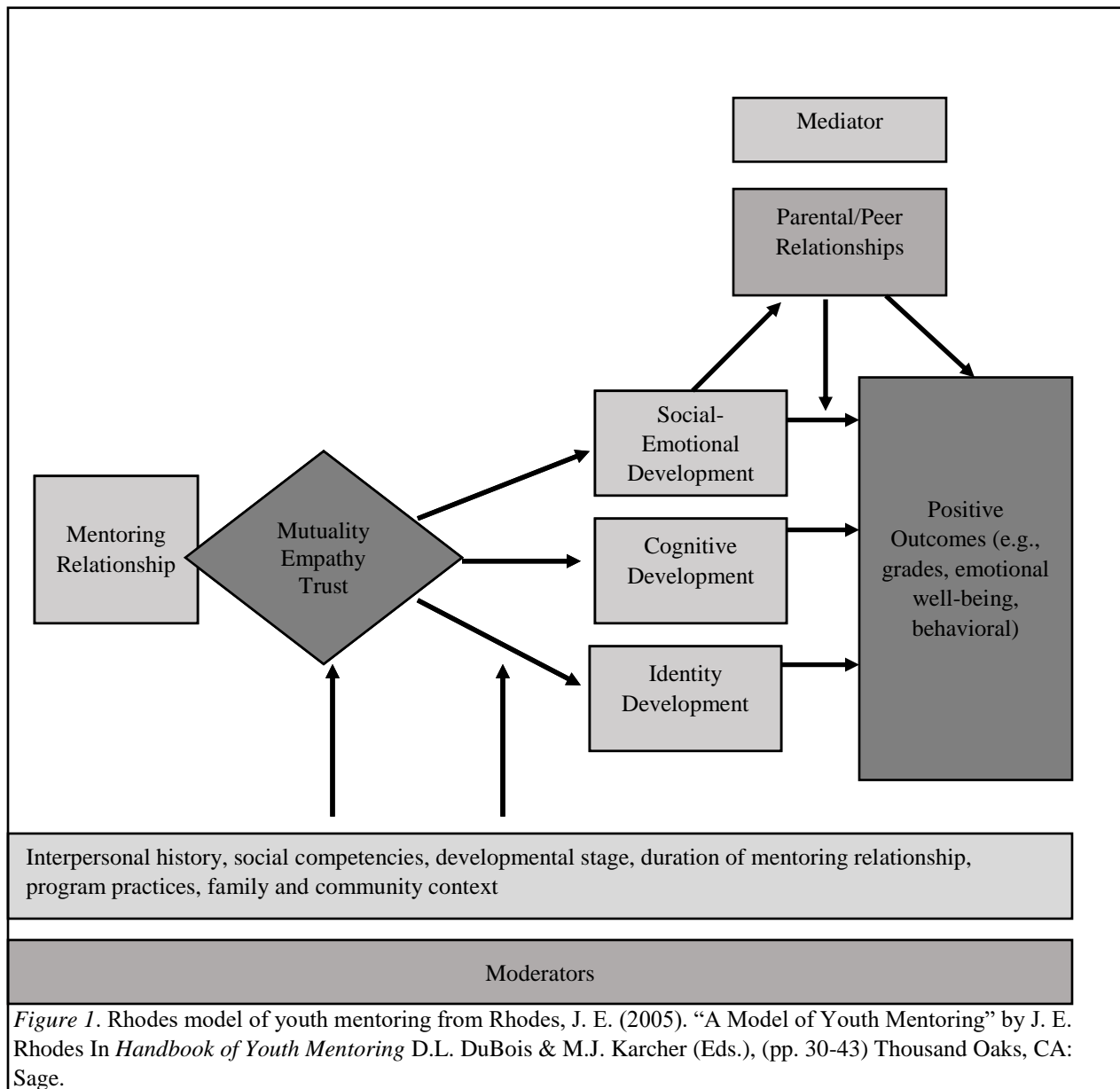


Figure 1. Rhodes model of youth mentoring from Rhodes, J. E. (2005). "A Model of Youth Mentoring" by J. E. Rhodes In *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* D.L. DuBois & M.J. Karcher (Eds.), (pp. 30-43) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The discussion of this study went on to propose that it was important to train mentors much more like good parents than peers. Like parents, it is important from time to time to offer constructive criticism and feedback rather than unconditional support for all youth’s action. Indeed, it is possible that unconditionally supporting youth could actually undermine criticism that youth receive from other adults, such as parents (Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborn, 2004).

Deutsch and Jones (2008) continued our understanding of the delicate balance of the youth-mentor relationship. In a consolidation of two previous studies on predominately racial minority youth enrolled in the Boys & Girls Clubs in two urban cities, the importance of respecting youth's growing autonomy and creating an environment of bi-directional respect was emphasized. This, it was concluded, was particularly important among youth who perceived themselves otherwise struggling for respect, such as racial and ethnic minority youth. Spencer (2006) came to more specific conclusions about the importance of respect within the youth-mentor relationship. In a qualitative research project consisting of semi-structured interviews with 24 youth-mentor pairs, four characteristics of successful mentoring relationships were identified: authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship. It also stressed that in many of these relationships, the mentor was initially required to "carry the load" of the relationship until the youth was able to trust the mentor enough to develop a relationship with them, furthering the literature on the importance of long-term youth-mentor relationships.

Brady, Bolan, and Canavan (2017) propose that support offered in youth-mentor relationships can be divided into the categories of: concrete, companionship, emotional, esteem, and advice. While emotional, esteem, and advice support only appear in the closest of relationships, relationships that are based on concrete and companionship support can lead to positive youth outcomes such as encouraging them to spend more time with other people and therefore form other important relationships. Furthermore, because not all levels of relationships existed in all youth-mentor relationships, it must be appreciated that all youth-mentor relationships are different and that all youth approach mentoring relationships with different needs.

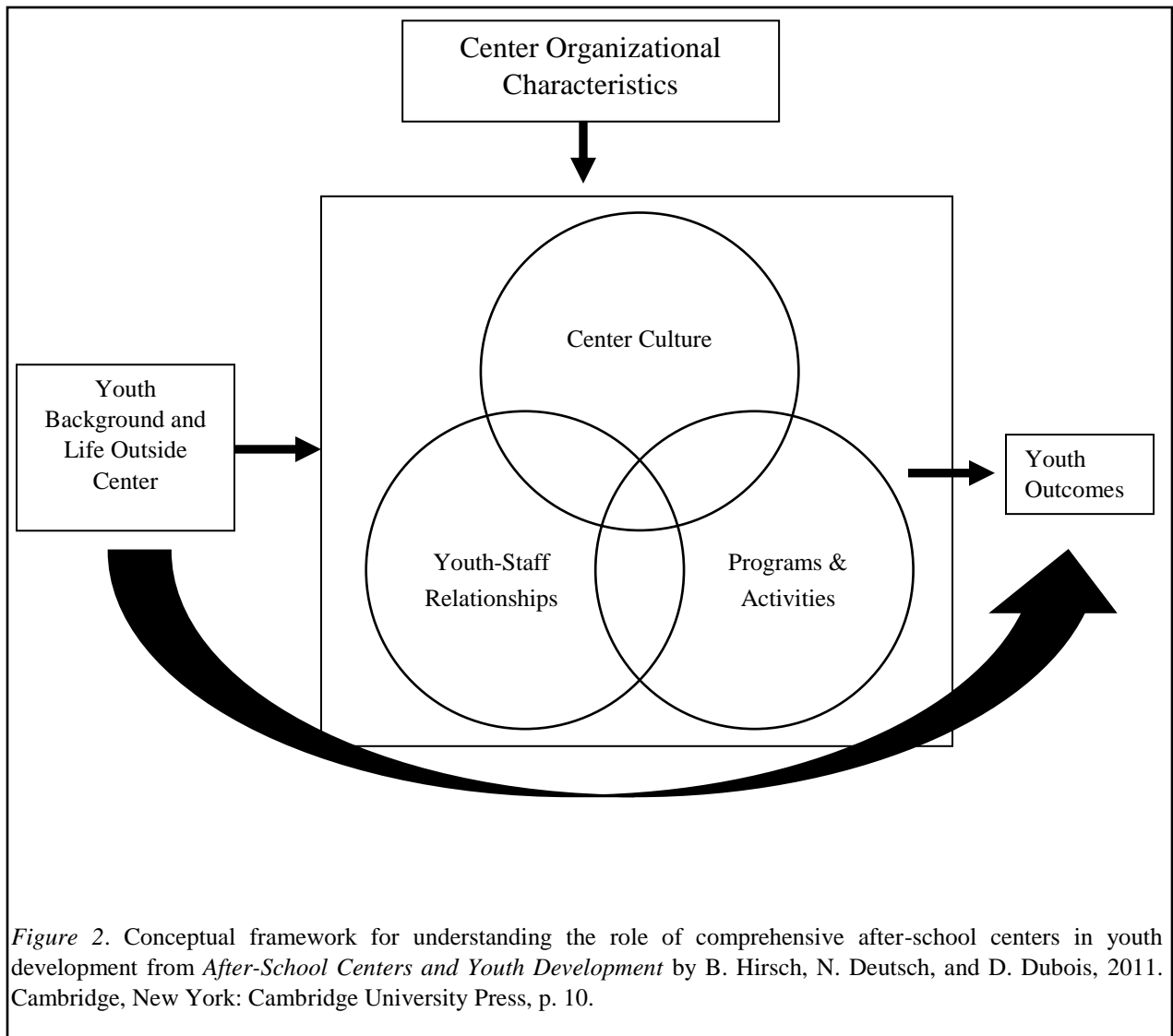
Regardless of which youth-mentor relationship model is used, it seems that successful relationships are not only intrinsically valuable but can lead to better relationships in general. In a study consisting of 409 youth who had had a mentor for at least eight months, the Mentor-Youth Alliance Scale (MYAS) was used to determine youth-mentor relationship quality and was determined to be a statistically significant predictor in relationship quality with parents, peers, and other adults (Thomson & Zand, 2010).

### **Exceptions to the Current Gap in Literature**

The above literature on after-school programs has given researchers and program directors a more clear, although never complete in any complex endeavor, idea of if after-school programs can be effective, what being effective to an after-school program might mean, and what the characteristics of effective after-school programs are. These are important questions to ask for anyone trying to understand after-school programs, but even complete answers to them would leave the body of literature incomplete. The existing literature, as demonstrated thus far in the literature review, is overwhelmingly quantitative research studying objective outcomes identified as crucial to a successful after-school program. As Deutsch and Spencer (2009) have pointed out, however, that, “Such approaches provide information about the effects of mentoring but tell us little about the processes that influence outcomes or how the quality of relationships can be improved” (p. 61). Few researchers have fully considered youth’s perspective on after-school groups. If positive youth development is to be taken seriously, and researchers are going to celebrate the capabilities of growth that young people possess, their experience must be part of our understanding of after-school programs. There are, however, exceptions to this gap in existing literature. One of the most important is *After-school centers and youth development: Case studies of success and failure*. In it, Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois (2011) conduct six case

studies of youth involved in three different Boys and Girls Clubs in urban environments. Within these case studies, Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois (2011) highlight the need for highly trained and motivated staff, a need for structure while still respecting youth's autonomy, and the importance of building staff-youth relationships. More importantly, they created the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development (see Figure Two). This framework recognizes the influences individual histories of the youth and emphasizes the interconnected nature of an after-school program's programs, activities, relationships, and culture. Additionally, the model inspired the use of Program, Activity, Relationship, and Culture (PARC) profiles during their study as a way to describe the interrelated factors influencing a youth at any given time at an after-school program. These factors have a compounding influence a youth's outcomes within the program. This model allows researchers to consider how each youth experiences and is influenced by specific activities within an after-school program.





In another quality exception, a year-long case study was conducted on after-school centers in the Youth Options Unlimited (YOU) network in Chicago. Its results provided detailed descriptions of an underfunded program that employed well-intended but uninspired staff. It highlighted the crucial role that the after-school centers play in providing a safe place for youth that otherwise would be constantly under the threat of a host of negative influences, not least of all gangs. It also displayed the powerful relationships that mentors can have on youth and their potential. Unfortunately, it also demonstrated the failure of the centers to challenge the youth to grow. Organized activities, trips outside the center, and time spent on academics were rare.

Most youth spent their time in the center simply socializing. Ultimately, the researchers feared that lack of vision of the centers could reinforce the limited vision and aspirations of youth that struggle to see the world more than a few blocks away from their home (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000). It was a powerful view of the incredible challenges that inner-city youth face and a reminder to everyone involved in an after-school program of the responsibility they have to the youth involved to make the program as effective as possible.

As a researcher most interested in youth's perception of after-school programs, there is a significant lack of literature. One exception is a study that interviewed 54 elementary and middle school youth enrolled in Boys and Girls Clubs of America in a low-income community. The researchers were most interested in understanding the youth's perception of the club, its staff, and activities at the club, as well as to what degree the club allowed for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The data collected provided valuable insight into youth's perception. Unsurprisingly, youth valued close relationships with staff and peers. The quality of relationships formed seemed to be much more closely associated with staff's level of experience than how long the youth had attended the club. This, along with other research, highlighted the need to train staff and reduce turnover. Also unsurprisingly, many youth expressed frustration over their perception that the club was often too structured, making it feel like no more than an extension of the school day. This led researchers to suggest that clubs could find ways to integrate academics into activities in the form of enrichment rather than exclusively homework time. Finally, many of the middle school youth expressed frustration that many of the activities felt more catered to the younger students. It was suggested that perhaps the club could have found ways to diversify their programs as to allow for greater choice and autonomy from the older youth (Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010).

Much of these conclusions were reinforced by Bulanda and McCrea (2013) who conducted a participatory action research study on an after-school program for African American youth titled Stand Up Help Out (SUHO). In this study, researchers collected interview and observation data and were most interested in understanding the youth's perception of the program, how those perceptions could help better structure it, and how the youth perceived those efforts. Noticing the gap in current literature on after-school research interested in youth's perception, Bulanda and McCrea (2013) said,

Youths' perspectives offer important insights for service planners and researchers, especially since the majority of after school program researchers have studied youths' behavior or test scores (a 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective), rather than seeking youths' opinions about service (a 1<sup>st</sup> person perspective). (p. 100)

Supporting previously discussed research, youth continually expressed value in relationships developed in the program. While many of them expressed trepidation over sharing personal aspects of their lives, the trust created by doing so help to create many lasting person bonds closely valued by the youth. These findings stressed the need for mentors to work to develop relationships with youth at the youth's pace. The youth also expressed interested in the authentic goal they had as a group to better their community. Although it may come as a surprise to some, many of the youth respected mentors' abilities to show leadership and provide structured activities. This seemed to put into question the practice of mentors who allow large amounts of free time in after-school programs out of the belief that the youth simply want to socialize and be left alone. Finally, while they may not have used the word, the most common area of growth for youth was in empathy. Youth consistently became more aware of how their actions influenced the people around them, a valuable skill for any youth to gain.

## **Conclusion**

While enough time has elapsed since the modern expansion of after-school programs for there to be a relatively robust body of literature on the subject, there continues to be significant gaps. Most directly related to this study, there is a lack of qualitative research interested in the perspective and experiences of the youth enrolled in the program. If our understanding of after-school programs and the embrace of positive youth development is to continue, further research must be conducted on how youth experience these programs so that we can better understand how to modify programs to reach out to more youth and produce more positive outcomes in at-risk youth. This would most practically necessitate detailed case study research with youth in after-school programs; spending adequate time with them to understand their perspectives and emotions considering the program they are involved in.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter will explore the research design and methods of the case study. This will include a detailed introduction into the setting and background. A more thorough description of the methods, methodological framework, and data analysis of the study will be given than was in Chapter One. Additionally, the rigor, trustworthiness, and concerns of confidentiality of this study will be addressed.

#### **Qualitative Research**

It was chosen to approach this research project in a qualitative fashion not only because of gaps in existing literature but to produce the most fruitful data on after-school programs based on my research questions. As opposed to the artificial manipulation of events in quantitative research, qualitative research seeks to understand events in their natural setting. It was the aim of this study to go into the natural setting of an after-school program and gain greater understanding of its youth and how they experience it, rather than manipulate it to specific standards or criteria. Only qualitative research, which Peshkin (1993) describes as having an, “open, opportunistic nature” could hope to capture this reality as it is (p. 23).

Furthermore, given that the aim of this study was to understand youth’s perception of after-school programs, only qualitative research could fully address these questions. My concerns were not in objective fact but in perceptions of reality. Therefore, all data was ripe with subjectivity, not as a weakness but as a consequence of the questions I asked. Only qualitative research could embrace these questions. Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, and Pierre (2007) expressed qualitative research’s embrace of subjectivity by saying,

In other words, qualitative data and information are always already interpretations made by participants as they answer questions or by researchers as they write up their

observations. Neither research participants nor researchers can be neutral, because, as emphasized earlier, they are always positioned culturally, historically, and theoretically.

(p.27)

Therefore, qualitative research in general best addresses the “messy” nature of the questions that I saw as most needing to be asked regarding after-school programs.

### **Methodological Framework: Phenomenology**

The chosen methodological framework for this study was phenomenology.

Phenomenologists emphasize the intimate relationship between people and the objects they interact with. This is because all human consciousness is consciousness of objects. If a person loves, wishes, judges, hopes, values, or any of the infinite number of ways consciousness can be expressed, it is directed toward a person, object, or thing. Therefore, “Phenomenology is concerned with the *relations* that exist between human beings and the world around them” (Marton, 1986, p. 31). These people, objects, or things that make up the world around us are phenomena (Husserl, 1931, p. 243). A researcher’s consciousness of the phenomena around him or her is called intentionality (Husserl, 1931, p. 242). Husserl (1931) called intentionality, “a concept which at the threshold of phenomenology is quite indispensable as a starting-point and basis” (p. 245). Through intentionality, phenomenology invites researchers to study these phenomena directly and intimately (Crotty, 1998/2004, p. 79). Specific to this study, I was interested in understanding how my participants experienced the phenomenon of the after-school program. A theoretical framework of phenomenology helped me to maintain focus on the specific phenomenon studied: the after-school program. Additionally, rather than objective truth or fact, I was seeking to understand their relationship with the program. In line with

phenomenological thinking, I understood that each of the youth experienced that relationship in qualitatively different ways.

Phenomenology was also crucially important in the development of my research questions. Phenomenology is most interested in the relationships we have with the objects around us (Marton, 1986, p. 31). Therefore, my research questions were not necessarily pointed at understanding my participants better. Similarly, they were not focused on understanding the after-school program. Rather, my research questions (and therefore the study as a whole) aim to understand the relationship that my participants have with the after-school program (the phenomenon). Any sense of motivation, frustration, appreciation, or affection that they may feel (which are all expressions of consciousness) were all directed at something (a person, place, thing, etc.) within the after-school program. Therefore, my participants' consciousness does not appear in isolation but rather in a relationship with the objects around them. In this study, I sought to understand those relationships.

One potential obstacle for the phenomenological researcher attempting to gain deeper understanding of phenomena is culturally-defined understandings or assumptions. For the phenomenological researcher, culture is a delicate balance of attribute and threat to research. Certainly culture provides history to reflect upon and meaning to the world around us, but it also limits the researcher by providing assumptions that are often taken for granted (Crotty 1998/2004, p. 81). Because our experiences are based on these culturally-defined understandings and assumptions which are limiting to our understanding of the world, a phenomenologist must attempt to continually doubt them. In fact, Husserl (1960) went so far as to argue that, "the evidence of world-experience would, at all events, need to be criticized with regard to its validity and range, before it could be used for the purposes of a radical grounding of

science” (p. 17). One key tool in doubting is to bracket, or disconnect, those assumptions from one’s mindset (Husserl, 1931, p. 108). Bracketing assumptions and attempting to question assumed meanings and understandings allows a researcher to study phenomena as though they were new or unique. This is why phenomenological researchers often speak of “discovering” the essence of experiences or phenomenon around them, because they are attempting to learn about it as though it was a first time being exposed to the phenomenon (deMarrais, 2004, p. 57). For example, Husserl (1931) calls researchers to, “set aside all previous habits of thought, see through and break down the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking” (p. 43). Heron (1992) says phenomenology, “exhorts a pristine acquaintance with phenomena unadulterated by preconceptions: it encourages the inquirer to sustain an intuitive grasp of what is there by ‘opening his eyes’, ‘keeping them open’, ‘looking and listening’, ‘not getting blinded’ (p. 164). Because of my extensive experiences with the after-school program, I have an array of assumptions concerning the program, its staff, and youth. A phenomenological framework allowed me to question these assumptions, bracket them to the extent possible, study the phenomenon as though it was my first time being exposed to it, be transparent with myself and my audience concerning my assumptions and experiences, and attempt to question what I might have otherwise have assumed or taken for granted.

Another concept of phenomenology that was influential to this study is that of the “home” or “homeworld”. Steinbock (1995) defines the phenomenological definition of home as, “that concrete lifeworld wherein we are typically familiar, normal, or ‘at home’” (p. 188). The homeworld is an intersubjective framework of existence, which a person creates based on their familiar experiences (Steinbock, 1995, p. 188). A person can have multiple homeworlds, based on the variety of spaces in which they comfortably exist. The homeworld is contrasted with the



alienworld, which is unfamiliar, foreign, or new. A person's homeworld is not static but continually redefined by their experiences with the phenomenon around him or her (Steinbock, 1995, p. 199). Students in the after-school program regularly experience this. For example, for many of them, a positive relationship with a supportive adult that is neither judgmental nor threatening is a new experience, undoubtedly casting doubt on what a relationship with an adult can or should be. This new experience of a positive adult relationship is undoubtedly an alienworld for many youth initially. As their new experience becomes normalized with experience within the program, a previously alien experience becomes increasingly comfortable, thus becoming a new homeworld and casting doubt on their previous homeworld which did not include positive relationships with adults. Steinbock (1995) argues that this process is not only possible but essential (p. 199-200). Perhaps most relevant to this study, is that as a person develops a new homeworld (as in the experience of the student developing positive adult relationships in the after-school program) it is possible to generalize those experiences to multiple homeworlds, restructuring their limitations (Steinbock, 1995, p. 182). Therefore, it is theoretically possible that a student who experiences the development of a new homeworld within the after-school program (say in the development of positive relationships with adults) can generalize that rethinking into multiple homeworlds. Therefore, such a youth would not only redefine relationships with adults within the after-school program but relationships with adults outside of the program as well. Such a transition described by Steinbock (1995) as a homeworld evolving "with ever new content and an ever new 'face'" (p. 188). Specific to after-school programs, this is supported by the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring (Figure One), which suggests that social-emotional development that youth experience within after-school programs can generalize to improved relationships outside of the program. Adopting a phenomenological

framework (and therefore the concept of homeworld) has strengthened my resolve in the possible outcomes that after-school programs can realize, justified the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring having a large influence in this study, and impacted the lens in which I see youth generalizing their development within after-school programs into their lives.

Because phenomenological researchers are attempting to “discover” their studied phenomenon, they often take on the role of learner, where the participant is teaching the researcher of their perspective (deMarrais, 2004, p. 57). This is perhaps the most practical reason why phenomenology was chosen for this study. Because I am most interested in understanding the perceptions of youth in the after-school program, my participants are the possessors of knowledge on the topic. My job as researcher was to do my best to record and understand their perspective of the phenomenon of the after-school program. Therefore the participants largely led and controlled the direction of the study.

### **Methodology**

This study was designed as an instrumental case study. Stake (1995) describes instrumental case studies as being aimed at gaining greater understanding not only of the specific cases but of something beyond them (p. 3). In this specific study, I aimed to not only gain a greater understanding of how the four specific participants perceived the after-school program they were enrolled in but to gain insight into youth’s experiences in after-school programs more generally. This is not to confuse my aims with generalization. Although my four participants each offered valuable data to this study, it is impossible for four participants to be representative of a large population. Stake (1995) says, “Case study research is not sampling research. We do not study a case primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this

one case” (p. 4). Despite this central focus on my four cases, I do hope that my readers find a degree of transferability beyond them.

The object of research in a case study is the case. Merriam (2001) defines a case as, “a thing, a single entity, a unit around with there are boundaries” (p. 27). For these purposes each of my four participants, was their own “entity” with “boundaries,” is its own case. Therefore, this study is also a multi-case study. Merriam (2001) says, “This type of study involves collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or subcases embedded within (such as students within a school)” (p. 40). I found viewing the youth as their own cases was helpful when attempting to bring out their individuality. Additionally, my comparison across the cases allowed for some of my most compelling data.

Merriam (2001) describes case studies as focusing on “holistic description and explanation” (p. 29). Because of the holistic nature of case study research, it is important to place definite borders around the cases. This is often referred to as bounding the case. Bounding is helpful in case study research because it places definite limitations on the scope of research and distinguishes data within the study from data outside of the study (Yin, 2014, pp. 33-34). For the purposes of this study, the youth and their perception of the after-school program were the case. Because there are nearly an infinite number of political, social, educational, moral, and other factors and data sets that could influence after-school programs, a case study methodology was helpful in limiting the study to the youth’s perceptions of the program rather than outside factors that might influence it but were beyond the scope of research.

Case study mythology was chosen because it was the most effective tool for answering my specific research questions. This fit is essential. Merriam (2001) says, “Thus a researcher

selects a case study design because of the nature of the research program and the questions being asked. Case study is the best plan for answering the research questions; its strengths outweigh its limitations” (p. 41). Yin (2014) points out that case studies are best equipped to answer questions of “how” or “why” because these questions, “deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence” (p. 10). My research questions are designed to understand “how” youth perceive the after-school program and its impact on their lives and are therefore a natural fit into case study methodology.

Case study methodology was also a natural fit into my research topic more generally. Case studies are well equipped to answer multivariable complex social issues which require greater insight before hypotheses can be developed to base further research upon (Merriam, 2001, p. 41). The current literature on after-school programs is yet developing. It is my hope that this study can be part of gaining greater insight into youth perceptions of after-school programs as a means of developing greater understanding of best practices in after-school programs more broadly.

Additionally, a case study is the study of events as they are happening, as opposed to biographical or historical research that studies retrospectively (Bhattacharya, 2015, p. 92). In this study, I was most interested in the youth’s perception “in the moment”, rather than a reflection upon their lives or influences thereof. Therefore, case study was appropriate in this sense.

Finally, a case study was chosen as most effective because case studies tend to be intense studies done over a relatively short period of time, ranging from a few weeks to a year (Bhattacharya, 2015, p. 92). This short duration is because case studies do not solely rely on ethnographic or participant-observer data (Yin, 2014, p. 21). This short duration was helpful to

my study, given its research questions. While all people change over time, my participants, as a consequence of their young age, had a particularly high likelihood of their perceptions of the program changing over time. Rather than a longitudinal or ethnographic study, I was interested in obtaining a relative “snapshot” of the youth’s perception of the program. If this study were to last a much longer time, say several school years, such a perspective would be impossible.

Although case study was the most appropriate methodology for this study, all methodologies have their weaknesses. Most relevant to this study, in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrumental tool. Stake (1995) says, “Standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field, making observations, exercising subjective judgment, analyzing and synthesizing, all the while realizing their own consciousness” (p. 41). While this can bring many strengths into the study, it is inherently limited by the skill of the researcher. As an inexperienced researcher, it was therefore even additionally essential that I maintained continual focus on case study methodology in order to produce a quality study.

Additionally, case studies bring with them a potential ethical problem. Because case studies often compile large amounts of data that is largely open to the interpretation and analysis of the researcher, it is possible that the individual biases of the researcher to influence the eventual conclusions he or she comes to (Merriam, 2001, p. 42). While there is no way to completely escape this potential threat, rigorous data collection and analysis along with transparency are a researcher’s best hope in doing so. I have attempted to maintain these qualities throughout this study.

## **Population**

### **Setting**

The program studied was a nonprofit, privately funded, Christian faith-based after-school program in a Midwest urban environment. Each year, local fifth grade elementary school teachers are contacted and asked to provide the names of students that would be a good fit for the program. Based upon this feedback, program coordinators and staff select a panel of sixteen youth (eight boys and eight girls) to invite into the program. Youth of color are emphasized but not exclusively served. Otherwise, the program selects youth that appear to have an academic, behavioral, emotional, or other need that could potentially be filled through membership in the program.

The program is divided into grade level and gender groups. Each group has a primary mentor that typically travels with them through twelfth grade along with support staff that typically do not. These divisions in the program are seen as relatively fluid. Periodically because of personality conflicts, personnel changes, or other factors, youth are moved into an age group above or below them or into an alternative group altogether. In the year of this study, for example, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade class was integrated into the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade groups. Because they were outside of the scope of this study, I did not actively pursue the matter, but it seemed to have no ill effects on the group. This is likely, at least in part, because the program has a family atmosphere. Upon good behavior and meeting basic academic requirements, youth are invited to remain within the program through their high school graduation. If those expectations are not met, staff disengage from the youth with the understanding that they are welcome to rejoin as soon as expectations are fulfilled. In this sense, youth are never really removed from the program. The goals of the program include providing academic assistance, mentorship, fostering

relationships, developing a vision for the youth's future, and offering a setting to develop a non-denominational Christian faith.

Toward these goals, the after-school program offers homework time with mentors at their public high school. This occurs during a school-wide study hall time. Additionally, the program offers three basic programs for the high school youth: Shout Out, Future Hopes and Dreams, and Final Destination. Shout Out is a largely informal time to build personal relationships between staff and youth. Organized games and activities typically take place with additional, less structured social time also provided. Future Hopes and Dreams aims to give youth a vision of what their life paths might entail after high school. Job shadowing, college visits, career exploration, and ACT preparation are just some of the activities that take place. Final Destination is an optional non-denominational faith-based program. Final Destination is offered separate to academic programs and optional to all youth. While specific data was not taken, most youth in the program seemed to voluntarily participate. Beyond these programs, mentors are in regular contact with youth and their parents, offering support and periodic one-on-one times, called Face-to-Face, as needed. Finally, the program offers trips to locations such as Pikes Peak, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Washington D.C. for both enrichment and reward.

### **Description of program facilities.**

The after-school program studied is blessed with significant private financial support that in addition to a large, full time staff, exciting rewards trips, and other expensive program features has allowed for uniquely high-quality program facilities. The primary program building sits in the downtown area of the Midwest urban community among various storefronts, restaurants, and loft apartments. It is a short walk from the community library, city/county building, and community theater. Largely glass front, with a trendy, industrial design and a large, identifiable

sign, the building is inviting and recognizable. Adding to these characteristics is a large mural on the side of the building completed by a group of youth several years ago. Once inside the building, one is greeted by a small commons area with seating for approximately twenty. When in operation, a portable metal detector stands over a doorway that leads into the facilities. From there, the building has an open floor plan that includes a non-alcoholic bar area that seats approximate forty, billiards room with four tables, dance hall, a partial basketball court, video arcade area, a computer/tech room, and numerous computer stations put into restaurant-style booths. Up a set of stairs and largely out of sight from this predominately open area is the program's executive director's office, a theater area that seats approximately fifteen in plush reclining seats, and a secondary computer area. This primary facility is not only used by the after-school program but is open to youth in general on weekend nights. The vision of these open nights is purely social but strives to provide a safe, positive, supportive environment for youth throughout the community. Additionally, this primary building is periodically rented out for various events and celebrations.

As the program initially expanded by one grade level each school year, it became apparent that they were outgrowing this primary facility. Consequentially, a secondary building was purchased. It is only a short walk from the primary facility, and youth meeting their mentors at the primary building often walk to the secondary for a specific activity there. This secondary building is much smaller in square footage but offers several important contributions to the program. First, there are two classrooms equipped with white boards and television screens, each big enough for a group of fifteen students comfortably. There is also a large meeting room in the front of the building facing the street that is the primary cultural hub of the community. Between the classrooms and large meeting area are the two large kitchen areas. Each kitchen is



stocked with a stove, refrigerator, dishwasher, and a full array of utensils. It is widely used by groups conducting cooking or nutrition tracks, and has been a significant addition to the program.

Both the primary and secondary buildings are predominately used by the middle school youth. As the after-school program transitioned into a high school program, many staff members believed that youth felt too old for the program facilities they had been attending since sixth grade and would benefit from an alternate location to meet at and call their own.

Consequentially, high school youth and staff primarily meet at the home of one of the primary donors of the program. The home is a unique setting. It is just off of a major street in the community, but large, mature trees, a long and windy private driveway, a river just next to the property, and an open field behind the home all make it feel much more rural than it is. Program youth and staff meet in an auxiliary building on the property that features a partial basketball court, kitchen, and classrooms that feature whiteboards and television screens. The majority of my out-of-school observations occurred at this location.

## **Background**

The program studied was founded in January of 2008 with a single sixth grade class. Each year, the program grew by one class, celebrating its first high school graduation in the spring of 2014. The program has had to remain flexible as it has grown into a 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade program. There has been substantial construction at their primary facility and the purchase of a secondary facility nearby. At times at the risk of sacrificing stability, it has also had to continually redefine and reconfigure itself as it has seen fit. This is both a benefit and a burden of being privately funded.

Perhaps the most overtly observable example of these changes is the development of the program-wide policy for mentors to disengage with youth from regular programming if they are not making apparent academic efforts and/or have continually displayed behavioral misconduct. While these disengaged youth do not participate in program-wide events, a “second relationship” is developed with the youth, generally in the form of one-on-one contact with the mentor called Face-to-Face. This policy was developed out of growing frustration that program resources were being put into youth that were not reciprocating with effort but rather developing a sense of entitlement toward program privileges and rewards. While the youth always have the opportunity to be reunited with the program, this was seen as a dramatic shift away from the philosophy of limitless love and patience that the program was founded on by many members of the staff.

Another dramatic shift in the program’s history was the adjustment into high school. At the middle school level, the program is almost exclusively an after-school program. Middle school youth meet their mentors immediately after school for brief homework time before being transported to the program’s facility for recreational time, social time, tracks, and other activities. At the high school level, it became clear that this schedule would not be successful. As youth obtained their own transportation, became involved in increasingly-demanding sports and school activities after school, developed a natural sense of independence, and generally grew out of the program facilities, changes were needed to continue to reach the youth in a meaningful way. Consequentially, the program was able to obtain permission from the local school district to move their academic time into the school day. During the school’s study period, program mentors go into the school, meet with students, and provide academic assistance for the students. Initially, this was conducted within classrooms with a single teacher assigned to each group. For

several years, I was one such teacher. Because of reconfiguration of the school schedule, the arrangement was later changed to the program meeting in the school cafeteria and later the library with program staff. While the later arrangement was deemed less effective by most staff, it gave the program greater autonomy within the school. Ultimately, it was deemed a mutually-beneficial arrangement for the school and program as student to teacher ratios in many of the classrooms during the study hall period were reduced and the program was able to contact youth within the school day.

As the program has continued to develop, it has significantly broadened its scope. While academics continue to play a key role in the program, a need to reach out to students who struggled to see relevancy or motivation in academics was seen. Addressing this need, the after-school program began to put on various student-led community event programs such as, “It Matters”, honoring Black History Month and “How Big is Your Why” honoring Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a reader’s theater event honoring Veterans Day, and an unsung hero project honoring under-recognized heroes in our society such as teachers, firefighters, nurses, and policemen. The purpose of these were similar to that of project-based learning in education: to provide an authentic and relevant common goal for youth to strive for that they can feel a sense of purpose, achievement, and pride in after completing.

Early in the program’s history, there was a sense of frustration that many of the youth, a majority of which were from low-income or otherwise problematic home lives, lacked a vision of where their lives were going and what role education could play in it. To remedy this gap in vision, an additional staff member was hired for the purpose of developing a program titled “Future Hopes and Dreams”. As the title suggests, its purpose was to develop and encourage a

personal interest, goal, or dream each youth had in hopes of providing a vision for what their life could be and the role that an education must play in it.

Another aspect of the program that has continually grown has been the student trips. Currently, all grades six through twelve are involved in a reward trip. Many of these are educational as well as recreational. For example, the seventh grade trip to St. Louis spends a significant portion of the trip learning about the Dred Scot Decision and the city's history of slavery. The 11<sup>th</sup> grade trip to Washington D.C. incorporates many of the city's national monuments, museums, and historical sights. In order to celebrate and develop the future hopes and dreams of individual youth, students have the opportunity to develop individualized trips their eighth and tenth grade years. Individualized trips are typically focused around a specific interest or future career choice that the youth is interested in pursuing.

Once the program had developed into a 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade group and mentors and directors were able to reflect on youth's progression with the program through high school, there was a growing degree of discontent in its methods. Gradually, mentors began to believe that many of the extrinsic rewards offered to the youth had unintended consequences. They began to see many of the program's graduates as having a sense of entitlement and with underdeveloped senses of intrinsic motivation. Wondering if the extrinsic motivators might be at least partly responsible, extrinsic motivators, particularly among high school youth, were decreased. One specific example is that youth had been rewarded with gift cards at the end of each nine week period based on their academic performance. A youth with high enough grades could earn over 100 dollars in gift cards every nine weeks. This practice was ended with the high school youth.

Collectively, these changes to the program demonstrate a continual effort by program directors and staff to attempt to find ways to reach the youth in a meaningful way. Change does

not come easy, particularly when it involves the coordination of a number of people. While many of these changes have not been seamless or universally praised, what should be praised is the willingness to risk controversy or failure to find ways to help youth, which need it so badly.

### **Participants**

For this study, four ninth grade youth enrolled in the after-school program were selected. This group of four was based on an initial recruiting pool of seven. Of those seven, one youth declined participation and two parents were unresponsive to telephone, text message, and postcard messages mailed home. The recruiting pool of seven participants was developed after initial observations and with input from program staff. Observations were conducted at the local high school during an academic time and a Final Destination meeting. Efforts were made while creating the initial recruiting pool to conduct a typical case study through youth that are relatively typical of the program. Youth were screened for typicality in areas such as academic achievement, socialization, and personal aspiration. Ninth grade was initially chosen because in preliminary discussions with program staff and directors, it was agreed that it was a crucial year in the development of youth and transition within the program. Program directors felt that ninth grade was a year that they often “lost” youth due to their greater degree of freedom in high school and the consequential competition for the youth’s time that the program has to conduct.

### **Design**

#### **Statement of Transparency**

In the name of transparency, it is necessary to briefly describe my subjectivities and experiences with the program studied. I began working with the program as a mentor in 2009. A former high school student who had worked at the program had recommended me. At the time, their typical employees were teachers willing to work a few extra hours after school.

Because of coaching responsibilities, my role with the program was seasonal. Most commonly, I have worked with middle school youth after school and high school youth during their in school academic time. One or two days a week, I would travel to the local middle school and assist with their academic time. Afterward, we would travel to the program's primary facility where I would assist "tracks" or recreational time, depending on the day. Occasionally, I have led tracks, most of them being related to fitness, nutrition, athletics or well being. I have worked directly with the ninth grade group that was represented in this study during both their seventh and eighth grade years, although that was not a consideration when deciding that they would be a potentially useful group for the study.

During my time with the program, their employee model has changed. Most of their employees are now full time, allowing them to be able to reach out to youth in the evenings and meet as a staff during the day. Consequentially, they have had less need for teachers working part time after school. This had made me become something of an anomaly within the program and at times struggling to define my limited role. In preparation for this study, I decided to cease my role with the program, not because I believed my employment there negated my ability to conduct research on it but simply because of lack of time to continue with a second job.

Throughout my time with the program, I have met many people that care deeply about the youth they serve. I have seen them reach out to youth time and time again, often when the youth is giving no apparent sign that they are willing to be receptive. Anyone that works with youth, particularly challenging ones, knows that moments of success can be few and far between. Occasionally, however, I have seen such moments of success. I have seen youth improve their lives as a result of the relationships and experiences gained in this program. I care deeply about this program because it works to help youth that need help so badly. My experiences there have

opened my eyes to the terrible conditions so many of our youth are put into at no fault of their own, made me slower to blame youth for their apparent academic deficiencies, and have honed my sense of obligation to help youth more broadly than academic instruction. Those changes are deep within me, and I carry them into this study.

It should also be noted that I have another, more recent, experience that has further strengthened my belief in the type of mentoring that this after-school program offers. In my first year teaching higher education, one role I took on was to supervise a mentoring program that had been developed the year before between the college I now work at and a local middle school. The program, which I have redesigned, features undergraduate students working one on one or in small groups with eighth grade youth in team-building and character-building activities. The program is small. We average approximately ten mentees and mentors in our weekly sessions. We meet during their club period at the end of the day for fifty minutes. Still, I know that the relationships developed during our time together is a significant bright spot in the youth's day and have further driven my interest and belief in this type of program.

These experiences and closeness to the study certainly come with both a cost and benefit as a researcher. First, it is a common concern of researchers to guard from being too close to their respective study. This was continually on the forefront of my mind in both my design and execution of the study. This concern was met with both a theoretical and methodological response. First, my theoretical framework, which urged me to continually question my assumptions about the after-school program and youth's experiences was used as a tool to guard against my own subjectivity. Secondly, here and throughout this study, I have made attempts to be transparent of my experiences and subjectivities regarding the program specifically and after-

school programs in general. It is my objective that readers will be able to use this transparency in part of their assessment of the potential transferability that this study might offer.

As an addition risk, this research design put me in a potentially difficult position. If my aim was to generate as authentic interview data from my participants as possible, there was potential for the youth to reveal negative information regarding the program. In such a situation, I needed to be able to be receptive to this data and capable of looking past assumptions I have made regarding the program. While I have made attempts to do so, it is again up to the reader, armed with my transparency, to judge my efforts.

Despite these concerns, I maintain that my closeness to the study was a net benefit. First, because of my history with the program, I was able to enjoy a status of cultural insider within the program. This was particularly unique because I was a white, middle class man doing interacting with middle school youth, many of which were lower income students of color. Such cultural insider status, at least in the context of the after-school program, is invaluable to researchers. It allowed me to observe more natural behavior. Indeed, as a cultural insider, many of the youth that were in the program but not involved in the study likely never realized I was doing research during my observations. Because my presence was otherwise common, they likely assumed that I was working or volunteering my time with the program. I do not say this as an element of deception, as data was only collected on my participants but rather as evidence of my ability to observe natural behavior within the program during my observations. Additional benefits were that I was able to more quickly gain the trust of my participants and their parents and obtain more open access to the program by its directors and mentors.

More broadly, I believe that my experiences relative to after-school programs made for a deeper, more fruitful study. They have given me a passion for my research topic. Rather than



corrupted my ability to conduct this study, that passion has motivated me to conduct the highest quality study I am capable of. I believe in the potential of after-school programs and have sought here to complete a study that will help to understand how youth experience them. I believe this can be an important part in defining best practices relative to after-school programs and is thus deeply meaningful work. My experiences have given me greater insight into the program. A researcher without such experiences and insight may likely have less effectively interpreted interview or observation data, without requisite background or context. Finally, my experiences have helped me to maintain my standards of quality of research. Because I personally know many of the people involved in this study, directly and indirectly, it pushed me even further to protect confidentiality, maintain professionalism, and complete a study that was of sufficient quality to be useful to them. My experiences with the program have required me to maintain transparency throughout this study. They should also be under the reader's consideration when considering my results. Nevertheless, I believe that they have made this study stronger.

### **Research Design**

Research was conducted throughout the spring semester of the 2017-2018 school year. All participants involved agreed to participate in the study and all necessary parental consent forms were completed. This study consisted of a qualitative case study rooted in a phenomenological theoretical framework. As such, the focus was on the essence of experience of the phenomenon studied: youth's perception of their after-school program. With that in mind, emphasis was always placed not on what events occurred within the program but on how the youth perceived those events. A central aspect of phenomenology is being doubtful of prior experiences and assumptions; taking a new approach to phenomenon void of socially-contrived meaning or understanding. Therefore, researchers are able to reach an understanding of the

essence of the experience. Specific to this study, efforts were made to understand the youth's perceptions free of the filter of my subjectivities as much as possible. At times when my subjectivities seemed to influence my perception, efforts were made to be as transparent as possible.

A key means of data collection was observation. In-school observations occurred during the youth's study hall period, which lasts 93 minutes and was located in the school library. These periods were supervised by program staff and youth met within their grade and gender groups (ninth grade males and ninth grade females). Therefore, during in-school observations, I typically split my time between the male and female groups, observing half of my participants at a time. Observations also took place at the program's various facilities. Observations occurred on a weekly basis, although not all youth were present at every given observation. If youth were absent from a given event, efforts were made to attend a meeting the following week, or in some cases later that week, that they would be present for. Access to youth at both their school and program facilities were assured and approved.

All observations in this study were carried out through the position of researcher as participant. This was deemed necessary because of my familiarity with the program, staff, and enrolled youth. If observations had been conducted as a non-participant, it would have seemed artificial or abnormal to youth and would have likely produced less natural behavior from them. On one of my first preliminary observations, for example, students were decorating journal covers for which they were going to log their thoughts on an upcoming series of lessons on the Old Testament of the Bible. To the program staff's surprise, I asked if I could design one of my own. Doing so, I believe, helped me to establish a more natural role in the group than if I had awkwardly sat in the corner and wrote in my observation journal. As far as I could tell, the youth

quickly accepted my presence and acted naturally. In fact, it was my impression that many of the youth not involved in the study thought I was working rather than doing research.

Researcher as participant observations bring with them an increased risk of getting too close to one's participants, however, so my efforts were again to be as transparent as possible regarding them.

In addition to observations, a series of interviews were held throughout the semester. At the onset of research, a semi-structured group interview was held. The primary scheduled topic of this interview was to further explain (and largely reiterate from the initial parent/youth meeting) the researcher's expectations for the project and what the youth could expect. Additionally, a small number of interview questions were asked, largely to accustom the participants to the interview process. Interview questions in this initial group interview were largely broad and impersonal such as, "What do you think this after-school program is for?" rather than more personal, pointed questions that would be reserved for individual interviews. While the group interview acted as a somewhat preliminary interview, it was recorded, transcribed, coded, and contributed to the themes of research along with all other collected interview data.

More formal, individual interviews were then scheduled. Throughout the semester, each youth was interviewed three times, each roughly four weeks apart. Interviews were semi-structured in nature. I went into each interview with a small number of questions to ask, largely based on observations up to that point or follow-up questions from previous interviews. At the same time, I maintained an openness to let the interview follow a natural course.

In order to facilitate productive interviews with youth that may otherwise be prone to short, non-descriptive answers, two activities were scheduled during the first two individual

interviews. The first activity was a social network activity (appendix I). At the beginning of the first individual interview, youth were asked to draw a web of those that are most important to their lives, with the strongest relationships being closest to them and more distant relationships being on the outer edges. People in their social network web who were active in the after-school program were designated with a star. In addition to giving the youth material to discuss during their two initial individual interviews, it was provided me with insight into the role that the after-school program played in their lives.

The second activity was a photography activity. After the initial, group interview, youth were supplied with disposable cameras. They were asked to spend the following weeks taking pictures of anything particularly meaningful in their lives. Then, the cameras were collected, and I had the photographs developed. In the second individual interview, I went through the pictures taken by the participant, giving them an opportunity to explain the significance of each subject. This was done for several reasons. First, the collected photographs were an additional form of data collection, adding to an increased triangulation of data. The participant's decisions of what to include in his or her limited number of photographs was very telling in the strength of a relationship with a given person or object. Second, the participant's description of each photograph made for valuable interview data. Finally, the photographs gave the participant material to discuss in the interview, thus "breaking the ice" of any potential uncomfortableness on the part of the youth.

The final interview was used as an opportunity to also member check. Participants were debriefed on developing themes in my research concerning them specifically. Being my final interview with them, I did not foresee the need for an "icebreaker" such as was in the first two interviews. Prepared questions were largely follow-up questions based on previous interviews or

observations, but (as with the first two interviews) it remained semi-structured in nature. I remained open to allowing the interview to go in any direction the participant wished to. See Table One for an inventory of all data

Table 1

Inventory of Data

Source of Data	Number of Pages	Total Number of Pages
Group Interview (1 Interview)	2-4 pages per participant x 3 participants	8
Individual Interviews (3 Interviews per participant)	7-14 pages per participant x 3 interviews x 4 participants	123
PARC Profile and Observation Notes (1 Form per interview per participant observed)	2 pages per observation x 29 observations	58
Social Network Webs (1 Form per participant)	1 page per participant x 4 member checks	4
Member Check Materials (1 Per participant)	3-4 per participant x 4 participants	15
Researcher Journal	Periodic journaling as needed	68
<b>Total Raw Data Pages</b>		<b>276</b>

## **Instrumentation**

Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois (2011) developed a conceptual framework of the role of comprehensive after-school programs on youth (see Figure Two). Comprehensive programs are defined as those that have multiple outcomes of youth in interest. In their framework, there are four means in which programs can influence youth: through programs, activities, relationships, and culture.

Those aspects of the program interact with each other as well as the youth's background to produce the youth's outcomes. This conception led Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois (2011) to create PARC (programs, activities, relationships, and culture) profiles as a way to record the influence that the after-school program was having on a youth at any given time. This study created adapted PARC profiles (appendix G and H) for each student involved in the study during each observation as a means of utilizing the Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois (2011) conceptual framework of after-school programs and the role the program was playing in the youth's lives. In addition to PARC profiles, during each observation, detailed field notes were taken. Focus was given to how the youth interacted with staff and other youth as well as how effectively the youth utilized the services that the program was offering.

One reason for this focus was so that during interviews, the effectiveness of utilization of services could be analyzed. If, for example, a youth was not engaged into the academic, social, enrichment, and other services the program offers in a meaningful way, rather than place judgment upon that youth, the researcher would use it as an opportunity to encourage the youth to reflect on how that (relatively low) level of engagement might affect the influence that the program as a whole was having on them. Would youth with relatively low levels of engagement in turn have low expectations of the program and its influence on them or do the youth

experience such a state of oblivion between their choice of active participation in the program and its effectiveness that they were unable to see the connection between the two? If they did associate low levels of engagement with low degree of influence on them from the program, what was their rationale? How could they justify this decision they were making? This was a primary, although not exclusive focus of the interviews. I was also interested in how the youth more generally perceived the program and how it may be influencing their lives.

### **Data Analysis**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) wrote,

You have just finished typing the fieldnotes from your final observation of the study and you proceed to file them. There, facing you, is all the material you have diligently collected. An empty feeling comes over you as you ask, 'Now what do I do'? (pp. 172-173)

This study, like any other qualitative study meeting a professional standard of rigor resulted in a large, nearly overwhelming amount of data. It was important from the onset of the study, particularly given the aggressive timeline I had developed for myself that I adhere to a regimented schedule of data analysis. Each observation I conducted was accompanied with a set of field notes, which were scanned, digitally saved, and then analyzed for future avenues of questioning in future interviews. These observations were done on a weekly basis. Observation notes, PARC profiles, photographic data, and the social network web activity were all used as data, primarily to help guide my questions in future interviews. My analysis of this data was often on a short timeline if one of the observed participants included my participant to be interviewed that week.

Interviews were done on a weekly basis, most commonly Friday afternoons. Interviews averaged thirty to forty-five minutes, resulting in approximately ten pages of text each. In order to keep up with the data coming in, all interviews were transcribed before the following week's interview. As Saldaña (2009) suggested, all interviews were coded both during and after data collection (p.7). Consequentially, each interview went through a first cycle coding before the next week's interview. This not only helped me to keep on pace with my chosen timeline but helped me to see themes as they developed. After each youth's third individual interview, a second cycle of coding was completed. In both first and second cycle coding, both descriptive coding, which Saldaña (2009) said, "summarizes the primary topic of the excerpt" and in vivo coding, which "is taken directly from what the participant himself says..." were utilized, with in vivo codes indicated with quotation marks (p. 3). This was chosen in order to have the flexibility to generate my own codes when I felt that my young participants lacked vocabulary or were talking around a specific idea while still being able to retain the original perspective and verbiage of my participants when possible. As Saldaña (2009) said, "Sometimes the participant says it best; sometimes the researcher does. Be prepared and willing to mix and match coding methods as you proceed with data analysis" (p. 76). This degree of flexibility seemed to be appropriate for this study to develop effective codes, categories, and themes.

Both first and second cycle codes were focused around the research questions and particularly each youth's perception of the after-school program and its influence on their life. Additionally, topics on the periphery of the research question, such as the participant's relationship with family members or view of school were not overlooked. After all interviews were completed, the emerging themes of each youth were analyzed for "meta-themes" of the study that demonstrated potential transferability.



## **Confidentiality and Ethical Concerns**

Within her seminal work attempting to identify the key characteristics of quality qualitative research, Tracy (2010) includes ethics as one of her eight criteria. She points out that research that treats participants ethically is not only universally desirable on a moral level but leads to more quality research. Participants that do not trust the researcher or his or her intentions or perhaps do not fully understand how his or her information will be used are more apt to protect themselves by not fully divulging their most intimate thoughts (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). With it in mind that ethical research is not only morally responsible but likely to produce more quality data, every effort was made to protect the confidentiality of my participants. The importance of confidentiality was even further magnified by the young age of my participants. Therefore, layers of protection were given to my participants. First, participants were given a pseudonym of their choice. All data, including that which connected students' pseudonym to their true identity was password protected. Next, although they were comfortable being named in the study, I chose not to reveal the name of the after-school program. Because it serves such a small number of youth, even pseudonyms would not be sufficient in keeping anonymity. In that same spirit, the name of the school which these youth attend was also not revealed. Finally, when pseudonyms were deemed insufficient in protecting anonymity, specific but non-essential details about participants were changed.

Beyond protecting anonymity and confidentiality, every effort was made to promote transparency with my participants and their parents/guardians. This was aided by the fact that, broadly speaking, I already enjoyed cultural insider status within the program. I was particularly close with this group of youth, having worked directly with them for the last two school years. This brought an element of trust into the study with me.

To further augment that trust, I tried to be as transparent as possible throughout the study regarding my intentions and goals for the research. This was particularly evident at the initial meeting with participants and their parents/guardians, which I hosted at the after-school program's secondary facility. I tried to make every effort possible to describe the purposes of the research, reiterate that participation was voluntary, emphasize that participants had the right to leave the study at any time, and answer all questions as honestly as possible.

Secondly, at our initial group interview, I emphasized transparency and honest conversation. More specifically, I discussed the importance of participants choosing to keep their own confidentiality and anonymity. While I made it clear that they were free to do so, I explained that discussing the content of interviews, their pseudonyms, and/or the direction of the study with others would potentially lead to otherwise private information becoming public and potentially embarrassing consequences.

Another opportunity I had to exercise transparency was during each participant's final individual interview, which also served as a member check. At the beginning of the interview, I shared with each participant the themes of research that I saw developing. Themes were most commonly delivered in a visual format in order to be informative as possible without creating a burden upon the participant, having to read copious amounts of complex, textual data. I then gave the participants an opportunity to respond to my research, presenting it as an opportunity to help me understand what I had gotten incorrect thus far or otherwise overlooked. The participants gave useful feedback during this time, suggesting that I had successfully gained their trust and comfort.

Finally, in the name of transparency, all communication outside of interviews and observations done with the participants was done through text messaging. This was so that I

could include parents in a group message and had record of all communication with the youth. Tracy (2010) held the position that, “Such procedures not only attend to ethics but also lead to more credible data” (p. 847). As my interviews began, this seemed to be the case and it seemed to me that the trust I enjoyed was at least partly due to my efforts at conducting the research in an ethical manner.

### **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

One of the challenges in qualitative research is that while one might consider his or her own research to be of high quality, it is more difficult to conclusively state the value of any one piece of research. This is, in part, because qualitative research does not seek to create “law-like” generalizations that apply in a universal fashion (Freeman et al., 2007, p. 29). Still, that doesn’t mean that the findings in qualitative research carry no meaning outside of the context of the study conducted. Rather, it is ultimately the reader, not the researcher, who is responsible for drawing conclusions from the research. Wehlage (1981) states that in qualitative research, “The consumer of the research, not the author, does the generalizing... It is up to the consumer to decide what aspects of the case apply in new contexts” (p. 216). Because in qualitative research it is the reader, which determines the degree to which a particular study holds meaning outside of the study conducted, it is also the reader, which, in large part, can determine the importance of any particular study. In order to bring about greater universal agreement as to what makes quality qualitative research, Tracy (2010) established eight “big tent” characteristics of excellent qualitative research: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). Throughout this study, I have attempted to be mindful of each of these characteristics in order to help me ultimately produce meaningful data and a valid study.

The topic of after-school programs was chosen specifically because I believe it is a worthy topic. After-school programs are one of the most exciting and fastest-developing changes in education today. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Centers, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Clubs, and countless other after-school programs are increasingly influencing the development of young people in America. It is of vital interest that we develop greater understanding of after-school programs. One important aspect of that understanding is how youth experience it.

Throughout this study, I have attempted to ensure that it was done with as much attention to rigor as reasonably possible. Part of rigor is that a large amount of effort was put into the study. That is true. This final project is the result of many hours of interviews, hundreds of pages of transcripts, untold hours of coding, detailed observation notes, and careful consideration of developing trends and patterns in data. To further add to my contextual understanding of after-school programs, I also observed two other after-school programs to build my context of what was typical or possible within such a context. It should be said, however, that rigor is more than simply putting in lots of hours on a given project or taking up large quantities of paper in interview transcripts and notes. In qualitative research, rigor is about providing rich descriptions that adequately describe complex phenomena and come to conclusions that are reasonable given the data presented (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). While my reader must ultimately decide the validity of my conclusion and their degree of transferability, I have made every reasonable attempt to put forth the effort to produce a study capable of being regarded of one of high rigor.

Perhaps my most conscious effort I have made throughout this project has been that of achieving sincerity. Tracy (2010) assigns the characteristic sincerity two sub-categories: self-reflexivity and transparency. Most relevant to this study, I have made extensive efforts to be

sincere and transparent regarding my subjectivities I bring into my research. I have worked with the studied program for several years and know many of the youth and staff well. This transparency is not to apologize for my subjectivity but rather to be honest about how it may influence my interpretation of data and perspective of observed events. It may have been tempting, for example, to turn this study into a position paper where I glorified a program that I already have strong affection for. My transparency throughout the study, however, acts as a check against what may otherwise be a conscious or subconscious violation of scholarly research.

Effort has also been made to strengthen the creditability of this study. More than perhaps anything else, the task of a qualitative researcher is to describe. Those descriptions must be full of meticulous descriptions and contextual details (Bhattacharya, 2015, p. 24). If it is the reader's job to determine the degree of generalization that a qualitative study is warranted (Wehlage, 1981), then the reader must be given sufficient material from which to make that determination. I have attempted in this study to do so. Furthermore, it is a boost to creditability if that provided data comes from multiple perspectives and methods (Tracy, 2010, 843-844). This not only provides more reliable data, but a more complex and complete understanding. In this spirit, I have collected data from observations at multiple sites in multiple events within the program. I have attempted to be as detailed as possible in my observation journal. My interviews have been both group and individual. Furthermore, to add a contextual base of after-school programs, I have observed multiple alternative after-school programs outside of that which is studied here.

Resonance is achieved in qualitative writing by creating a meaningful experience for the reader (Tracy, 2010, 844-845). It is impossible for me to know if this has been achieved because resonance is very much about what meaning each individual reader takes from this study. I

hope, however, that I have chosen a topic that is significant enough and presented it with enough authorial craftsmanship in order to convey meaning to the reader. I hope that readers commonly find transferability regarding other youth in other after-school groups (which in itself justifies the topic) but also the experiences of struggling or forsaken youth in other context of our greater education system. Additionally, I believe that this study can potentially find meaning regarding the state of evangelicalism today, our obligation to our fellow-citizen, poverty in America today, race relations in America today, and a host of other topics. These meanings are ultimately, however, not for me to decide.

I have sought for this study to achieve a significant contribution largely in how it addresses current gaps in existing literature. Researchers still have much to learn about after-school programs. Furthermore, little research on after-school groups, which emphasizes the perspective or perceptions of enrolled youth, has been conducted. Finally, conducting this research while continually mindful of positive youth development makes it additionally unique and (in my mind) significant as researchers continue to try to establish best practices and further understanding of after-school groups.

Perhaps the most important attribute that any research must have is that it is conducted ethically. Research ethics has multiple facets. It includes being mindful of risks to participants throughout the research, being transparent regarding the intentions of the researcher, protecting all data and identifications, working to maintain confidentiality, and presenting findings in a humane and responsible fashion (Tracy, 2010, 846-847). My focus on ethics has been maintained throughout this research project. I have worked to maintain the anonymity of my participants, their after-school program, and the school they attend. All data and identifiers have been password protected throughout the study and will continue to be. More holistically,

however, ethical research is about maintaining an ethical framework in one's mind throughout the project. I have attempted to approach each observation and interview with the upmost respect for my participant and his or her perceptions. This was particularly important given my research question. Because I was less worried about fact or truth concerning events than my participants' perception of those events, any position they took needed to be treated with respect, even if (perhaps especially if) I disagreed. It is my hope that I was able to treat my participants, their families, and the staff at the after-school program ethically, not only because it is morally desirable but also because doing so builds a trusting bond that ultimately produces more quality data and understanding.

Finally, Tracy (2010) indicates that in order to be considered quality, qualitative research must demonstrate meaningful coherence. By this, she means that research must be consistently aligned toward a consistent goal, present findings logically in line with the research's purpose and data presented, display consistent and rationale methods, be aligned with current literature, and generally display sound thought and consistent message throughout the study (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). While it seems too bold of me to declare these expectations a success within this study, I have made a conscious and deliberate attempt to be continually mindful of my research purpose. Toward that end, I made something of a ritual of continually rereading my research questions before every interview and observation. I attempted to connect to current literature by utilizing a strength of what I viewed as the piece of literature that is most relevant to this study, *After-School Centers and Youth Development* by Hirsch, Dueutsch, and DuBois (2011) by creating a PARC profile during each observation for each participant observed. This not only connected my study to current literature but strengthened the data gathered from my observations. While reflecting on each of these data-collecting sessions, I consistently attempted

to maintain focus on how my participant's words and actions reflected their perceptions of the program and what I could learn about those perceptions. Ultimately, the job of a qualitative researcher is to describe what is in front of him or her. I have claimed to do little more and hope that my reader finds that I have done a consistent, rational, and adequate job of doing so.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a more detailed description of the setting of the after-school program studied and its background, providing considerable context to the study. Additionally, the methodology of the study was described in greater detail. The majority of data collected was be through observation and interviews. The work of Hirsch, Deutsch, & DuBois (2011), particularly their conceptual framework of after-school programs, was key to the instrumentation of this study.



## Chapter 4: Findings

As a single instrument case study grounded in phenomenology, this study sought the essence of the experience or phenomenon free of prior experiences or socially-constructed assumptions. Specifically, I sought to understand four ninth grade youth's perceptions of their after-school program. Toward that end, this study was focused around the following research questions:

1. How do youth in the program perceive the services they receive and their influence on their lives?
2. How do youth in the program perceive the value of the relationships created with mentors, youth, and other staff within the program?
3. To what extent do youth in the program perceive the association between their level of engagement with the program with the influence that the program will have on them?

The aim of this study was to understand each youth's perception of the phenomenon, (the after-school program). Consequentially, as described in Chapter Three, all data was ripe with individual subjectivities concerning how each youth experienced the program. Therefore, I will first present each of the four youth as individual cases and divide the first section of this chapter by participant, embracing their subjectivities in each respective section. In that spirit, it should also be noted, I have chosen to include largely unedited quotations. I found that understanding the subjectivities and perceptions of the youth is more obtainable in their authentic language. Consequentially, fillers such as, "like" and "you know" as well as grammatical errors will remain, exposing the reader to more authentic language (and therefore perception) of high school youth. In this chapter, I will briefly introduce and provide background to each participant followed by a detailed description of the themes of data collection specific to them. Finally, I

will then present a cross-case analysis of each of the four cases in which I will compare and contrast them based around the data collection themes.

### **Participant: Sadie**

Sadie was recommended to me as a participant by the program's staff after another candidate in my initial pool decided to decline participation. She is a Hispanic youth of slender body type that had joined the program in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. An initial screen that I had set up for myself of participants was that I was looking for youth that, like the majority of youth in the program, had been enrolled since 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Based on that criterion, I initially passed over Sadie as a less than ideal candidate to pursue. Upon further review and consideration with program mentors, however, I decided that Sadie could potentially offer uniquely valuable insight into the program. Her late enrollment meant that more than most youth it was out of conscious choice. In fact, I later learned that she had individually, rather than out of parental persuasion, sought out the after-school program. Because they had an opening, something that is relatively rare, they accepted her. I grew curious as to the reasons she sought out the program and the potential that her descriptions would provide insight into what youth value in such a program.

When I went to Sadie's home to talk to her and her mother about my research, it was only days before I was to begin my data collection. I was understandably nervous about the prospect of their disinterest in the study and having to seek out an additional participant. Sadie and her family, consisting of two younger sisters, aged seven and three years old, two older brothers aged sixteen and eighteen, her mother, her stepdad, and a maternal aunt with an infant daughter, lived in a lower-income neighborhood of town not far from the after-school program's primary facility in what could be described as a lower middle class, two-story home. Because of my late recruitment of her into the study, they had been absent from my parent/youth meeting designed

to give an overview of the study. After explaining my research, I was surprised with the lack of questions or concerns either of them had. For her part, Sadie's mother was interested in my interviews providing Sadie an outlet to communicate openly and confidentially with someone, which was not a characteristic of Sadie's relationship with her mother. Sadie struck me as quiet and shy. Her apparent shyness, coupled with the fact that she was the only youth in this study that I did not previously know before it started concerned me that I would struggle to get sufficient data out of our interviews together. As I got to know Sadie better, however, she not only became increasingly willing to be open and detailed in her descriptions of even personal topics in our interviews, but I also began to see a kind of quiet leadership out of her that usually only comes from intelligent and mature youth.

It should be noted that there was clearly love in Sadie's home. Repeatedly, she spoke fondly of all of her immediate and many of her extended family members. She spoke of how she was "proud" of her mother that she "changed her whole life just for me and my brothers and my sisters". She spoke of the strong "bond" with her sisters. Of her two brothers, she described one as, "protective" and "someone I can go to when I'm upset". When going through the pictures taken with the disposable camera I had given her, I was able to see evidence of a typical, healthy sibling relationship with her other brother. He had taken the camera and took a picture imitating how he imagined her taking pictures for "crushes". She lovingly rolled her eyes and jokingly said, "I hate my brothers!" She also spoke lovingly of many of her family members, most notably her grandparents and a maternal aunt.

That being said, Sadie had clearly grown up in a difficult environment for a young child. She described her father as not being, "in the picture a lot". She described her mother's history with drug abuse causing Sadie to, "be home alone a lot" and that her mother, "went away for a

little bit”. The sense of abandonment Sadie surely felt after these experiences was undoubtedly what she was referring to when she said, “I’ve had a lot of people leave my life that meant a lot to me, and so that’s just something I like to keep caution”. Beyond her immediate family, Sadie felt like she had few role models of success within even her extended family. Of her extended family she said, “I wouldn’t say success, we’re not successful people, but like, we kind of slacked a little bit during those times we should have been focusing on what we really wanted to do...” This lack of role models created, in my estimation, a sense of isolation within her family, undoubtedly being a driving force that brought her to the after-school program.

Here, I present three themes of primary significance for Sadie: her vision of her future self, her personal growth through the program, and the seeking out of positive relationships.

#### **“I want to be someone”--Vision of Future Self**

A predominant theme that quickly emerged from my data collection was that Sadie had a vivid vision of her future self. In our conversations, Sadie regularly reported that she perceived that she lacked role models in her family. As stated earlier, this should not be taken as an implication that her family was without love. In fact, my data collection indicated quite the contrary. Nevertheless, based on the emphasis in my research questions and theoretical framework on the youth’s perception of their experience and the consistency with which Sadie discussed her perception that she lacked role models, I felt compelled to include this critical theme of Sadie’s experience.

This lack of positive role models of success in Sadie’s life would have had a powerfully detrimental influence on many youth, but it seemed to have the opposite effect on her, acting as a catalyst of change. Somehow, despite a lack of family members to act as positive role models of

success as she saw it, Sadie developed a keen vision of herself as she wanted to be in the future, saying that she wanted to, “be someone” and have a, “good life”.

When later pressed with what that meant to her, she associated it strongly with financial stability, saying that she wanted to not have to worry about money later in life. Additionally, she associated, “being someone” with going to college. Further tying the ideas of “being someone” with financial success, she said of the after-school program, “They want you to be able to live your life, a happy life, with a good job that you wanted, you know.” Therefore, for Sadie, much of her future vision of herself consisted of economic and professional stability unlike she had thus far experienced or seen within her family.

While Sadie possessed a vision of her future that is uncommon for youth of her age, it should not be viewed that she had these goals for herself entirely void of encouragement from her family. On the contrary, Sadie reported sometimes feeling burdened by her family’s high expectations of her. She said of her mother, “it’s just harder for her to go through life pretty much and you know, my mom even told me she doesn’t want to see me or my brothers go through that.” She additionally spoke of her grandfather as a driving force to encourage her to graduate from high school. Still, those expectations of her family seemed to be the product of her family seeing Sadie’s vision for herself rather than an independent source of motivation for Sadie. Sadie reported, for example, that her family did not push her siblings in academics in the same way.

Sadie seemed, in my estimation, to be driven by a vision of her future self to be different than her family members, who she loved dearly but also wanted a different life for herself than they were living. This vision gave her an appreciation for the importance of academics that is

unfortunately relatively rare in youth and drove her to the program as a source of academic support.

**“They do want you to succeed in your school education and everything”: Academic support.**

Because of her vision of her future self that she had, Sadie was motivated to succeed academically. This was not something that came easily to her. Chronically, Sadie had been academically behind, particularly in reading and math. As she said, “I’ve always been pretty slow with reading and math. I’ve always been at least two grades behind. I’ve, like, ever since I was in kindergarten. I used to have to be in special classes.” Despite these challenges, Sadie was able to maintain focus on her goals and experience academic success. For example, in our second interview, she shared with me a recent success: she had recently gotten her math grade, a subject that she chronically struggled in, up to a grade of 75%. She was understandably excited and proud. When discussing her motivations for achieving her academic success, she said,

Because I’ve always had a big fear of ending up like my dad and I never wanted that.

And my mom has always told me he used to not be good in any of his classes. He used to skip and he wasn’t...and even if he didn’t skip, he’d still fail his classes and everything because...and he’d just give up. And I...and he’d just be on the street all the time, and I have that fear of ending up like him, and I didn’t want that.

Clearly Sadie saw the consequences of academic failure in her family members and understood the importance of academic success. None of this is to imply that she was an exceptional student. Throughout our time together, she continued to struggle, but our conversations together made me confident that she would graduate from high school and likely go to college if she was able to maintain her vision for the future she wanted.

**“College wasn’t really an option for my future”: The program’s role in instilling Sadie’s vision.**

During our final interview together and in an improvisational activity, I drew on my notes two identical stick figures. I turned them toward Sadie and told her that one of them was her in the future having attended the after-school program through twelfth grade. The other was her in the future having not attended the program. I then asked her how she thought the two girls were different. She quickly pointed toward the figure that had not attended and said, “She probably wouldn’t be in college.” She then went on to explain how her lack of family role models with college degrees had seemingly negated college from her future. She said, “College wasn’t really an option for my future”. As a demonstration of how outside of her schema higher education was before attending the after-school program, she told a story of her grandmother encouraging her to go to college. In the story, her grandmother told her, “You need to go to school.” Her naïve response back was, “I’m already at school, Grandma”, demonstrating how she had never even considered going to college.

Far from innate or exclusively a product of her family, Sadie perceived this lack of vision before the after-school program to be a product of the institutions that she had grown up in. She told a story of a school counselor at her middle school who had been conducting a questionnaire about the students’ future plans. When Sadie inquired about one specific portion concerning college, she was told that she wouldn’t have a chance to do that. In fact, when she and a group of her peers expressed interest in college, they were given the impression by the counselor that in Sadie’s words, “kids like us don’t really have a chance to do that”. While apparently the counselor was reprimanded, it left a lasting impression on Sadie that she wouldn’t be going to college. Sadie said of her initial impression of the event, “Okay, she’s telling us we can’t, so

let's not waste our breath on it...As, you know a kid, looking up to a grown adult, the adults are going to be right". Whatever the combination of racism, classism, and unprofessionalism this incident with the counselor represented, it left a clear impression on Sadie that she was not good enough for higher education.

What is even more impressive about Sadie is that despite these powerful forces working against Sadie, she came to the after-school program wanting more for herself. This act is powerful evidence of an internal vision for her future. This vision, however, had to be developed. The after-school program consciously tries to develop this, most directly through the Future Hopes and Dreams branch of the program. Here, the after-school program provides college visits, ACT preparation classes, job shadowing, and a host of other activities. Sadie, however, perceived that the after-school program had its most significant role in developing her vision of herself and her future through improving her self-confidence, undoubtedly overturning years of implications and people explicitly saying that she wasn't good enough, allowing for meaningful personal growth through the program.

### **“Know who you are”: Personal Growth**

In what I intended to be my final question of our last interview together, I asked Sadie my most direct, pointed question specific to my research questions of my entire data collection period: "...is there anything that you think I'm missing that I need to know about what you think about [the program]"? Her answer led me to reconsider the categorization and thematic organization of my entire data collection. She said that her mentor persistently pushed her to keep working, in this case specifically on her academics, and overcome her tendency to give up too quickly. This led me to see a theme in Sadie's perception of the program: that it provided her opportunities to grow and mature, particularly in the areas of self-confidence and socialization.



**“They made me realize that I’m not... lower than anybody”:** Self-confidence.

Regularly during our conversations together, Sadie spoke of her low self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, when retrospectively discussing her chronically low grades she said, I used to think I was dumb or something. I used to think I wasn’t smart at all. And that kind of lowered my self-esteem a lot as I’ve grown older because I’ve always thought I was, like, very low for my other friends.

Sadie credited the after-school program with successfully improving her self-confidence. She said that the after-school program encouraged youth to, “know who they are” and be “strong and independent”. Repeatedly, she attributed the after-school program as helping her to build her self-confidence and see that, “I’m not lower than anybody”. Finally, she commended the efforts of program directors to get youth, “out of their comfort zone”. Collectively, it can be seen that Sadie saw a significant influence from the after-school program as to help her develop into a more complete, healthy, happy, and confident individual.

Far from in a vacuum, Sadie perceived that these benefits led to a host of other, more concrete benefits. For example, when discussing recent academic improvements she had seen, she credited the after-school program, not because of tutoring helping her to understand a complex subject area but because their message to her was, “it’s not that you can’t, it’s that you’re making yourself so you can’t do it”. In essence, Sadie perceived that the program had improved her self-confidence leading to academic improvements.

**“You kind of have to talk to other people”:** Socialization.

One of my earliest impressions of Sadie, when I came to her house only days before my data collection was to begin was that she was quite shy. As my data collection began, both my observation and interview data seemed to confirm this. During my observations, Sadie usually

interacted with a relatively small circle of those she perceived to be her closest friends in the program. During our first individual interview, she said, “I’m pretty shy around new people...” As my data collection continued, I found this category of personal development to be a bit more complex than I initially understood.

First, Sadie credited the after-school program with helping her to get over her shyness. She saw this as a natural consequence of the diversity and number of people that she inevitably had to interact with in the program. As she said of the youth during program activities, “We all go together and we have to interact with each other, and you just have to work with all of them”. Consequentially, Sadie believed she had grown more comfortable interacting with people she did not have a close, personal relationship with.

Additionally, she saw that the after-school program had installed activities with the intention of improving social skills. Just before this study began, the program had organized a community 2 mile/4 mile run as a fund raiser for the program. Additionally, it served as a project-based learning experience for the youth, as they were involved in the advertising, designing of awards, setting up and tearing down of equipment, solicitation of sponsors, and much more. In addition to having the honor of creating the winning design for the awards, Sadie was responsible for going out and asking businesses around the community for sponsorship in the race. Youth were prepared by mentors with how best to approach the solicitation, but it was ultimately the responsibility of the youth. In doing so, Sadie credited the experience with increasing her confidence in communicating with adults she didn’t previously know. She said, “...with talking to older people, it’s like more comfortable for me. Or at least more than before I was here.” By, “here”, Sadie meant her involvement in the after-school program, indicating that

she understood that her involvement in the program had led to her improved confidence and communication skills.

**“It’s mainly about creating another family”: Seeking out Positive Relationships**

The development of personal relationships was among the primary services that the after-school program provided Sadie. This was primarily a reaction to her relative lack of personal relationships for much of her childhood. Although she was again living with her mother, for example, she maintained a distant relationship with her. Of her distant relationship with her mother she said,

I like, am close with my mom and everything but when it comes to like drama going on in school like me just having a bad day and wanting to talk about it. That’s something we’re not really close with. I can’t really communicate with her as much.

In addition to largely being without her mother and father for most of her childhood, she described largely being without friends growing up. For example, when she reviewed the photographs she had taken of people and things important to her, she chose to take two pictures of her dog. In describing the dog she said,

...and this was like my sister and best friend, because like, where my grandparents lived, it was mainly my brothers’ friends, so it was mainly boys in the neighborhood, so my brothers played with them, and I mainly played by myself because I was little and girls couldn’t go...

Here I discuss two predominant categories of relationships Sadie sought out of the after-school program: those with mentors and those with youth.

**“She’s there for me”: Relationships with program mentors.**

The school year of this study, Sadie’s group was in a transition because they had changed primary mentors, a relatively rare event within the program. Sadie spoke highly of her previously mentor, attributing to her the lesson of being taught the importance of “knowing who you are” and being “strong and independent”. When asked if the transition from one mentor to another was difficult, she said that it would not be particularly so because her mentor,

...was still going to be there, even if I switched mentors, because she is always going to be there, you know? I can still talk to her even if she’s not my mentor anymore. I feel like, in [the after-school program], since it’s a fam, like it’s like big family. If you go to like, you know, with your mentor, if you switch to a different mentor, you still have that mentor in your life, they’re not going to leave until you, even if you do graduate, they’re still going to be there for you.

What is particularly noteworthy of her trust that her relationship with her previous mentor was going to be permanent despite the fact that she had transitioned to another group was that in a later interview, she described her trepidation of trusting relationships more generally. She said,

They always tell me, like, after graduation, don’t think that this program is just until you graduate. It’s actually a program that lives with you forever and we’ll always be there if you need anything, you know, but if it’s...when you graduate, or if you’re thirty and planning your baby shower, and I feel like that is very true, but then again, I’ve had a lot of people leave my life that meant a lot to me, and so that’s just something I like to keep caution, but you know...I know they’re there for me.

For Sadie to trust that her former mentor was going to maintain a relationship with her was a significant leap of faith and evidence of a significant relationships for a person that had experienced more than her share of abandonment.

In search of a positive adult figure, Sadie had begun to develop an equally close relationship with her current mentor. For example, when describing her unwillingness to communicate freely with her mother she said,

And knowing that, you know, I have [Sadie's mentor] to turn to, and I don't have to wait until school starts or have to wait until [the after-school program] starts. I could easily just text her and be like, "[Sadie's mentor], I'm having a problem" and she's there for me.

Throughout our conversations and my observations, I could clearly see that Sadie valued the adult relationships she obtained in the program as she sought to fill a void that she experienced.

**“It made me realize how close we are”: Relationships with program youth.**

Sadie's efforts to seek out relationships in the program were not limited to mentors. Early in my observations, it was clear that Sadie was part of a very tight-knit group of youth within her gender and grade group in the program, consisting of Sadie, Donna, and another youth not involved in the study. When given the option, the three girls almost always socialized together with a few other youth sporadically joining. Not surprisingly, Sadie indicated on her social network web that she had the closest relationship with these two girls of anyone in the program. Sadie said of the close sub-group of friends, “Like me, Donna and [student not in the study], I feel like we're closer than everyone else. So, like, you know, people like to butt in and stuff, even though it's just like us”. Clearly Sadie saw that the three girls made up a close-knit friendship.

Further highlighting the importance of peer relationships in terms of what the after-school program had to offer Sadie, she attributed to the program to many of her current friendships. Many of Sadie's current friends, Sadie doubted she would be as close to if it were not for the after-school program. She said of herself before involvement in the program, "I was very anti-social. I still kind of am, like I'm pretty shy around new people but they kind of help me...". Throughout our conversations together, Sadie seemed to value her relationships she had made with the program and clearly saw it as a primary service that it was offering her.

### **Participant: Jackson**

Jackson is a tall, thin African American teenager, whose height is further exaggerated by his tall, flattop style haircut. Having worked with Jackson for the last two years, I knew something of his personality before my observations and interviews began. I thought of Jackson as quite studious and generally compliant and respectful of adults. Still, I had seen him in conflict with other youth, usually over petty or immaterial topics that tend to direct the majority of adolescent arguments. What made Jackson a challenge in this study was his tendency to give short, vague answers to even complex questions and his seemingly uncomfortableness with the interview process. I had planned for this as a general challenge while interviewing youth, but my preparation did not seem ready for Jackson. For example, when I asked him to describe the people which he had chosen to include on his social network web, an activity largely chosen in order to get the youth comfortable talking about a topic of their choice, he first gave only the ages of each person. Coupled with his stiff body language during the interview and tendency to avoid eye contact, my initial impression was that he was uncomfortable with being interviewed. After all, it was Jackson that was absent from my group interview, which was also designed to address this problem. His uncomfortableness would have been understandable. I tried to give

lots of simple, impersonal questions to break the tension and turn our interview into more of an informal conversation, but this never seemed to help. After the interview concluded, he insisted that he was perfectly comfortable being interviewed. In the end, the most effective strategy that I seemed to be able to adopt was to ask “yes” or “no” questions but to be prepared to follow up with a “why” or “can you tell me more about that” after the initial answer. This is all to describe Jackson as very straightforward, direct, absolute, and literal in disposition. He also seemed to me to be a valuable source of potential information because of his having been in the program since sixth grade, his apparent friendship with most of the members of his group, my impression that the program was largely meeting a social, rather than academic deficiency of his, and his receptiveness to the mentor’s help and encouragement during academic support times. The two predominant themes that emerged during my time with Jackson were that he viewed the after-school program as an opportunity for future success and as a means to expand his social network.

### **“You’re missing out on a good opportunity”: Opportunities for Future Success**

Jackson saw the after-school program as a means to gain access to goals he had for himself in the future with more precision than any of the other youth in this study. Consequentially, when asked if he had ever thought of leaving the program, he responded that he had not because, “that means you’re missing out on a good opportunity”. For Jackson, this took on a very concrete form. For example, when presented with two stick figures, one symbolizing him having gone through middle and high school with the after-school program and one without the program, he reported that the figure with the program would certainly be in college in five years. As for the figure without the program, he was much less certain. While he thought he might be able to get to college without the program, he perceived that it would be much easier with the program. Throughout our conversations together, Jackson focused on the program’s

influence on his future. Two categories of this theme emerged as ways in which Jackson used the after-school program to gain access to his goals: program trips and academic support.

**“Me going out of town like that...that seems like very exciting to me”: Program trips.**

Jackson often discussed that the trips that the after-school program offered both further encouraged him to maintain high grades and gave him opportunities that were applicable to his future goals. In what seemed like one of the most profound statements of our time together, Jackson said of the benefits of the after-school program,

...the trips you can do, the people who encourage you to be successful, so one day you can go out into the world and be someone that you want to be instead of being something that you don't want to be and get a job that you really enjoy instead of getting a job that you just hate and you're just trying to get money for it

What struck me about this quote (and elsewhere) was Jackson's ability to see long-term benefits and appreciate the importance of delayed gratification in a way that is unique among youth his age.

When asked to describe the program, he said that it was an, “after-school program and it will help you improve what you do and you get rewards for stuff that you accomplish and you get to go to good trips and good scholarships and stuff like that”. One feature that the program implemented in recent years is that of individualized summer trips, where youth get to design a trip for themselves the summer of their eighth and tenth grade years that is focused on a passion or interest of theirs. In Jackson's case, the program had arranged time working with and being trained by a professional chef. Of the experience, he said, “...he told me about how you can work hard and achieve what you can do and all that type of stuff. And he taught me how to cook



stuff” and that “It made me feel very excited because I really wanted to do it even more”. In Jackson’s case, the individualized trip seemed to work exactly as it had been intended by the program. It encouraged a passion and interest in Jackson by making it seem obtainable and brought him back even more encouraged to be successful.

Other trips within the program are designed for more broad enrichment and experience for the youth. For example, during the youths’ 9<sup>th</sup> grade summer, they take a trip to Washington D.C. together. Jackson seemed to well-appreciate the uniqueness of such a trip as an opportunity for him. For example, Jackson said,

I’m like the person who doesn’t like go out of town...So, me going out of town like that, out of [his home city], that seems like very exciting to me, and like the Washington D.C. thing that we’re doing this year, that really motivates me, because I’ve actually never been to Washington D.C. so I really want to go see it.

Throughout our conversations, it seemed apparent that Jackson well-appreciated the unique opportunities of trips he was offered through the program and saw the value in such programs toward obtaining his personal goals.

**“I think my grades are higher because of [them]”: Academic support.**

Jackson seemed to have a similar focus on the other category of using the after-school program to achieve his future goals: academic support. Academic support itself seemed to be multi-faceted for Jackson. First, he identified that he valued the tutoring support he got at the program. Jackson said,

...well you see, my parents have to go to work all the time, and so they would get out of work at 9 o’clock and then I would need help on my work, but they would be too tired

and they would go to sleep. So, [the after-school program] helps me with my work and so I can keep my grades up.

In my observations, John, rather than a program mentor, was the most common source of tutoring that Jackson received. Indeed, during every observation I made of their study hall time, Jackson and John worked together, once for nearly the entire period. Of their tutor/tutee relationship, Jackson said, “I’m not really good at Math, but [John] is, so what I do is, I would ask [John] to help me with Math homework.” Jackson’s willingness to accept academic support and focus on his grades was frequently put into the context of his future goals. Jackson had the goal to be college-bound and pursue a career in the culinary arts. He was well-aware that, “colleges...check my grades” and that he had to maintain strong grades in order to achieve his goals. As he put it, “to pass you gotta have a D, so if you’re just like that person that’s just like, um...ok, as long as I get a D, can just pass, well, you’re not going to go anywhere with just all D’s”. Jackson strongly valued that his participation in the after-school group gave him access to academic support that would help him achieve his goals.

Beyond tutoring of specific material, Jackson also seemed to value the encouragement and support that the program offered. For example, Jackson said that his mentor, “tells everyone to get their work done, so that tells me that you need to get your work done and make sure it gets turned in”. Furthermore, he reported that he valued this encouragement and that it made him more likely to complete his schoolwork and therefore receive higher grades.

### **“We were like family and stuff like that”: Expansion of Social Network**

Another predominant theme that emerged from my data collection with Jackson was that the after-school program provided him an opportunity to expand his social network. In fact, the only non-family members that Jackson chose to include on his social network web that were

directly connected to him were youth in the program. While Jackson certainly was able to expand his social network and improve his social skills as a result of the program, there is a degree of ambiguity and inconsistency regarding them that should be mentioned.

**“I think [it] made me become friends with most of these people”: Development of relationships through the program.**

While discussing his social web that he created during our first individual interview Jackson said,

I think [the after-school program] made me become friends with most of these people because I barely knew them and I didn't think they wanted to be friends at first, but when I got to [the after-school program], we had like a whole bond and stuff. We were like family and stuff like that.

Beyond acknowledging the program's contribution in building relationships, Jackson also seemed in some ways to hold value in those relationships. When asked what his favorite parts of the program were, he responded, “hanging out with people” during Shout Out. As additional indicators of his value in relationships, he willingly received peer academic support (largely from John), he enjoyed being able to help others, and he reported another student in the program as being his best friend.

It was also apparent that Jackson had a strong relationship with his mentor in the program. Of his mentor he noted, “[Jackson's mentor] will...have one on one time with me to make sure I'm still caught up with my work and everything's ok at my house” and that he had a, “close relationship” with him. In another interview, Jackson noted that he appreciated his mentor's consistency and predictableness. Jackson seemed to thrive in this predictability and it allowed him to better utilize his mentor as a resource for his success.

**“What’s cool about [it] is, you know, the interactions and stuff”: Socialization through the program.**

In addition to the development of relationships through the program (and perhaps because of) Jackson perceived that he was able to improve his social skills at the after-school program. While I perceived that he was receiving this benefit during my observations, he had not been able to express his perception of that benefit until our final interview together. There, I provided him two stick figures. The first, I said was him five years from now having gone through the after-school program. The second was him having never gone through the program. I asked how they were different. His first response of how the program had influenced him was that the stick figure which had gone to the program was more willing to accept help from others while the figure that had not been involved in the program, because he had grown used to doing his academic work on his own, would be unlikely to accept help from others. This willingness to accept help from others, while a significant mark of socialization in itself, is likely only one way in which Jackson was able to hone his social skills through the program.

**“They’ll all the same to me”: Ambiguous nature of relationships for Jackson.**

While Jackson clearly benefited from the program by being able to expand his social network and develop social skills, some of my data collection during both interviews and observations did not parallel this perceived value of relationships within the program. For example, in my observations, I did not see a positive interaction between Jackson and the youth that he claimed to be his best friend. He claimed to get along with everyone and have a close relationship with everyone in the program despite the fact that he displayed strong introvert tendencies when I observed him. In one specific example, I observed a Final Destination lesson. As the lesson was ending, the youth started to casually converse in very typical fashion. Unlike

his peers, Jackson immediately pulled out his phone and began to play a game that took all of his attention away from his peers. While spending time on his phone is certainly not atypical of youth his age, it did seem to indicate strong introverted tendencies considering his peers around him were those that he claimed as his closest friends, and they were all engaging in conversation voluntarily.

As another example, Jackson was unable to express personal differences or his preferences between his current and former mentor, saying, "...they're all the same to me. They help me in every type of way, and I'm good with them". While it is certainly a positive to be "good" with one's mentor, the inability to distinguish between two people whom he had spent such a large amount of time with seems to demonstrate a type of compliance rather than a legitimate personal relationship.

Finally, multiple times during interviews, he struggled to express or understand the relationship-building value of the after-school program. For example, when asked what he felt like he gained from Shout Out, the social aspect of the program which is largely aimed at relationship building, he said, "I think you like relax and stuff like that", answering in a very intrinsic, individualized manner as though the opportunity to develop relationships did not prioritize for him.

The apparent contradiction regarding Jackson's perceived value in relationships within the program was among the most troublesome aspects of this study. In qualitative research, one position is to maintain an interpretation of faith; a maintained position that the participant is faithfully and truthfully reporting his or her subjective experience (Kim, 2016, p. 193). If operating under a strict interpretation of faith, I would take Jackson's account at face value and maintain his value of relationships within the program. Kim (2016), however argues that an

interpretation of suspicion (a research position which allows for collecting data and meaning beyond the literal words spoken by the participant and decoding it to gain greater understanding) in addition to an interpretation of faith allows for greater quality research (p. 194). If I were to adopt an interpretation of suspicion, I would likely note that Jackson did not overtly attempt to build relationships (in fact he avoided them) on a regular basis. This would lead me to one of four conclusions, perhaps a combination thereof: he did not value the relationship-building aspect of the program at least to the extent that he said at times in our conversations together, he did not fully understand personal relationships, he lacked the social skills to carry out those relationships, or perhaps he perceived personal relationships differently than others including myself.

Further adding complexity to the issue is that this study emphasized youth's perception rather than reality or objective fact. Jackson's perception of value in relationships may or may not be associated with what I as a researcher can observe such as his attempt to develop and conduct them. Given that, it may have been easy to conclude that Jackson needed to be believed at face value as the expert of his own perception. Still, I cannot avoid the fact that the conflict between my observations and his professed value of relationships is relevant because the way in which he carried out his relationships in the program (such as retreating to his phone given the opportunity or not understanding the relationship-building value of Shout Out) at least partly reflected his value of relationships. After all, what is a researcher if he or she is not able to interpret, extrapolate, and infer? Jackson's personality characteristics, including potentially having difficulty understanding and practicing social relationships and interactions have influenced his perception of the program and thus what makes it meaningful for him. Therefore,

in order to create best practices for him within the program, mentors and directors must be aware of how his actions within the program parallel (or not) with his claims of value of relationships.

In the end, I felt compelled to include two sides of a story: Jackson at times professing to value relationships in the program as well as other data that seemed to indicate that he did not understand or value them. After all, in qualitative research, it is ultimately the reader that must draw meaning out of each datum collected and study completed, rather than the researcher.

### **Participant: John**

Based on my experience with the after-school program, I had always had John in mind as a potentially strong source of data and cooperative participant. John was in my initial pool of participants, and it was well into my preliminary research before a program mentor reminded me John came to the program late, his eighth grade year. While being in the program from the beginning of sixth grade was a criterion of my participant selection, it was John that caused me to reconsider its usefulness, which eventually led to my recruitment of Sadie.

John is a medium height and medium build student of biracial decent. He has large hair that he described as “poofy” that makes him easily recognizable. During my previous experience working with John and preliminary observations, I noticed his intelligence, willingness to help others, and strong sense of humor paired with an intrinsic nature. What most interested me about John as a potential source of data, however, was his involvement in extracurricular activities. John was heavily involved in theater, which significantly limited his time with the after-school program. In fact, for much of this study, the only time I was able to observe John was at the study hall period, which occurred during the school day. I grew curious of what opportunity for data his involvement could bring. How did he feel about missing so many program events, given that it strives to create a family environment in each group? What

did he feel he was sacrificing? What did he miss most or least when he was gone? How was he received when he seasonally returned? These were some of the initial lines of inquiry I decided to pursue with my first interview with John.

Given that my initial impression (and his repeated self-description) of John was that he was introverted, I was greatly surprised at how he thrived in the interview process. More than any other participant, John was capable of telling detailed stories with thick descriptions and keen insight to a depth that left me feeling as if my only responsibility was to hit “record” before he started. This is not to prioritize John’s data over my other participants, but it is safe to say that he made my job much easier than it could have been, for which I am appreciative. During our time together, two themes of his perception and experience of the program were formed: his intrinsic motivation and the socialization and relationship building benefits of the program.

#### **“I’m motivated more or less by my own progress”: Intrinsic Motivation**

Going into my last interview with John, I had come to the conclusion that more than any of my other participants, the interview and observation data I had collected all indicated a straightforward perception of how he valued the services the after-school program offered. In a sense, I thought I had John figured out. John did not value the academic services of the program, because he had “always had good grades”. While he did concede that without the program, being placed in a standard study hall throughout the school he would “just do what everyone else does and just mess around and wait until the night before to get it [his school work] done”, he concluded that this would likely have only a minimum negative impact on his grades overall. For example, he conceded that doing so might make it, “a lot harder to focus in class”. Nevertheless, he maintained that he thought he would largely still have the same high grades without the program and therefore reflected his lack of value in the academic support offered



therein. John attributed to his lack of value in academic support at the after-school program and academic success despite under-utilizing the tutoring services available to an intrinsic motivation that my observations confirmed he possessed.

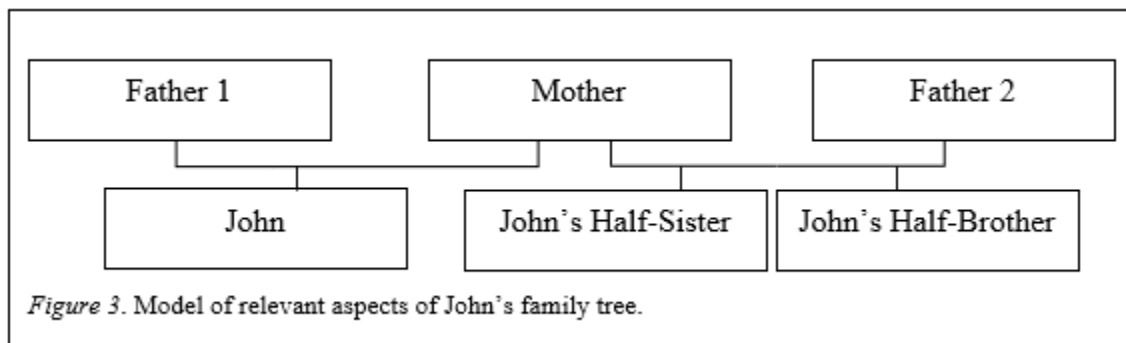
Then, in my final individual interview with John, I received a reminder of how “messy” of a business qualitative research is. As I had with my other three participants, I presented John with two identical stick figures. The first figure represented him five years from now having gone through the after-school program. The second represented him five years from now having not gone through the program. With remarkable specificity for a freshman in high school that told me in a previous interview, “I don’t really have any specific goals. I kind of do things in the spur of the moment”, he went on to tell me that (at least for the moment) he hoped to pursue a college degree and career in psychology. Without the program, however, he surmised that he would most likely become a welder. While a welder is certainly a noble profession, it stands in stark contrast to a career in psychology and represented what he perceived to be a dramatic influence that the after-school program had had on him.

I was perplexed. How could a youth who had stated a lack of value in the program’s academic support also believe that it was creating such a dramatic academic (and professional) difference in him? I was only able to develop my answer after carefully reviewing my interview data with John. John said the program, “pushes you to your best”. Because of this encouragement he said he was going to, “Make sure I’m taking AP [Advanced Placement] History, Advanced English, and two classes of math.” Concerning his projected attitude without the program, however, he said, “I probably would take, like, simple stuff, like just enough to...maybe like AP History because I really love history and the other two, would probably just be like, ‘Eh, I’ll get around to it’.” While I initially interpreted this as a contradiction of his

professed individualism and intrinsic motivation, a closer reading, coding, and intensive journaling led me to conclude otherwise. John was able to justify that this encouragement to realize his academic potential was categorical different than tutoring. This support that he was receiving was about getting him to do more for himself and by himself rather than helping him to be able to do what others thought he should. In this way, John was able to retain his sense of independence and vision of himself as intrinsically motivated while simultaneously receiving a degree of support from the program. A major effort of my data collection for John was my understanding of the source and ramifications of this intrinsic motivation.

**“They kind of just threw me away”:** Source of intrinsic motivation.

John had a relatively distant relationship with his family. See Figure Three for a model of relevant aspects of John’s family tree.



John’s mother was the family member he had the closest relationship with. Of her he said, “Mom’s always been there for me and she’s always done whatever it took”. This relationship was confirmed by John’s social network web, where he included his mother as the only family member directly connected to him. In addition to his mother, John had previously lived with his older brother (whom he was still living with at the time of the study) and sister (who had since moved out on her own). Both his brother and sister were half siblings, sharing their common

mother. John attributed this as part of the reason why he had a distant relationship with both his brother and sister. Of these strained relationships he said,

Uh...I guess basically, I mean, um...so like, my brother and sister have, like, the same dad and my dad is different and my dad has always been there for me and everything, and he tries to be there for them. They're like, 'Nah, I don't want your pity'. And so, like, then um...I was more or less...I don't want to say favorite, but like, their dad favored me more than them for the most part. So because of that, they kind of just threw me away, like, you have your dad, you took our dad. We don't want nothing to do...I was like the black sheep. So, like, that's kind of where it started.

John recalled that his relationship with both his brother and sister had improved since his sister had moved out, most notably because the two of them were not able to "team up" on him.

Nevertheless, his relationship with his brother remained tense. Of his brother he said,

He's pretty cool sometimes I guess. We have more or less that brother like the WWE [World Wrestling Entertainment] kind of brother relationship like steel chair to the face, but we're always there for each other like, 'I hate you, but I love you'.

Additionally, he said of his father who lived several hours away, "I don't see him as much as I'd like". Finally, John said of other older siblings through his father who he said, "I don't really know them because they're all like a lot older than me." This is all to say that John's family life was largely void of close, personal relationships in which he could convey trust and support.

John largely credited this void as the source of his intrinsic motivation. He said of his relationship with his brother and sister that had had spent time with during his childhood,

...the reason I even do so well in school is because when I was younger, I always felt that my brother and sister pushed me away so I've always become, I've become the more independent of the three to show, like, I didn't need you then, I don't need you now. Rather than letting his lack of close family relationships be to his detriment, he seemed very conscious of his strategy to use it to his advantage. This strategy had an additional consequence, however, an intrinsic personality.

**“I feel the need that I have to do...the best I can”: Ramifications of intrinsic motivation.**

Probably the most commonly mentioned reason John attributed to his lack of value in academic support at the after-school program and academic success despite that lack of value was his sense of intrinsic motivation. Consequentially, John felt that the extravagant reward trips offered by the after-school program had little effect on him. For example, he said, “I feel the need that I have to do, be the best I can be rather than focusing on, well, if I be the best, I get this”. Indeed in what was perhaps too desperate of an attempt to get John to attribute at least some of his academic motivation to the extrinsic rewards that the program spends untold amounts of money on enrolled youth each year, I asked him if there was anything, without limit, even millions of dollars, that the program could offer him that would motivate him to work even harder academically. Nevertheless, he held firm. He responded, “I think that I probably would have already achieved their goal without the incentives”. I yielded that his intrinsic motivation was legitimate and sincere.

Whatever John's need for extrinsic motivation, his mother supplied plenty of it without the after-school program. John felt as though his mother held him to much higher academic

standards because of his success relative to his two siblings at home throughout his childhood.

John said,

...because I feel the need to do so well, it kind of sets a expectations higher, like, my brother and sister, if they had a C, Mom would be saying, 'Thank God' but with me, it's like, 'What are you doing with your life?'

Because of these higher standards, John's mother was in the habit of taking access to his phone or video games from him as punishment for unacceptably low grades, which he surprisingly indicated motivated him much more than the after-school program's incentive trips.

### **“I was pretty quiet before joining”: Socialization and Relationship Building**

Rather than academic support or trips, John valued the socialization opportunities of the program. Through the after-school program, John sought to move past his naturally introverted nature and develop positive relationships with both youth and mentors.

#### **“Like, I was more of a loner”: Introverted nature.**

John was thoroughly aware that he possessed strong introverted tendencies, often referring to himself as, “quiet”, “introverted”, “secluded”, or “not a people person”. Put another way, he described himself as, “more of a loner before [the after-school program]”.

Consequentially, John described himself as slow to trust people, often letting a relationship develop slowly in order to, “know what they're about before I do anything”. Early in the interview process, it became obvious to me that John was conscious of his introverted nature. His mother, however, was the catalyst of change. Indeed, his refusal to socialize was the reason that his mother had enrolled him in the program largely against his will. John said, “It was the simple idea that my Mom didn't like that I secluded myself and so [the after-school program] has

really helped me form friendships and...trust people slightly more". The after-school program provided him ample opportunity to socialize and develop personal relationships.

**“So they kind of force me to come out of my shell”: Socialization and development of personal relationships.**

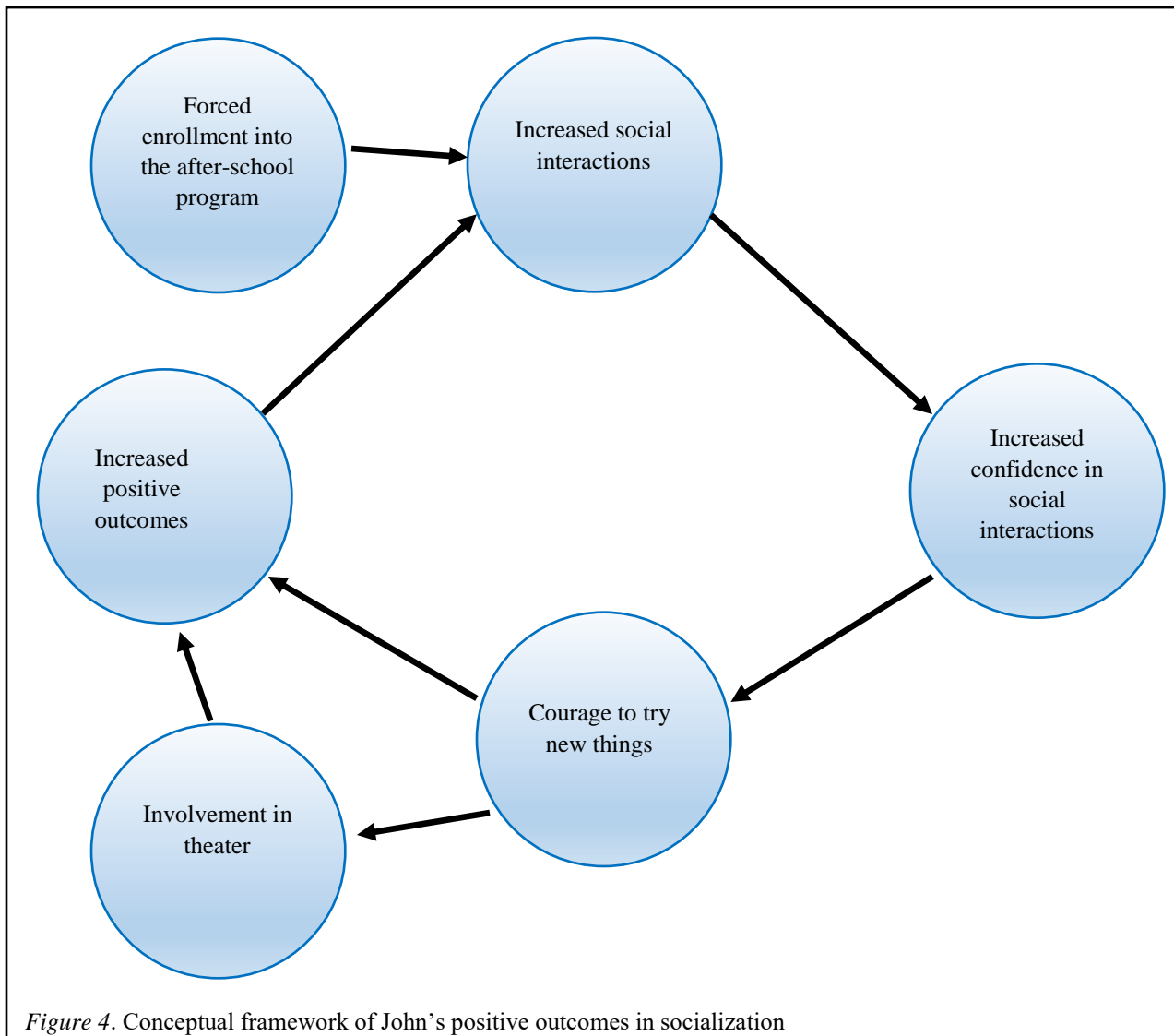
John was conscious of his need to become more comfortable interacting with people in social situations and cautiously welcomed the opportunities and relationships that the program could provide. Of the after-school program, he said,

I mean, I've warmed up to it. Some days, I'm like, I wish I could stay home, but you know those days you're not feeling social interaction. You just want to be alone, but Mom's like, 'You're going!' And I'm like, 'okay, okay, I understand'.

Consequentially, as he “warmed up” to the program, he learned to value several of the friendships and role models that he had developed in the program. As an added benefit, his involvement in the after-school program encouraged him to become involved in theater. John said,

That's probably like the first step, and then, you know, it was like [the after-school program] kind of gave the idea of like well, trying new things. Being in [the program] a year, oh look, there's theater, I've tried this, it worked out well enough. Looks like we're going to try another thing, and...that's where we are today I guess. Made a lot of friends through that. It's pretty fun.

As a result of the after-school program giving him opportunities for social interaction, John became increasingly comfortable with trying new experiences where he in turn saw many more socialization benefits and relationships developed (see Figure Four).



***“I’ve made friends”: Value of program relationships.***

On one hand, as discussed earlier, John valued his relationships gained within the program. For example, he spoke often of his friendship with Jackson. John took on something of a tutoring role to Jackson, often helping him with his homework. The relationship, however, was clearly bidirectional in that John valued it and saw it as a genuine friendship. John said of his relationship with Jackson,

We talked a little bit before [his enrollment in the after-school program]. And then, he, we kind bonded more and he’s been a pretty good friend. And we don’t just talk in [the

after-school program] anymore now. We actually talk outside of it. And that's pretty nice, you know? Like at school, you have those friends you just talk to at school, like, they're really just there so you're not bored. But, like, [Jackson], he's been a good friend over the past year or two, give or take.

This recognition of John's that his relationship with Jackson was beyond trivial is particularly significant because of John's sensitivity and awareness for shallow relationships. In another interview, he said of the after-school program,

I didn't know if I'd like it at first, and I was more kind of nervous joining, but I've made friends, so it allows me to like talk to more people and...not just like, a one word answer, like, "hey". Not just like small talk. It's actually like meaningful conversation. Rather than just, "So...nice weather we're having". It's, "Hey, how's it going?" Like an actually, genuine wondering, not just trying to be nice.

John not only valued that he was developing relationships in the program but that those relationships were of a depth that gave them genuine significance, what he seemed to desire most.

Beyond making genuine relationships, John had a clear understanding that membership in the program had gotten him involved in friendships with youth much different than his non-program friends and that diversification of his relationships was probably good for him. For example, John said, "I've made a couple more friends of people I wouldn't expect to be with if it wasn't for this". This diversification of friendships made a significant effect on John's social network, as many of his closest friends indicated on his social network web were enrolled in the program.



While the relationships John was able to develop with youth in the program were significant, his relationships with mentors were even more so. In fact, John said, "...honestly, I like most of the mentors more than most of the kids". Similar to his relationships with youth, perhaps what he was most aware of was the genuine nature of those relationships. For example, he told me a story as an example. Just before Christmas break, he overheard the high school director telling his mentor that mentors were not to work over the break. A few minutes later, his mentor was talking to John and told him to be sure to call him over break if he needed anything. John noted his mentor's willingness to work "off the clock" for John's sake and said, "I think that's very important for a mentor, that he's a full time mentor. He's not just there to be there. He cares about everyone who is there." Likely because of the genuine nature that John perceived his relationship with his mentor and other adults in the program to be, he referred to them as, "positive role models", which he clearly valued.

***"I've always felt the need to keep people at a distance": Detachment from the program.***

Despite reporting and displaying value for relationships he had developed within the after-school program, John remained somewhat distant from it. Part of this was his seasonal involvement in theater, which largely took him out of the program's activities after school. Even when he was in attendance, he had a way of withdrawing himself from the group, slipping in the back of a crowd, and avoiding social interactions with anyone he did not explicitly trust. He was clearly aware of this tendency saying, "I don't like that idea of being in the front row though. That's not me. I'm not trying to be the center of attention. I'm about that back row." While he thought that involvement in the program had improved his social skills, his development was incremental and slow. John said of his social skills development due to the program, "...and I guess, like...trust people slightly more, not a lot, baby steps, baby steps, but more than before.

And that's been really helpful I guess." Here, John demonstrated not only awareness of but appreciation for social skills development as a result of involvement in the program.

My attempts to determine to what extent John's efforts to withdraw from social interactions indicated his natural intrinsic inclination or a lack of value in those relationships were my greatest challenges concerning my research with John. One could have easily concluded while observing John and seeing him withdraw from interactions that he did not value them. Despite these anti-social tendencies and efforts, John's awareness of his introverted tendencies, willingness to participate in the program, and detailed descriptions of his fondness for many of the program's youth and particularly staff led me to the conclusion that John valued his relationships in the program. After all, when referring to his incremental socialization through the program he said, "Again, I was pretty quiet before joining and became closer to other people in it and I've started talking more and I'm not just the quiet guy I once was, although I'm still pretty quiet, just not as bad." What struck me most about this quote was the phrase, "just not as bad", indicating a value placed on socialization and a development of relationships through being less "quiet". These relationships were largely what he missed when he was absent for theater and what he felt he gained from the program when he was in attendance.

#### **Participant: Donna**

Like Sadie, Donna came to my study late. In her case, I thought I had secured a willing participant and parent for the study. The potential participant came to my parent/youth meeting despite the fact that her parent was not able to. In the following weeks, however, her parent proved unresponsive to my repeated efforts to make contact, and I was eventually forced to seek out another participant. None of that is to say that Donna was a less than ideal candidate. She was within my initial recruiting pool, and her mentors thought she could be a valuable source of

data. Previous to this study, I had worked with Donna only sparingly. Although I occasionally helped her group by tutoring after school, the limited nature of my role in the program and her sports schedule negated my ability to build a significant relationship with her.

Donna is a medium height, athletic build African American student. She is a multi-sport athlete, and what I knew of her previous to this study was largely of her identification as an athlete. As another potentially relevant factor, Donna is a legacy member of the program, with three older siblings that had previously attended and graduated from it. She also had a reputation of being strong willed and at times stubborn. During the study, she repeatedly used words like “rowdy” to describe herself. Finally, I also thought of her as relatively popular among her peers at school and as having many friends outside of the program

What most intrigued me about Donna as a participant was her seasonal absence from the program due to athletic participation. Did her limited role in the program influence how she valued it, the strength of relationships she had in the program, or what role she saw the program having on her future? Additionally, given that relationships are such an important aspect of such an after-school program, would having a large number of close friendships outside of the program influence the value she places on it? These were among the lines of inquiry I was interested in pursuing specific to Donna. For Donna, three themes emerged during my data collection: her distance from the after-school program, her intrinsic motivation and independent nature, and the enrichment benefits she saw from the program.

#### **“I never came”: Distance from the Program**

A predominant theme of Donna’s participation in the after-school program is that she always seemed to distance herself from it. One way this manifested itself in that she maintained a selective social network within the program. It was largely due to her alternative sources for

relationships and entertainment outside of the program and had powerful implications in how she perceived and experienced the program.

**“I don’t usually associate with them that much.”: Selective social network.**

Regarding youth in the program, Donna had a very small social network. This was based on my observations, interview data, and Donna’s social network web. This was a surprise to me based on my perception of her going into the study as popular among her peers. Her small social network did not seem to originate from a lack of social skills or outgoing nature but rather an intense interest in keeping a selective group of friends. Donna seemed very conscious of this. For example, of the program she said,

...there’s not that many girls to choose from and then like, the girls that are in [the after-school program], I don’t really talk to in the first place, like even when we’re at [the program] stuff, I don’t usually associate with them that much.

Donna’s small social network within the program seemed to be at least largely by her choice. As I could tell, Donna was more broadly popular at school, and she often made comments that implied that she chose not to be around many of the program youth. For example, she said of the program youth, “I get really annoyed by people, like, I can only deal with them for so long”. Indeed, despite being (what seemed to me) very socially competent, Donna included the smallest number of friends within the after-school program of the participants of this study on her social network web. Of her friends within the program, however, she appeared to have an intense and loyal friendship. Two of the three program friends she included on her web, for example, she described as her “best friend”. Of program youth outside of her social network, however, she referred to them as only “acquaintances”.

Donna had had two mentors since sixth grade in the after-school program. One of the primary reasons she reported enjoying the high school version of the program more than middle school was her closer relationship with her current mentor. She reported that this was largely due to the younger age of her current mentor, making her seem like more of a “sister” than a “mom”, which she described her previous mentor as. Nevertheless, her willfulness and independence occasionally caused her to have conflicts with her mentor, one of particular significance that occurred during this study over her unwillingness to put away her phone and participate in a Shout Out activity. While she clearly had a relationship with her mentor, it is worth mentioning that Donna did not include either her past or current mentor on her social network web, further indicating her selective social network.

**“I have, like, other friends and other things to do”: Alternative sources for relationships and entertainment.**

Donna’s selective social network was likely at least in part due to the fact that she came to the program with the least need to make friends of any of my participants. She was active and successful in sports. Many of her friends we discussed were based around their common participation in athletics. For example, of one non-program friend she said, “We played volleyball together, softball, track. All the sports that I play, we play, we play together.” Furthermore, during this study, she had a boyfriend, she reported a robust social network on her web (including friends outside of the program), and I perceived her to be popular among her peers at school.

More subtly, Donna’s perception of her social network was revealed to me when she made several references of “my friends” that meant her friends not in the program. For example, when asked why she rarely attended the program in sixth grade, she said, “Because I would

rather be out with my friends.” Her description of “my friends” implied that her first thought when she referred to her friends (and therefore her social network) were youth outside of the program and that her relationships within the program were of a secondary nature. This is largely because more so than any of my other participants of this study, Donna came into the program with a robust social network and involvement in other extracurricular activities. In a sense, she didn’t have as much of a “need” for the program as my other participants.

**“I didn’t go on any trips”: Implications on her perception and experience in the program.**

A key aspect of the after-school program is extrinsic rewards, particularly in the form of reward trips for academic success. Unfortunately, these rewards seemed to have little effect on Donna’s motivation. As discussed earlier, Donna had a small social network within the program. Additionally, she had a tendency to associate the quality of the experiences within the after-school program with who would attend. Because many of her closest friends in the program had a history of not qualifying for the reward trips, her perception of the significance of the trips was greatly reduced. Additionally, her comparatively greater life experiences in travel (as compared to my other participants and my experiences with youth in the program in general) negated the novelty of the reward trips for Donna. Finally, she explained that she would, “...rather, like, go on a trip with my family. Because my family is more fun”. These factors collectively negated much of the potential motivation that the reward trips in the program could offer. For example, she chose not to attend the most recent reward trip that had been held at the time of this study because, “nobody else was going”. This resulted in the ineffectiveness of the extrinsic motivation that the program tried to use as an incentive to be academically successful. Another

important reason that Donna perceived the program reward trips to be ineffective was a strong sense of intrinsic motivation.

### **“I normally push myself, you know?”: Intrinsic Motivation and Independent Nature**

While Donna held value in the program, it was noticeably less than the other participants of this study. Most notably, she held little value for the academic support, as she displayed independence and intrinsic motivation to maintain high grades (which she historically had). As Donna explained, “I normally push myself, you know?” As an illustration of her independence, Donna told a story of a time that her mentor (undoubtedly discouraged at her failed attempts to further motivate Donna) asked her what she could possibly offer her as a reward to raise her grade in Spanish class. Donna replied, “I don’t need something. I can do it on my own”. This decline of academic support and extrinsic motivation might be seen negatively as stubborn willfulness if not for the fact that she typically had strong grades and was generally seen as capable of being academically successful on her own by her mentors.

While students, being intrinsically motivated to be academically successful on their own is a generally positive characteristic one negative consequence is a furthering sense of isolation from the program. One story in particular that Donna shared with me illustrated this. She described an incident in which her mentor had (in Donna’s perception) “ambushed” her concerning a recent drop in a grade. In describing her mentor’s persistent approach to Donna’s grades, Donna’s said,

...like I understand that like [the after-school program] is supposed to like help you, but I feel like I’m an independent person, so I can like get my stuff done by myself. I don’t need someone telling me...I feel like the girls in, most of the girls in [the program] need that. But then I just like \*laughing\*...

As her voice trailed off and led to a long, drawn out pause, I eventually responded, “You don’t really need that?” She responded, “No”. This story was telling because it illustrated how Donna felt somewhat different than her program peers. While, according to Donna’s perception, her peers had a need for persistent academic support, Donna felt as though her independence justified a much more “hands off” style of mentoring.

### **“Like they provide a lot of things”: Enrichment Benefits of the Program**

After my first individual interview with Donna, I was left with the sense that there was little other than spending social time with her small network of friends in the program that she valued. She reported to have little value in the academic support the program provided. She didn’t think that she was motivated by the reward trips that were offered. She didn’t seem to enjoy the company of most of the youth in the program. Additionally, she reported that she only came to the program because her parents forced her to. My primary focus for my second interview was therefore establishing what, if anything she did value in the program other than social entertainment.

The one aspect of the program itself that she did seem to hold value in was what she called “extracurricular” but might be more accurately called enrichment. She said of the program, “they provide a lot of things” in reference to experiences outside of those of most youth in the general population. She recognized that the program could offer her unique experiences that could supplement the education and development that she was otherwise receiving and experiencing. One specific example she gave for these, “extracurricular” experiences was a Black History Quiz Bowl that was conducted through the Future Hopes and Dreams branch of the after-school program. For several weeks, high school youth in the program spent time in heterogeneous grade level groups and studied a bank of hundreds of questions on Black history



that would be used for the Quiz Bowl. The winning team received a free trip to Athens, Georgia to observe a national Black history quiz bowl with the intention of sending a competing team the following year. Rather than the trip incentive, Donna indicated that she valued the Quiz Bowl because she was skeptical that she would be learning sufficient Black history in school.

While she rejected the idea that the program's trips encouraged her to be academically successful, she also expressed interest in the Washington D.C. trip that the program was offering to 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade youth as a source of enrichment. Although there were academic requirements to be eligible for the trip, the program directors and mentors also largely saw it as an enrichment opportunity rather than an academic reward or incentive. Although Donna said that she had previously been to Washington D.C. and indicated that that lessened her excitement about the trip, she also said, "But I don't know, I still want to go" as though to appreciate the uniqueness of such an opportunity.

### **Cross Case Analysis**

In this section, I will present a cross case analysis of my four participants. I will compare and contrast them on many of the major themes concerning their perception of the after-school program and their experience in it. I will discuss each youth's distinct approach to relationships with the program, their perception of the academic support offered by the program, and their perception of the faith-building aspects of the program. See Table Two for a summary of the cross case analysis themes.

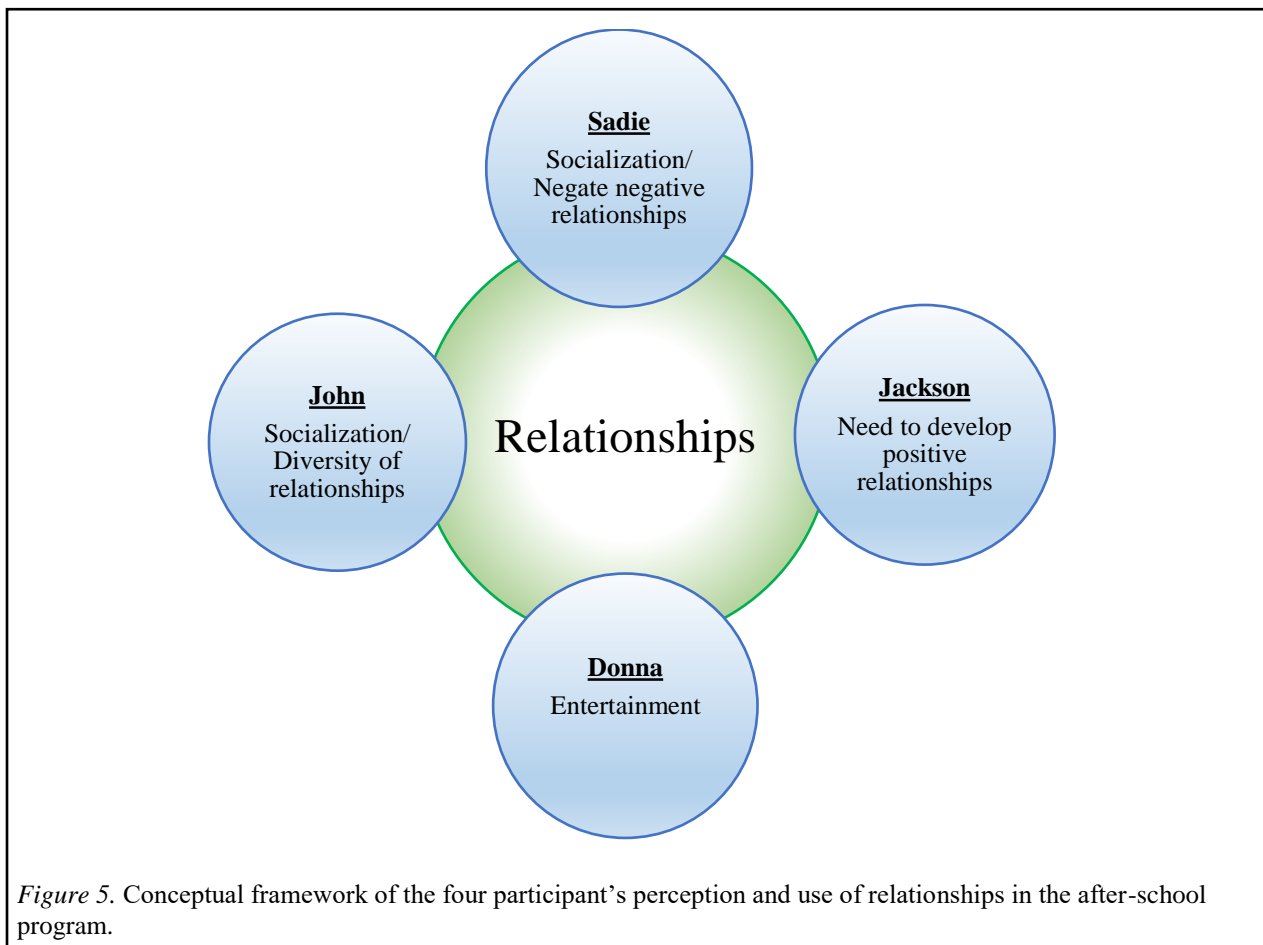
Table 2

## Comparison Across Participants

Participant	Cross-Case Themes			
	Relationships	Academic Support	Final Destination	Motivation
John	The program was an opportunity to overcome introverted tendencies and diversify his social network.	The program provided academic encouragement rather than support.	He appreciated the opportunities to engage in complex conversations.	He rejected offers of extrinsic motivation offered by the program.
Sadie	The program was an opportunity to negate detrimental impact of lack of personal relationships and positive role models.	The program served as a tutoring service, helping to improve her academic performance and self-confidence.	She appreciated the relevance of contemporary topics and Christian principle's application to them.	She responded well to the extrinsic motivation offered by the program.
Donna	The program was an opportunity to exercise relationships established outside of the program.	She understood why the program attempted to provide academic support but did not think that it was a service she needed.	She found the lessons interesting, although reported having difficulty keeping focused at times.	Outright rejected offers of extrinsic motivation offered by the program.
Jackson	The program was an opportunity to develop personal relationships and hone social skills.	The program served as a tutoring service, helping him to improve academic performance and provide additional academic accountability and support.	He found importance in learning Christian beliefs and the Bible.	He responded well to the extrinsic motivation offered by the program.

## Relationships

While relationships within the program played a significant role for all the youth, the role that those relationships played in the program and their lives was distinctly different for all youth (see Figure Five). For example, Sadie lacked positive relationships and role models with the people that probably should have been closest to her in her life. Her father had not been, “in the picture a lot” and of her mother she said, “I didn’t really have a connection with my mom” largely because she, “went away” much of her childhood. Furthermore, she described her brothers as largely distant from her much of her childhood.



In addition to a lack of positive relationships, Sadie even experienced a host of negative experiences and negative role models with those that would have been most natural to be positive influences on her. Of her extended family, she said, “none of my family members have

been to college”. In a more specific example, she recalled coming to a program academic celebration held at the end of every nine weeks school period. Only students that had achieved specific academic standards were invited and then celebrated. While Sadie had qualified at the lowest qualification level, just being invited was an achievement considering her academic history. When her mother, who was able to come with her, realized that she qualified at the lowest tier, her only response in the car on the way home was, “I thought you did better”. Sadie reported feeling crushed on a night that she should have been proud of her achievement. Consequentially, Sadie came to the after-school program looking for positive relationships and role models that could negate the negative in her life.

Additionally, Sadie perceived that the relationships she could create in the program as an avenue toward greater socialization. Sadie reported being excessively shy before entering the program, a characteristic that I confirmed even before the data collection process began for this study. Sadie perceived being forced to interact with a relatively large number of people that were diverse in personality as an opportunity to develop better social skills and get over her shyness. Sadie credited this development in socialization as a key skill that has recently helped her to improve her relationship with her mother.

Like Sadie, John saw relationships in the program as a way to develop social skills. In contrast, however, John’s need for socialization was due to introversion, a more conscious withdraw from social interactions, rather than Sadie’s shyness, an intimidation of social interactions. John saw that, “being in [the after-school program] kind of forces me to be around people” as though he’d prefer not to but understood that such interactions were good for him. In contrast, Sadie said, “I’m pretty shy around new people but they [the after-school program] kind

of help me” as though she wanted to be around more people but lacked the confidence and social skills to do so effectively and comfortably.

As a secondary purpose, John saw his relationships developed within the after-school program as a means to diversify his relationships. While he did have some close friendships before involvement in the program, they were very different than his friends within the program. As he said, “I’ve made a couple more friends of people I wouldn’t expect to be with if it wasn’t for this” and that this effect was good for him.

Jackson, like John and Sadie, came to the after-school program in need of relationships. Indeed, the only non-family members that Jackson decided to directly link to him on his social web were youth he had met through the after-school program. Jackson’s small social network and therefore need for social relationships was undoubtedly connected to his need to refine his social skills. Of the four youth, this was most similar to Sadie’s shyness although distinct. Sadie’s deficit was in her confidence in engaging with people in social interactions while Jackson’s deficit was in mastering the norms that dictate those social interactions. Nevertheless, Jackson’s needs were at least partly met, as he reported becoming friends with many people in the program, several of which he perceived did not want to be friends with him initially.

Relationships played a role for Donna that was the most unique of the four participants in this study. This is likely due to the fact that she came to the program with what appeared to be the least need for relationships in the program. That is, Donna had many more avenues for gaining friendship than the other youth in the study. That being said, her relationships in the program were clearly of importance to her. She described two of the youth in the program as her “best friends” and was rarely away from her small, close network of friends at program events. Relationships played a role for Donna that can best be termed entertainment. Her relationships

were what made the program entertaining. Because of the closeness of these relationships, this entertainment was largely what she looked for and valued in the program. That is why of the after-school program she said it was, “something to do I guess. At least I’m not bored at home”. Her relationships (and the program more generally) were largely a means of recreation.

### **Academic Support**

Because of her chronic struggles in school, Sadie came to the after-school program largely as a means to obtain consistent academic support. Particularly in math and English, Sadie was consistently behind her peers and received poor grades. Not surprisingly, she seemed grateful toward the program for their support and proud of the progress she had made. During our first individual interview, for example, she bragged to me that her math grade had recently raised to a 75%, a good score considering her traditional struggles in the subject.

What was unexpected for me, however, when discussing the support the program gave her in academics, she did not attribute their support to helping her understand complex material but rather their ability to instill self-confidence. Sadie said,

And then [the after-school program] came along and they told me that it’s just...people are different and you just have to accept that, but no way is anyone ever dumb in this world and everything. They help you a lot, you know, they don’t get frustrated with you.

To further illustrate the point that she tended to view the academic support she received through the lens of personal development, when asked how she thought things would be different for her if she was still failing math, she responded, “I’d probably be less confident about myself”.

Clearly Sadie’s perception of the tutoring services she was receiving through the program was more complicated than reinforcing content alone but instead instilling self-confidence simultaneously.

Like Sadie, Jackson held the academic support that the program offered in high regard. While Jackson did receive tutoring at the program, it was primarily from youth rather than mentors, particularly John. Also like Sadie, Jackson viewed academic support more broadly than assisting to understand academic material. For Jackson, academic support was largely about encouragement and reinforcement. For example, he said, “I think [the after-school program] actually makes me better at getting my stuff in”. When asked if he thought he needed support and encouragement to get his school work handed in, he responded that he thought he did. Jackson’s acceptance of his need for academic support from the program mentors is likely at least in part due to his compliant nature, a characteristic he held in common with Sadie and in stark contrast from John and Donna.

Unlike Sadie and Jackson, John held virtually no value for the academic support offered in the program. While he did occasionally complete homework during the school’s study hall period, he maintained that he did not need support from the mentors (which my observations seemed to maintain) and that the program did not improve his grades. The closest he ever got to expressing value for the program’s academic support is that he said that without having study hall with the program, he would likely do less homework in his study hall and be forced to do it late at night. While he maintained that this would have little effect on his grades, he conceded that it might make it more difficult for him to pay attention in class due to fatigue. Considering John’s academic success and his generally independent personality, it is not surprising that he would hold little value in the academic support of the program.

Paradoxically, while John reported to not value the academic support that the after-school program provided, he simultaneously perceived that the after-school program had made a dramatic influence on the trajectory of his professional career. Without the after-school

program, he reported that he would most likely become a welder. With the after-school program, he reported that he was currently interested in a career in psychology. He rectified these seemingly contradictory statements by explaining that the after-school program provided him encouragement to do things like enroll in advanced classes (which he needed) as well as provided academic support, which he did not.

Donna, like John was typically academically successful and held little value in the academic support offered by the program. While she did say that she doesn't mind her mentor reminding her of her grades, Donna was generally annoyed by the academic support offered to her, accusing her mentor of "ambushing" her. Like John, this lack of value for academic supports offered them was largely due to Donna's relative academic success absent from it. Unlike John, Donna seemed to have additional feelings of being removed from the program and that she was somewhat different from other youth in the program. While she said that she understood that most of the girls in her group likely need their mentors to be persistent in providing support, she believed that she did not and therefore wished that her mentor would, "let it go". While this feeling of being different than her peers was again likely in part due to her experience of academic success without the program, it was also likely due to her frequent seasonal times away from the program that inevitably made her feel like an outsider from it.

It should be noted that while Donna did not value the academic support that the after-school program offered, she was also willing to look at the educational opportunities that the after-school program offered more holistically. She particularly spoke highly of the Black History Quiz Bowl that was offered through the Future Hopes and Dreams aspect of the program. She believed that this program could compensate for what she perceived to be an inadequate amount of African American history taught in public schools. This was a function



that she valued and found relevant. Additionally, although she generally held less value in program trips than many of her other youth, she was willing to recognize the unique opportunities that the Washington D.C. trip offered her in enriching her education.

### **Final Destination**

As a faith based after-school program, one aspect of the program, called Final Destination, was devoted to Christian faith-building. Held one night a week (either Mondays or Wednesdays depending on the group) it was considered optional to youth with alternative, secular activities offered to make up for participation points that were kept as a requirement for rewards trips. It is worth noting, however, that during this study, I am not aware of any student taking advantage of these secular alternatives. It is possible, however, that some youth outside of the study did outside of my awareness. While I had been involved in the program for years, I had little experience with Final Destination, not because I had avoided it but rather because it was never within my responsibilities at the program. While I had been around youth enough to know that they would likely be hesitant to speak openly and glowingly about their faith, I did expect it to be a much more prominent topic of conversation. In fact, none of the youth identified Final Destination as a primary aspect of the program that they valued.

In what seemed like a unanimous position, the youth valued Final Destination, particularly its ability to make Bible study relevant to their lives and decisions they were currently making as youth. For example, Sadie said of Final Destination, “It’s religious-based, of course and it mainly, you know, you learn verses from the Bible, but one thing I like about it is they relate to stuff that’s going on in your life right now to stuff.” Similarly, John said,

So I'm a Christian...and the way [his mentor] goes about things, I feel that he's saying, 'I'm suggesting this, but whether you do that is out of my control'. It's like, I like how it's not like, 'This is it. This is the only way'. So I feel that that's pretty nice, you know?

Jackson seemed to value Final Destination more than his peers in this study. Of Final Destination he said,

it's important to me because, as I said before, you learn about God and I actually usually don't read the Bible a lot, so it gives me an opportunity to actually read it and learn what the Bible is actually about

Despite this enthusiasm, he reported only, "kind of" feeling closer to God as a result of Final Destination. He implied that he saw Final Destination as a replacement to going to church on Sundays. Finally, he placed Final Destination behind academic support, relationships, and trips in terms of perceived value of aspects of the after-school program.

Collectively, all four youth of this study reported to enjoy Final Destination. This was additionally supported by my observations where all youth seemed to enjoy the lessons. In fact, Donna was the only participant that did not volunteer that she was a Christian despite the fact that I never asked any of them. Even Donna described Final Destination as, "fun", "cool", and "interesting". This is despite the fact that she also said of Final Destination, "Like, um...when we watch, like, videos and stuff, I kind of just tune out. And especially because they're on Mondays, so I'm super tired, so sometimes I fall asleep". The youth all seemed to experience Final Destination as an opportunity to develop relationships, have complex conversations, discuss issues important to youth, and receive the scripture in a judgement free environment. None of them, however, chose to rank the program as a service offered by the program of primary importance to them.

## **Motivation**

One factor that seemed to influence the developments that each participant experienced as a result of involvement in the program was motivation. This relationship could be seen in cognitive, social-emotional, and identity development. This trend was observed not only of the degree of motivation for development that the youth demonstrated but also the degree to which they reported being susceptible to intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. As a general rule, the after-school program in this study served as a source of extrinsic motivation for youth. Although program directors had made efforts to scale back the extrinsic motivation offered, they still ran on a motivational system where youth were inticed to maximize their development (particularly in academic and behavioral outcomes) in the program through reward trips and celebrations. This motivational system is therefore dependant on youth which are first motivated to demonstrate development and secondly on youth which posses a tendancy to be responsive to extrinsic motivation.

It can be seen that Sadie demonstrated a high degree of intrinsic motivation, as demonstrated by her decision to enroll herself into the program, seeking out support to be successful as she defined it. Nevertheless, she also perceived that she responded strongly to the extrinsic motivation offered by the program. In her initial desription of the program, she said, “it usually helps you with getting your grades up and if you do get your grades up you get like rewards for it and stuff”. Additionally, when describing the Black History Month quiz bowl activity, which she expressed a degree of uncomfortablness in, she said that a major motivating factor to participate was the reward trip to the winning team. Based on this receptiveness to extrinsic motivation, it should not be suprising that Sadie perceived that she had experienced strong positive outcomes as a result of the program. She reported that her academic grades had

improved, she had developed lasting positive relationships, her relationship with her mother had improved, and she had made significant improvements in self-esteem.

Like Sadie, Jackson demonstrated a high degree of receptiveness to extrinsic motivation. He reported the individualized trip the previous summer, which had included meeting with a personal chef, the future profession which he aspired to, as being extremely motivating. Of the experience he said, "It made me feel very excited because I really wanted to do it even more." Jackson also reported the reward trips as being one of two factors which motivated him to work for academic success. He said, "the reason I like to keep my grades up is because of the trips and stuff but also for the colleges that check my grades and stuff like that". Because of this motivation to be academically successful, Jackson was receptive to receiving academic support from not only program mentors but enrolled youth. The most common source of academic support Jackson received during my observations was actually from John. While Jackson perceived that this tutoring, along with academic encouragement more generally offered by the program led to positive academic outcomes, the relationship that developed as a result from these tutoring sessions undoubtedly led to further social-emotional development as well.

Unlike Jackson and Sadie, Donna reported a low degree of receptiveness to extrinsic motivation. Continually during our interviews, she described being uninfluenced by rewards offered by the program. For example, she reported declining an invitation to the most recent reward trip because her closest friends in the program did not qualify. Rather than be motivated by extrinsic factors, she reported being predominately intrinsically motivated to be academically successful. In one telling example of Donna's rejection of extrinsic motivation, her mentor, exasperated by what she determined to be Donna's underperformance in Spanish class asked what she could possibly offer her to be motivated toward further success. Donna described that

her response was, “I don’t need something. I can do it on my own.”. It can be said, however, that Donna at times demonstrated a degree of intrinsic motivation toward positive outcomes. For example, of academic success she said, “I just don’t want to be the person with the bad grades, like I don’t think that looks good on someone.”. That being said, that motivation seemed highly inconsistent and dependent on the specific context. For example, she often underutilized the academic time when the program met in school and was unreceptive to her mentor’s attempts to assist her. In following with the observed trend, Donna also reported the least amount of positive outcomes as a result of enrollment in the program. For example, she perceived that her grades were not any different as a result of the program. In another conversation, she described her maturation over the last several years but commented that she didn’t think that the program was responsible for this maturation. In short, she felt that she saw very few positive outcomes as a result of the program.

At first glance, it would seem that John’s experience in the program was inconsistent with the relationship between motivation and positive outcomes that I have described. First, John reported little receptiveness to extrinsic motivation. For example, when describing why he wasn’t motivated by program trips, he said, “I just feel that I have to do the best I can no matter what it is or if there’s a reward or not at the end.”. In fact, in what was probably too desperate of an attempt to get him to connect even a portion of his motivation to the program’s incentives, I asked him if he would be more motivated for academic success if the program offered him a million dollars as a reward. Nevertheless, John stuck to his position saying, “I think that I probably would have already achieved their goal without the incentives.”. Despite his lack of receptiveness to extrinsic motivation, John perceived positive social-emotional outcomes as a result of enrollment in the program (see Figure Four). Rather than an exception to the

developing relationship explored here, John supports the relationship between sensitivity to extrinsic motivation and positive outcomes in after-school programs. This is because the after-school program primarily offered extrinsic motivation in domains other than that which John experienced positive outcomes in. In order to qualify for reward trips, for example, students were required to meet academic standards and remain in good standing with the program (as measured by attendance and appropriate behavior). John, however, was experiencing positive social-emotional outcomes, most notably overcoming his excessively introverted nature. If the after school program was not motivating him to do so, it then begs the question of what his motivation toward these outcomes was. While John was always quick to credit his intrinsic motivation, he also commented that his mother was a significant influence in this development. Not only did she force John to join the program to begin with, she was prone to suspending John's access to his phone or video game system if he tried to refuse to attend. In fact, John reported that threats of such suspensions were more motivating to John than the promise of reward trips from the after-school program.

Collectively, it can be seen that the youth in this study who were intrinsically motivated or receptive to extrinsic motivation were more likely to see positive outcomes, provided that they were offered extrinsic motivation in those domains of development.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I provided the prominent themes for each of my four participants for this study. While each participant's themes were developed independently, the youth's perception of the after-school program's academic support offered and the relationships developed through the program were among the most commonly discussed themes. Next, I provided a cross-case analysis of similarities and differences found between the participants. These included their

perception of relationships within the program, academic support offered through the program, Final Destination, the faith-based aspect of the program, and motivation as pertains to the program.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications**

While there is a growing body of research on after-school programs, few researchers have approached after-school programs with a phenomenological theoretical framework, embracing positive youth development, and done so with an insider status within the program. Based on this uniqueness of this study, I will present in Chapter Five conclusions and implications that I have drawn from my research, data collection, and data analysis while working with the after-school program and my participants.

In Chapter Four, I presented four participants: Sadie, John, Jackson, and Donna. All four were high school freshmen involved in the after-school program and were students of color. Collectively, they represent a broad width of experiences and perspectives within the program. This study was grounded in phenomenology, which allowed me to emphasize the youth's perception of the after-school program and encouraged me to study it outside of my preconceptions and assumptions of the program. In this chapter, I will respond to the research questions, using my phenomenological theoretical framework. Next, I will discuss this study's contribution to current literature on after-school programs, reflect on implications of this study, and propose avenues for future research.

### **Responding to Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do youth in the program perceive the services they receive and their influence on their lives?
2. How do youth in the program perceive the value of the relationships created with mentors, youth, and other staff within the program?



3. To what extent do youth in the program perceive the association between their level of engagement with the program with the influence that the program will have on them?

One characteristic of qualitative research is that it tends to embrace the “messiness” that is the human experience. Rather than studying a subject in a lab setting and manipulating controlled variables, qualitative researchers more often than not do their research in the field. This almost inevitably creates a complex body of data that runs outside of the researcher’s initial intentions or expectations. While it is a necessary common practice to declare research questions at the onset of any study in order to build credibility and coherence, qualitative data can rarely be contained within the confines of those questions. Therefore, it is often necessary to respond to research questions collectively and holistically, as there is significant overlap and entanglement from one question to another. This was particularly the case for my first and second research questions. Early in my data collection period, I realized that the phrase, “the services they receive” in research question one encompassed research question two. Indeed, my participants perceived the relationships developed in the after-school program were among the most important services provided and one of the areas that my participants demonstrated the greatest need for and interest in. In that spirit, I will respond to the research questions simultaneously. My response will be rooted in phenomenology, which will be discussed briefly before my response to the research questions.

Phenomenology is the theoretical framework guiding this study. Phenomenology views consciousness as always the consciousness of objects, also called phenomenon, around one (Husserl, 1931, p. 243). Because everyone’s consciousness is individual and unique, their experience with the phenomenon will be as well. Among the challenges with phenomenology is to deal with the phenomenon as directly as possible, void of social constructs and experiences

which can limit the scope of the researcher's vision. Therefore, the phenomenological researcher must continually doubt his or her previous experiences (Husserl, 1931, p. 17). In this case, the phenomenon in question was the after-school program. My research questions lent themselves well to phenomenology because they centered on the youth's unique perception of the phenomenon, the after-school program. Each participant had a unique perception of the phenomenon. My efforts were not to collect data on objective fact but rather subjective perception of the phenomenon.

While my theoretical framework and methodology were essential in making sense of this otherwise "messy" data, no framework and methodology can entirely organize qualitative data. It was inevitable that some data would fail to neatly organize themselves into themes and not easily be explained with the given methodology. For example, all youth, particularly John and Donna discussed their racial identity and how it impacted their experience within the program. While this did not enter the study as a primary theme, it undoubtedly would have if I would have adopted an alternative framework. As another example, it was unclear to what extent the youth's degree of vision for the future was a legitimate source of intrinsic motivation to be successful and to what extent it was a manifestation of compliance. Given a different theoretical framework and methodology, I may have been able to differentiate from these two. As I was interested in the youth's perception of how the after-school program was impacting their lives, I was largely forced to resolve to trust their perception of their own motivations unless I observed behavior that seemed to contradict their own words. Finally, there was considerable data collected that contradicted itself. John at one time gave a conflicting answer regarding how the after-school program impacted his academics. Sadie conflicted herself regarding the degree to which she thought her vision for her future was innate or had been developed within the program.

Nevertheless, it was my job as the researcher to attempt to make sense of this “messy” data. This could only be done by rigorous collection and analysis and ethical transparency throughout the writing process.

As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, this study was also heavily influenced by positive youth development. Positive youth development is a philosophy in child psychology which emphasizes a view youth of on a natural progression of development and capable of remarkable resilience and strength rather than focusing on negative or problem behaviors that should be attended to by adults (Lerner et al., 2005, pp. 10-11). Because adherents to positive youth development have an optimistic outlook on youth, they tend to value youth and their perspectives. This philosophy fit well into my research because of my emphasis in the youth’s perception and their experience in the after-school program. Rather than studying one or more of the various outcomes associated with the after-school program, I chose to study the youth’s perspectives of the program. By asking the youth their perspective on the after-school program (the phenomenon), I was demonstrating value in their perspective. Therefore, my research in many ways was the implementation of positive youth development.

All four participants valued relationships in the program. Of the four, John and Sadie approached these relationships most similarly. Both actively sought out opportunities to develop relationships and perceived a need for role models out of the mentors. The difference between the two, however, was in the origin of their need for these relationships and role models. John sought to counter what he saw as a personality trait weakness: his introverted or even anti-social tendencies. Sadie, however, sought out the program in order to counter what she perceived as negative influences and role models within her existing social network. Like John and Sadie, Jackson came to the program in search of personal relationships. This need, however,

manifested itself differently. Like John and Sadie, Jackson hoped to use the program to broaden his social network. This need was imbedded in an additional need to hone his social skills that made it somewhat distinct from John and Sadie. In terms of valuing relationships within the program, Donna's perception was most unique. She saw the program as an opportunity to conduct relationships she largely had developed outside of the program. This is largely because she came to the program with less need for personal relationships than the other three participants and because of her tendency to keep a selective social network.

All participants saw value in the academic services provided by the program, although they didn't necessarily perceive that those services would influence their lives. John and Donna, largely because they saw themselves as self-motivated, didn't see value in the provided academic support for them but accepted that academic support had value for other, less motivated students. John showed this in his willingness to tutor Jackson. He valued academics enough to volunteer his time helping his peer, but persisted that such services were unnecessary for him. Paradoxically, while John professed to hold little value in the academic support services, he simultaneously perceived that the program as a whole was making a significant influence on the trajectory of his future career. In fact, John was currently interested in going to college to pursue a career in psychology. Without the program, he guessed that he would have most likely become a welder. He was able to rectify this paradox by explaining that the after-school program, "pushes you to your best", most practically by encouraging him to enroll in Advanced Placement courses. In this way, the program was providing academic assistance that he did not value but academic encouragement that he did. Donna explicitly said that she understood that her mentor needed to have a more hands on mentoring style for many youth, although not for her. She understood why her mentor meticulously monitored the youth's academic progress but felt

“ambushed” when she was on the receiving end of such persistence. In this way, she expressed her value in academic support but retained her self-image of being different than many of her peers in the program. Jackson and Sadie valued the academic support and perceived that it influenced the trajectory of their lives. Jackson first demonstrated this value by being willing to accept tutoring services, most commonly from John. Additionally, he was uncertain if he would have been headed to college without academic support from the program, but he was clear that the provided services made his path to college much more obtainable and certain. Sadie likely received the most intense tutoring and academic support of the four participants in the study. Her willingness to simply accept such services demonstrates a value for them. Furthermore, she was certain that without the academic support, she would not be headed to college and with it, she was. The degree of certainty that the academic services provided would influence the youth’s lives seemed to be connected to their degree of intrinsic-motivation the youth possessed and their degree of academic struggles before entry into the program. Consequentially, John and Donna perceived themselves to be more intrinsically motivated and to have had more academic success previous to the program than Jackson and Sadie.

All students appreciated the uniqueness of the trips and experiences offered to them through the program. The degree to which they thought the trips would influence their lives, like the academic support, seemed to be connected to their degree of intrinsic motivation. Jackson and particularly Sadie identified with the trips as a form of extrinsic motivation and inspiration that encouraged academic success. For Jackson, this was most directly connected to future professional goals. He left his individualized trip that included time with a professional chef encouraged to pursue a career in the culinary arts. This inspiration led to more generalized academic drive and motivation so that he would be able to achieve his future career goal. Sadie

saw the trips as sources of extrinsic motivation for academic success, opportunities for personal growth, and chances to develop relationships with youth and mentors. Donna and John, however, rejected this extrinsic motivation as ineffective. Despite this rejection, both Donna and John consented that the trips were unique opportunities they should take advantage of, most notably the Washington D.C trip. Both Donna and John saw themselves as intrinsically motivated, and my observations confirmed this. Additionally, whatever need for extrinsic motivation Donna and John needed in order to be academically successful, they received from their parents. Both Donna and John's parents were in the habit of taking away privileges such as their respective children's phones and video games as consequences of poor grades. Neither Jackson nor Donna reported their parents as a source of extrinsic motivation.

As reported in the cross case analysis of Chapter Four, all of the youth reported enjoying Final Destination, the optional Christian faith-based aspect of the after-school program. Although I never directly asked, Jackson, Sadie, and John all professed to be Christian. Nevertheless, none of the youth saw Final Destination as a primary aspect of the after-school program in terms of their value. Instead, Final Destination was generally seen as a time to build relationships, have conversations, and consider Christian faith in a contemporary context. Of the four, Jackson seemed to place the highest value on Final Destination. Nevertheless, he placed more value on academic support, program trips, and relationships within the program than Final Destination. John embraced his role as being prone to asking complex questions of his mentor in Final Destination. He appreciated when his mentor expressed enthusiasm that he would be returning to Final Destination after a seasonal absence because of his tendency to spark conversation. Such reinforcement seemed to provide John with a sense of belonging within the after-school group. Sadie saw Final Destination as an opportunity to further develop

relationships with her peers and mentor. Donna described Final Destination as, “fun”, “cool”, and “interesting” despite also confessing to at times “tune out” or fall asleep during the program.

Of the three research questions for this study, the third was the most difficult to develop an answer to. The research question was largely established out of anticipation that I would have participants who under-utilized the program, particularly during academic time. It was difficult to answer of Sadie because she was such an active attendant, likely for a few factors. First, she tends to be a compliant person. As she said, “I can’t say no to anyone and I hate being mean...” Secondly, as discussed in Chapter Four, she has a strong vision of her future, largely brought on by a negative history with her family that gave the after-school program greater meaning to her. Finally, her need for positive relationships drew her to the program, creating a need for the program that was different from other youth in the study. If nothing else, the proof of Sadie’s value in attending the program is most demonstrated by her strong attendance, which is voluntary. Even the study hall period, which is during a mandatory part of the school day, is voluntary in that she could easily obtain a pass from a teacher elsewhere in the building if she wanted to escape the program mentors. The fact that she was such a regular attendant of the program and that she credited the program with having a strong positive influence on her (in areas such as academics, confidence, and the development of personal relationships) at least suggests her belief that consistent engaged attendance is more likely to lead to stronger youth outcomes in the program. This conclusion, however, proved difficult to develop any more fully.

Like Sadie, because Jackson had a very high attendance rate and was generally active in all program activities, making a determination of his appreciation for the relationship between engagement in the program and influence proved difficult. He clearly valued attendance. When asked if he had ever considered leaving the program, he quickly responded that he had not

because doing so would mean, “missing out on a good opportunity”. When pressed further, he explained that this opportunity was largely associated with its ability to gain access to future professional goals. In his case, the program gave him academic support and experiences that would help him get accepted into college and pursue a career in culinary arts. Like with Sadie, my data collection indicated that he valued attendance and was engaged in program events. Determining if their regular, engaged attendance was due to an appreciation for the relationships between engagement and influence of the program, however, proved difficult.

In contrast, John and Donna were seasonally absent from the after-school program due to participation in school extracurricular activities. In John’s case, he was involved in theater. While program mentors tried to be flexible to his schedule and meet with him occasionally, his attendance was sparse while preparing for the school’s musical. John understood that when he was absent, he missed out on opportunities. Foremost on that list of opportunities was the opportunity to socialize and develop relationships. For example, of the need to regularly maintain those relationships, John said,

I feel that like I said I’ve become friends with people that I never would have previously thought but I feel that in order to keep the bond strong, you have to be around. You can’t just show up whenever you feel the need to.

John’s understanding that he was missing opportunities when he was absent from the program can also be seen by his willingness to sacrifice in order to be able to attend the program. At the time of this study, the school’s theater department was putting on a play that John said he thought sounded like a lot of fun to participate in. Nevertheless, he decided to decline participation in the play in order to be able to participate in the after-school program. This clearly demonstrated an appreciation for what was lost by lack of attendance in the program.



While his participation in theater caused him to seasonally miss out on opportunities with the after-school program, John perceived that he was making up for those opportunities. John credited the after-school program with giving him the confidence to try theater in the first place. In turn, theater was helping him grow more comfortable with social interactions. Therefore, he perceived that he was largely realizing the same socialization benefits from theater (perhaps even more so) as he would have been if attending the after-school program. Consequentially, while John seemed to feel a sense of being torn between two programs which he identified with and cared for, he did not seem to perceive his seasonal absence from the after-school program would lead to a significant setback.

Like John, Donna was seasonally absent from the after-school program. In her case, it was because of her involvement in various sports teams. Although the program expected her to make up some of the time she missed in order to qualify for rewards trips, it was on a much smaller scale and often without some of her closest peers' presence. When asked what she missed out on when she was absent, she did not perceive that she missed anything of consequence. This is largely a reflection on her lack of value for many of the program's services other than social time with her close network of friends and the fact that she had opportunities to interact with those friends outside of the program.

Collectively, a pattern can be seen. Youth that came to the program with the greatest need for it (Jackson and Sadie), were such regular attendees that determining their appreciation for the association between engagement and benefits proved difficult. John and Donna, however, were less-regularly attendees. The two respective extracurricular programs that caused their absences (theater and athletics) largely replaced much of their need for the program and therefore lessened their perception of lost benefits they might have realized from the program.

In Donna's case, athletics provided social time with friends similar to what she would have sought out at the program. In John's case, theater provided opportunities to develop relationships and counter his intrinsic nature.

### **Contributions to Literature**

In this section, I will present key conceptualizations, concepts, and philosophies presented in the literature review that influence this study including the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring, Positive Youth Development, and the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-School Centers in Youth Development. Additionally, I will propose what contribution this study has on that body of literature. Finally, I will use material presented in my cross case analysis to discuss the contributions this study has made to that literature.

#### **Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring**

As presented in Chapter Two, one conceptualization central to this study is the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring (Rhodes, 2005). See Figure Six for a visualization of the Rhodes (2005) model of youth mentoring. This model places youth-mentor relationships central to mentoring's effectiveness. Only once the youth-mentor relationship has achieved sufficient depth and longevity can youth development be realized. Such development can be categorized into social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development (Rhodes, 2004). Socio-emotional benefits can in turn be generalized, providing opportunities for improved relationships with parents and peers. These developments then lead to positive outcomes such as improved grades or behavior (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

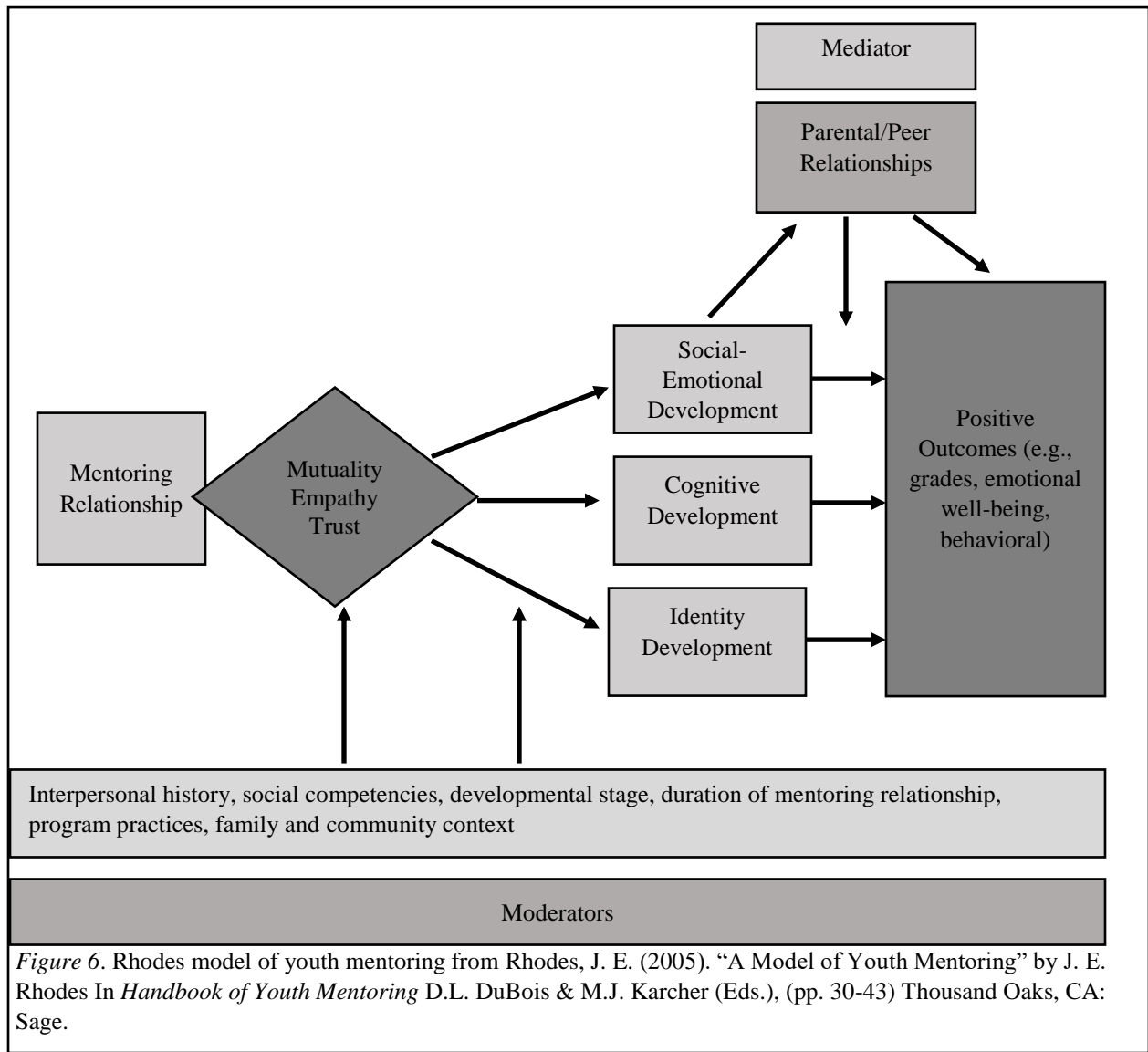


Figure 6. Rhodes model of youth mentoring from Rhodes, J. E. (2005). "A Model of Youth Mentoring" by J. E. Rhodes In *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* D.L. DuBois & M.J. Karcher (Eds.), (pp. 30-43) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This study supported the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring in multiple ways. First, it confirms the importance of relationships in after-school programs. Of the four participants, Sadie spoke most frequently and fondly of her relationship with her mentor, in her perception filling a void of positive adult relationships in her life. Additionally, in what could be expected based on the Rhodes Model, she likely perceived the greatest influence upon her by the program of the four youth. John and Jackson both had strong relationships with their mentor and in turn perceived to have realized positive outcomes. Donna admittedly kept the program, including her

relationship with her mentor, to a distance. In what seems predictable according to the Rhodes Model, she perceived to have the least benefits from the program. This supports the central importance of youth-mentor relationships in after-school programs.

This study also supports the categorization of developments that can be realized by after-school programs. Sadie perceived developments in all three categories. For example, she reported the development of numerous positive relationships, the improvement of her self-confidence, and growth her ability to communicate with adults, all of which are positive social-emotional indicators. Additionally, she perceived that social-emotional development to have generalized as a result of the after-school program with helping her to improve her relationship with her mother. Cognitive development was realized by her gaining greater understanding of academic concepts, particularly in her English and math classes respectively. Identity development was demonstrated when she credited the program with helping youth to, “know who they are”.

John’s perceived growth was primarily in social-emotional and identity development. For example, social-emotional development can be seen by his crediting the after-school program with giving him the social confidence to try out for theater. Identity development was evident through John crediting the program with encouraging him to realize his academic potential by enrolling in advanced courses and to start thinking of future professional careers.

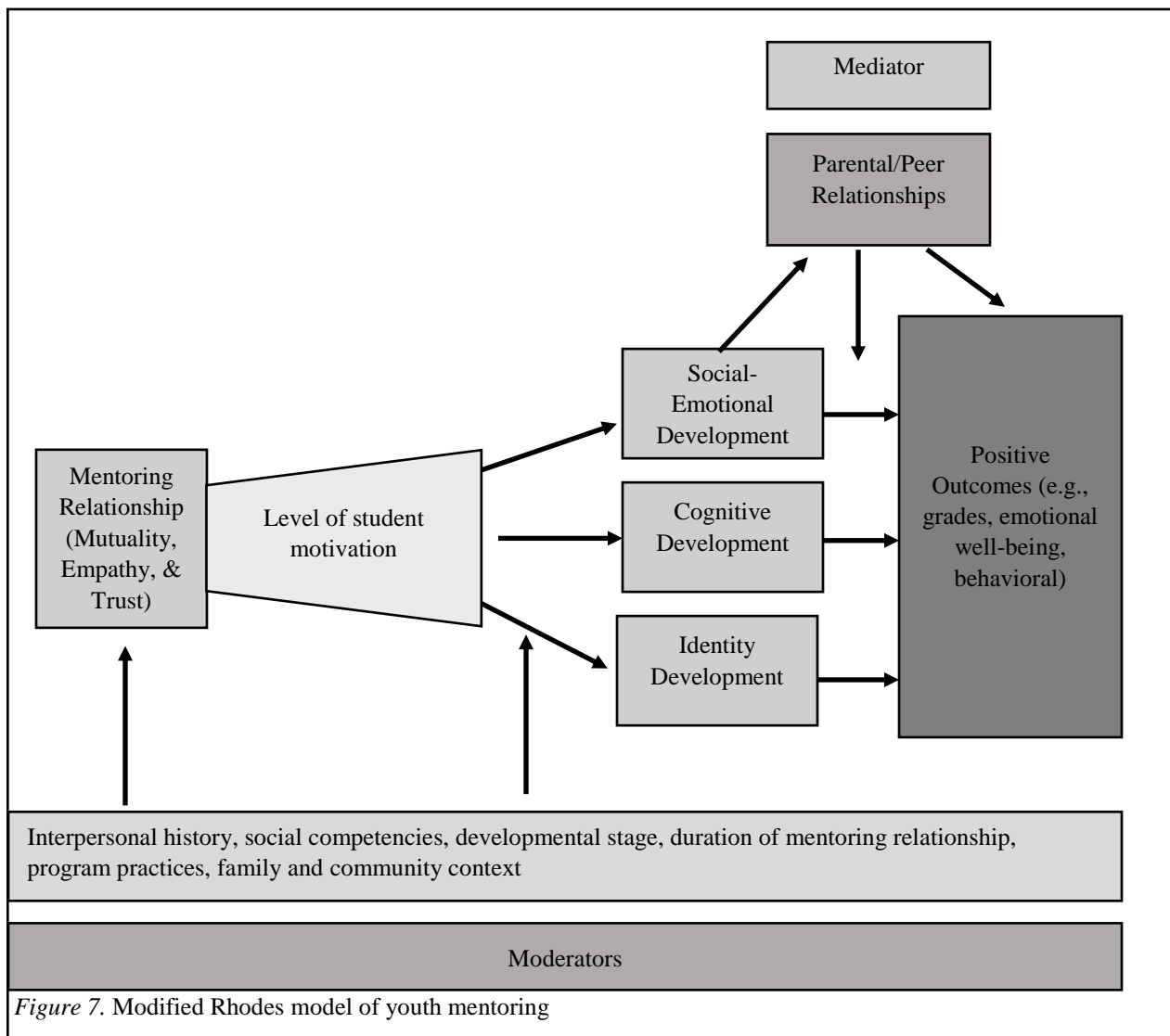
Jackson perceived benefits in all three categories. Social-emotional development can be seen by his refinement of social skills. Cognitive development was seen by his mastery of academic concepts, most commonly due to John’s tutoring. Identity development was realized by John’s crediting the after-school program with motivating him toward a future career in culinary arts.

Finally, Donna, who perceived the least benefits from the program, was largely limited to social-emotional growth, as she did report the development of a limited number of relationships within the program that she valued. Donna's comparatively lesser benefits are undoubtedly connected to a number of factors found on the Rhodes Model including her limited depth of relationship with her mentor, interpersonal history, and family/community context that kept her from embracing the program as whole-heartedly as some of her peers.

One extension of the Rhodes Model that is suggested by this study is the fact that youth are often aware of the developments depicted in this model. For example, not only was Sadie able to generalize social-emotional development realized at the after-school program into an improved relationship with her mother, she was consciously aware of that development and able to articulate it. John was able to discuss social-emotional developments as he learned to "come out of his shell" as result of the program. Jackson understood and was able to explain his cognitive development, and ensuing positive outcomes, as a result of the tutoring services offered by the program. Finally, Donna, who I observed to have realized the least development as a result of the program, understood that her development within the program had been minimal. This consciousness and ability to articulate development within this model is noteworthy. Its demonstration legitimizes interview as a tool, albeit one that needs proper triangulation, to gauge student development in after school programs, legitimizes positive youth development in the context of after-school programs, and places an importance upon student perception while determining best practices in after-school programs.

In addition to suggesting the usefulness in utilizing student perception when studying their development in after school program, this study suggests the necessity in adding a single factor to the Rhodes Model: student motivation. See Figure Seven for a modified version of the

Rhodes Model. This study suggests that a determinant factor in youth development in after-school programs is their level of motivation in doing so. This motivation could be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature, however, the after-school program studied here acted largely as a source of extrinsic motivation. Therefore, the data collected here would suggest that the level of intrinsic motivation or susceptibility to extrinsic motivation factors was a predominant factor in determining the level of development (and ultimately positive outcomes) that a student would realize as a result of participation in the program.



Sadie, for example, demonstrated a high degree of intrinsic motivation. She enrolled herself into the after-school program and regularly discussed her vision and criteria of success for her life. Additionally, she reported being motivated by the extrinsic motivation of reward trips to continue her efforts toward cognitive development. Not surprisingly based on this level of motivation, she was able to realize positive outcomes, in this example improved grades, as a result of participation in the program.

Similar to Sadie, Jackson demonstrated intrinsic motivation, particularly in the domain of cognitive development as a vehicle toward a meaningful career and economic independence. Additionally (again, similar to Sadie) he reported being motivated to meet the academic standards to qualify him to participate in the program's reward trips. Undoubtedly a crucial factor in Jackson's positive outcomes realized because of the program was his motivation for doing so.

As was the case for much of this study, John stands out as the most complicated participant in trying to understand the themes and results of this research. First, it is useful to consider what positive outcomes he seemed to have realized as a result of the program. John was most aware of his social-emotional development which led to greater socialization and willingness to explore more extroverted experiences (such as theater). Because the after-school program did not design its extrinsic motivation system to explicitly target such outcomes, John's motivation for doing so had to come elsewhere. John reported his motivation came from two sources. First, his mother was insistent to him getting greater socialization opportunities, even do the point of forcibly enrolling him into the program and suspending access to his phone and video game systems if he refused to go. Therefore, extrinsic motivation played a role in his social-emotional development. Secondly, John demonstrated a level of intrinsic motivation

toward overcoming his excessively introverted nature. He often described his development in seeking out social development in the context of improvement, demonstrating that he held it in value. In this case, John came to the program with his own source of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Therefore, a case can be made that although the after-school program did not supply the motivation for John's social-emotional development, it did provide a setting in which that development could take place.

The second category of development that John reported was realizing greater academic motivation. He reported likely being down the road of exploring a career in psychology as a result of the after-school program and likely becoming a welder without it. He explain this largely because the program gave him encouragement to do things like enroll in advanced classes that he would have been unlikely to do so without it. Like the first example, this development was clearly the result of a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. In our interviews together, John expressed a blossoming interest in psychology that demonstrated a sense of intrinsic motivation. Nevertheless, counseling with his mentor, with whom he had a relationship described by mutuality, empathy, and trust, was clearly a factor in getting John to increase his level of academic motivation.

As described in the cross case analysis of Chapter Four, Donna demonstrated the lowest level of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation toward development of the four youth in this study. She seemed only interested in exercising relationships with youth that existed outside of the program. She rejected academic support offered by the program, and she reported often disengaging from activities such as Final Destination. Although she did report valuing enrichment portions of the program, most notably the Black history quiz bowl, such motivation seemed highly contextual and unlikely to generalize into more broad development and positive



outcomes. This lack of motivation effectively blocked all potential that the after-school program had to realize positive outcomes for Donna despite considerable resources being put into her enrollment in the program.

### **Positive Youth Development**

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a philosophy within child psychology which emphasizes the ability of youth to naturally develop and even thrive despite hardships and challenges. This ability is based on personal strengths and abilities the youth already possess and can be further augmented through effective developmental strategies (Lopez et al., 2015, p. 727). Rather than viewing youth as broken and requiring repair by adults, PYD views youth as resources of already significant potential that need to be further developed (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 10-11). Generally, this study supports the premise of optimism for youth. Indeed, among the most foundational philosophies that this study is rooted in is the belief that youth's perceptions of the services that are being offered them matter. Continually throughout my data collection, I was impressed by the depth of answers that these participants gave me as well as their willingness to analyze their own perceptions, actions, and biases. These were young people that had been placed into situations that for a wide variety of reasons were less than advantageous. Their situations might have been insurmountable if not for the opportunities for development that they were given through the after-school program. Despite these otherwise insurmountable deficits, I saw youth of incredible promise in all of them.

More specifically, this study took steps to support PYD. Catalano et al. (2004) established a list of comprehensive objectives that should be focal points of PYD programs.

They include:

1. Promotes bonding

2. Fosters resilience
3. Promotes social competence
4. Promotes emotional competence
5. Promotes cognitive competence
6. Promotes behavioral competence
7. Promotes moral competence
8. Fosters self-determination
9. Fosters spirituality
10. Fosters self-efficacy
11. Fosters clear and positive identity
12. Fosters belief in the future
13. Provides recognition for positive behavior
14. Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement
15. Fosters prosocial norms (Catalano et al, 2004, p. 101-102)

Based on my data collection, I identified ten of these fifteen objectives being directly addressed within the after-school program. They were:

1. Promotes bonding
2. Fosters resilience
5. Promotes cognitive competence
7. Promotes moral competence
9. Fosters spirituality
10. Fosters self-efficacy
12. Fosters belief in the future

13. Provides recognition for positive behavior
14. Provides opportunities for prosocial involvement
15. Fosters prosocial norms

This further supports the breadth of objectives that after-school programs can take on. More importantly, this study demonstrated that youth are largely aware of these developments occurring as a consequence of their involvement within the program. For example, Sadie was aware that the after-school program had increased her social competence, helping her to get over her natural shyness and improving her relationship with her mother. John, despite reporting being naturally inclined to be shortsighted and to only be concerned with the present, credited the after-school program with giving him greater belief in his future. He believed that the after-school program had provided necessary encouragement to enroll in advanced classes and that because of that encouraging, he hoped to pursue a career in psychology. Without the program, he thought he would have most likely not enrolled in advanced courses and become a welder. This demonstrates that youth within after-school programs can be incredibly perceptive of many of the ways in which the program is allowing for their personal growth, a central premise of PYD.

### **After-school Centers and Youth Development**

As discussed in Chapter Two, the majority of research that has currently been conducted on after-school programs has been quantitative, outcome-focused in nature. These studies have progressed our understandings of best practices in after-school programs (DeWit, DuBois, et al., 2016; Gortmaker et al, 2011; Leos-Urbel, 2015; Sheldon et al., 2010; Shernoff, 2010). Still, the prevalence of quantitative research has created a need for qualitative research to help explain some of these results. One of the most important exceptions to this quantitative trend in after-

school program research has been *After-school centers and youth development: Case studies of success and failure* by Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois (2011). Perhaps its most important contribution was the creation of the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development. This conceptualization emphasized an after-school program's programs, activities, relationships, and culture (PARC) influence youth in an interconnected fashion in order to bring about positive outcomes upon youth. See Figure Eight for the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development.

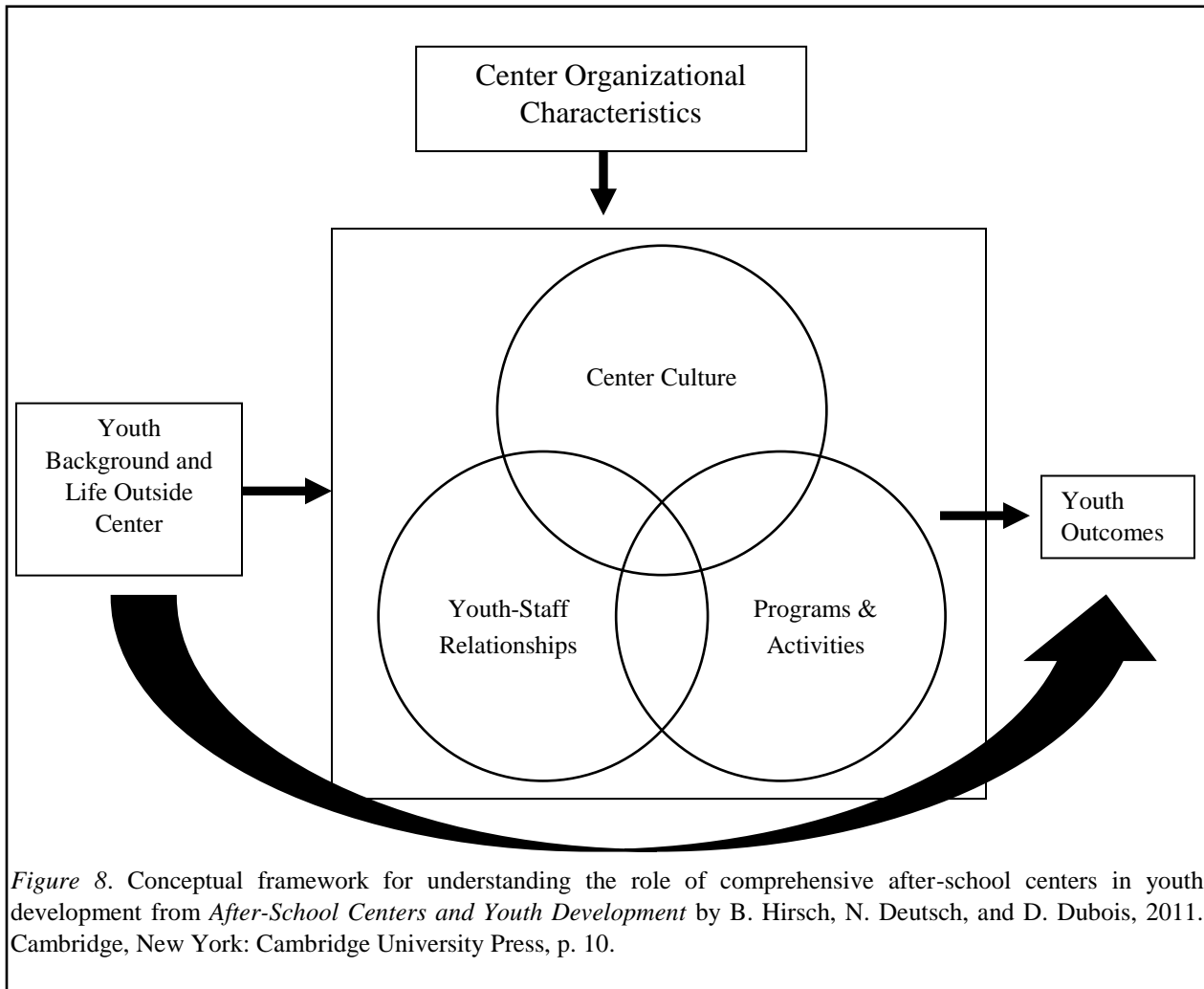


Figure 8. Conceptual framework for understanding the role of comprehensive after-school centers in youth development from *After-School Centers and Youth Development* by B. Hirsch, N. Deutsch, and D. Dubois, 2011. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 10.

My data collection supported Hirsch, Deutsch, and Dubois's conceptual framework, as I saw regular indications of the overlapping nature of the after-school program's PARC. For example, the culture building up to the Black History Bowl was one of acceptance of the importance of the activity and relevance of the content. The youth genuinely wanted to win the competition and saw the greater goal of advancing the collective knowledge of African American history as worthwhile. Consequentially, the cooperative nature within the respective groups allowed for greater relationship-building potential. This in turn increased the potential for youth outcomes as a result. Jackson seemed to have particularly benefited from experiencing an opportunity to experience success and develop social skills that would not have been available otherwise. Donna also seemed to thrive during the Black History Quiz Bowl practices. This is undoubtedly because she reported seeing meaning and significance in the purpose of the activity. According to the Hirsch, Deutsch, and Dubois's conceptual framework, it should not be surprising that my observations of that activity also indicated that she was the most outgoing to people outside of her immediate social network of any time I observed her. In this case, the relevance of the specific activity supported her ability to conduct relationships within the after-school program. These factors compiled to lead to greater outcomes, as she was a clear leader within her Quiz Bowl group.

Additionally, my participants indicated not only that the after-school program's PARC overlapped in their influence on youth outcomes but that the youth were at least at times perceptive of their overlapping nature. For example, John understood that one of the primary reasons that he valued Final Destination (a program) was that he enjoyed his conversations with his mentor (relationship) during them. Without such a relationship, John's outcomes at Final Destination would have undoubtedly been lesser. In a negative example, Donna understood that

one reason she didn't value program trips (activities) as much as she otherwise might have is because many of her friends (relationships) in the program often didn't qualify or chose not to go. If her relationships within the program had been stronger and more diverse, her outcome from trips would have undoubtedly been improved.

In addition to supporting many of the major themes in *After-school centers and youth development: Case studies of success and failure*, this study indicated that a refinement of the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development (Figure Eight) may be useful. While the factors that can influence youth outcomes in after-school programs can generally be categorized into programs, activities, relationships, and culture, this division is quite broad. Within these categories, particularly in relationships, there is room for specificity. Each of the four participants in this study had a distinctly different outlook on their relationships within the program. Sadie approached relationships out of a context of lacking personal relationships and role models. She had a void in her life that she very consciously saw and sought out a solution for. Even beyond seeking academic help that was the primary motivator that led her to seek out the after-school program. Jackson approached relationships within the program as an opportunity to hone his social skills. John approached relationships as an opportunity for socialization. He very clearly understood that his excessively intrinsic nature was negatively influencing his wellbeing. While initially forced into the program by his mother, he soon learned to appreciate his need for it. Finally, Donna approached relationships within the program as a source of entertainment. She regarded only one friend within the program as one that she wouldn't have had without it. This was by far the lowest number of my participants. Rather than an opportunity to develop relationships, Donna saw the after-school program as primarily an opportunity to exercise her existing

friendships. These exceedingly different perceptions regarding relationships within the program can dramatically influence best practices for allowing opportunities to develop successful relationships within the program. Therefore, I propose adding more specific subsections to the relationship category of Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development (Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois, 2011). See Figure Nine for the specified PARC conceptualization.

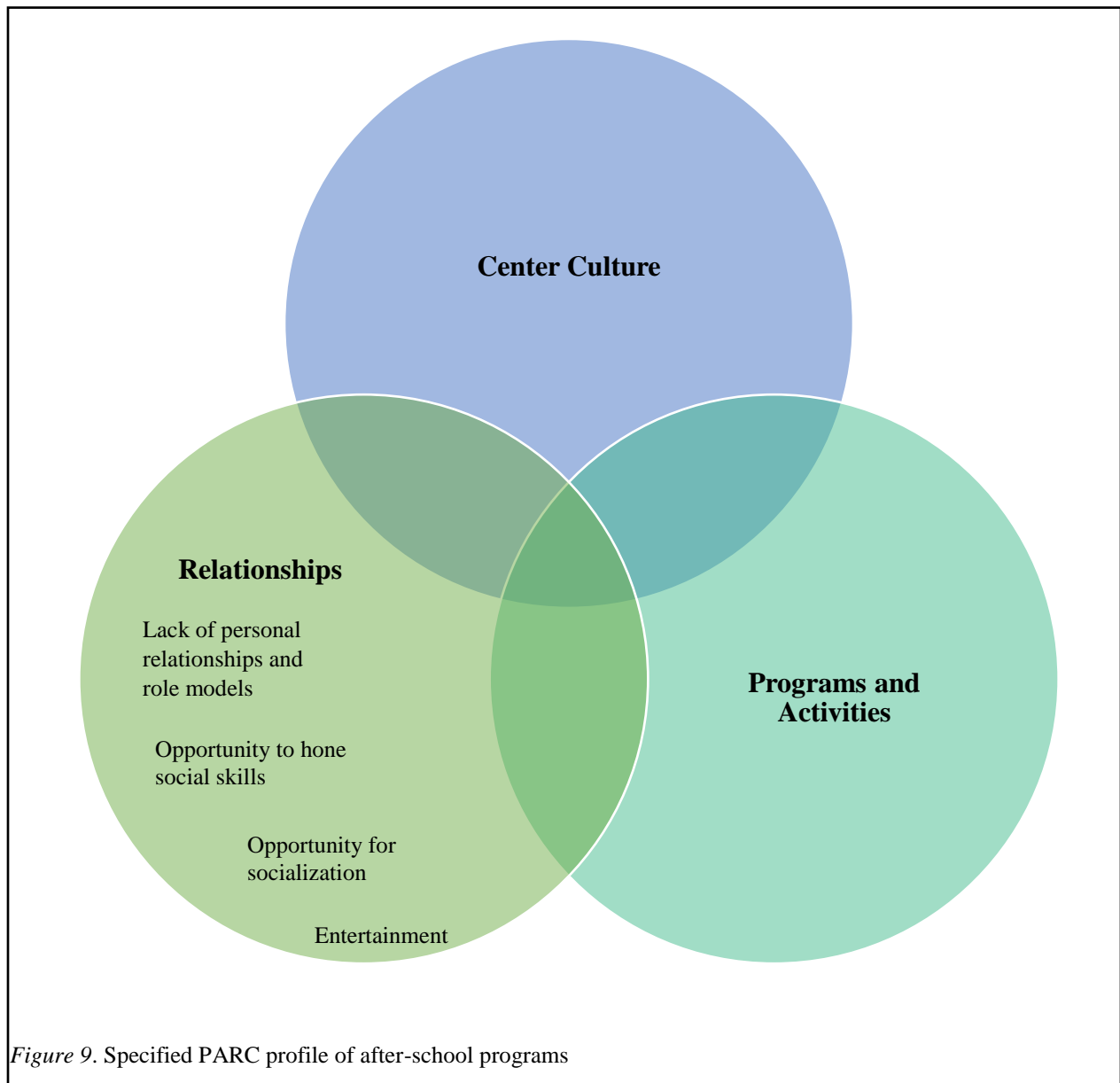


Figure 9. Specified PARC profile of after-school programs

## **Researcher Reflections**

As stated earlier, one aspect of this study that made it unique is that I, as a white, middle class man, was able to enjoy insider status while researching an after-school group that was predominately populated by working class youth of color. My insider status was earned through working nine years with the after-school program and ten years teaching in their school district. I had previously worked with three of the four participants in this study closely. Many of their friends, older siblings, and parents knew me. Based on this experience, I also enjoyed insider status among the program mentors and directors, as they were exceedingly willing to open their doors to me and assist me well above and beyond what I could have ever hoped for if I was new to the program. I added further to my experience with after-school programs by observing two other programs in preparation for this research project. With this experience and insider status, I feel qualified to give some degree of reflection on the after-school program in this study specifically with hopes that those reflections might have a degree of transferability to other after-school programs.

I believe that this research could be utilized to shift policy regarding initial selection and recruitment of students into after-school programs. My data collection and analysis proposed key factors that influenced the degree of benefit that my four participants perceived they were getting from the after-school program. Among these were need for academic support, social/emotional wellbeing, need for extrinsic motivation, need for enrichment experiences, and need for personal growth. Based on these factors, youth could be more accurately screened for potential for growth within the program.

As stated earlier, Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an optimistic philosophy of child psychology which emphasizes the potential for growth that youth already possess. This



philosophy can be further implemented into after-school programs. There is a need to redouble efforts to respect the natural development of youth and celebrate their strengths rather than see it as adults' role to "fix" our youth. One way to do that is to get regular, systematic feedback from youth on their perception of the program and its progression. That feedback need not be as formal of research as this. In my experience in this research and elsewhere working with youth, however, they generally take the opportunity seriously when an adult of authority genuinely asks their opinion of something that is relevant to them. With exceptions, my participants generally took my interviews seriously and gave deep, meaningful feedback. They were honest with themselves. They were realistic about their perception of the program and its influence on them. This feedback the youth are prepared to give is an untapped resource of information regarding an after-school program's effectiveness in reaching youth.

As stated throughout this study, the importance of relationships in after-school programs cannot be exaggerated. After-school programs need to reexamine their programs and insure that they are valuing youth-mentor relationships above all else. This not only speaks to the philosophy that mentors must approach their mentees with but program policies as well. Specific to the after-school program observed in this study, relationships can be increasingly emphasized by taking further efforts to ensure the retention of mentors for seven year cycles as youth move from 6<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades. The frequency of mentor/youth contacts over the school's summer vacation can be maintained. Further training of mentors with specific strategies on how to develop relationships can be implemented. Finally, the importance of taking the time to understand each youth's relationship positionalities can be emphasized. This study indicated a wide range of relationship positionalities that youth come into after-school programs with that deeply effect their perception of and experience within the program (see Figure Nine).

After relationships, a secondary point of emphasis can be on the relevance of activities. The primary reason that youth in this study enjoyed Final Destination, the optional faith based aspect of this program, was because it made Christianity more relevant to them than they had previously experienced. They overwhelmingly commented that they enjoyed having conversations about contemporary issues and problems they were having. When scripture was used, it was (in my observations) always placed into a relevant context, and all opinions regarding it were welcome. Similarly, Donna, who generally resisted finding meaningful experiences in the after-school program, reported finding the Black History Bowl meaningful because she perceived that there was a legitimate need for more education on African American history in her life. This need made the Black History Bowl relevant to her. Even challenging youth will respond to programming if they are able to see its relevance.

I would invite after-school programs to reexamine the degree of emphasis they place on attendance. While certainly youth must attend the after-school program to see benefits, after-school programs must examine the reason for youth absences. In John's case, he was seasonally absent because of his participation in theater. While his absence could be seen as to have a negative experience on his outcomes associated with the program, closer examination necessitates a different perspective. The primary need that John came to the after-school program with was a lack of socialization. His mother saw a need for him to overcome his anti-social habits he was developing. While this didn't come naturally, he eventually grudgingly came around to accepting that doing so was in his best interest. As he began to experience greater socialization, he gained confidence in social settings. He then utilized this added confidence by enrolling into theater. While in theater, he saw greater socialization benefits. Therefore, while he was missing the after-school program for theater, he was realizing an equal

(and perhaps even greater) benefit in the area that he had the greatest need for growth in. Based on those benefits, John's sacrifice of attendance in the after-school program for the sake of theater should be seen as a victory of the after-school program rather than a detriment toward his development.

Finally, after-school programs could do well to reexamine themselves and insure that they are doing everything they can to make all youth feel equally included and invested into the program. As successful as the Black History Bowl was, celebrating African American history had an unintended consequence. Sadie, as a Hispanic youth in a predominately African American program, initially felt largely excluded from the Bowl. When asked to describe her perceived outsider status, she responded,

Yeah, because it's like, they kind of, since most of the [after-school program] kids and stuff are African American, it's like, they focus more on that stuff than they do on other cultures. It's just like Caucasian or Mexican, because, you know, it's...my culture is cool too.

It should first be noted that in a later interview, Sadie reported that this feeling of being an outsider slowly subsided as their preparation for the Bowl progressed. Nevertheless, she continued to wish that there was a way to also celebrate and learn about her culture as well. In fact, she reported knowing little to anything about her culture's history and an interest in learning. What she did know, she expressed interest in teaching to her peers. This recommendation to insure the inclusion of all youth is certainly not a critique of the Black History Bowl. It was genuinely observed to be an engaging, relevant activity for youth within and beyond this study. It is also not a recommendation that youth of non-African American

races and ethnicities should not be learning African American history. Still, after-school programs would do well to insure that all youth feel celebrated and valued within a program.

### **Conclusion**

This study was a phenomenological case study, heavily influenced by positive youth development, the Rhodes model of youth mentoring, and the Hirsch, Deutsch, and Dubois Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development. The rationale for this study was largely based on the belief that after-school programs are one of the most promising avenues for improving education today and the fact that the majority of current research completed on after-school programs today is quantitative and outcome-focused in nature. Rather than analyze outcomes, this study, rooted in phenomenology and positive youth development, placed value on what youth perceived was meaningful within their experience of the after-school program and what was not. Data collection was done through observation, group interview, individual interview, generated documents, and photographic data. Twelve individual interviews and one group interview were conducted with four 9<sup>th</sup> grade youth enrolled in a 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade privately funded, faith-based after-school program in a Midwest urban community. Over the course of twelve weeks, weekly observations were conducted, with an observation form completed for each youth involved in the study that was present on that given day. This resulted in a total of 29 observation forms completed.

### **PARC Profile**

In this study, I supported current literature including the Hirsch, Deutsch, and Dubois Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development (PARC Profile) which emphasizes the importance of relationships within

after-school programs. All four of the youth involved valued the relationships within the program. Their positionality regarding those relationships, however, varied greatly. These differences in positionalities regarding relationships impacted their outcomes within the program. Therefore, I saw a need for specificity regarding the perspectives that youth have toward relationships within after-school programs in the Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development (PARC Profile). I collected data which justified the inclusion of four sub-categories of relationship perspectives: lack of personal relationships and role models, opportunity to hone social skills, opportunity for socialization, and entertainment.

### **Academic Services**

Another important conclusion of this study was that all youth valued the academic services provided by the program, although they did not all think that those services would meaningfully influence their lives. While Sadie and Jackson actively utilized and perceived value in that support, John and Donna did so in more subtle ways. John demonstrated value in academic support by providing it, largely to Jackson. Additionally, he professed appreciation for the academic encouragement provided by the program rather than the tutoring that the program offered. Donna saw value in the academic services but only for other, less motivated youth.

### **Motivation**

A central theme that emerged in the data analysis of this study was the importance of youth motivation in positive outcomes realized in the after-school program. The after-school program primarily served as a source of extrinsic motivation for the youth. Therefore, youth that perceived and displayed greater intrinsic motivation or receptiveness to the program's offered extrinsic motivation realized greater positive outcomes. This theme necessitated a remodeling of

the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring, placing the level of student motivation as a central determining factor in youth development.

The most common source of extrinsic motivation offered by the program were reward trips, which were used as incentives for meeting academic and behavioral expectations. These include trips to St. Louis, Pikes Peak, Kansas City, and Washington D.C. All of the youth in the study appreciated the unique experiences that these trips offered them, although the degree to which they perceived them to be a source of effective extrinsic motivation for them varied. Sadie and Jackson perceived the trips to be a high degree of motivation. John and Donna appreciated the trips but did not perceive that the trips motivated them. Because of this discrepancy, I invited after-school programs to rethink the role of extrinsic motivation in their programs or their initial screening procedures to select youth that would be best motivated by their program.

### **Final Destination**

All of the students expressed a degree of appreciation for Final Destination, the optional faith-based aspect of the after-school program. While their degree of appreciation varied, it was largely based on the emphasis of the mentor to make the content of Final Destination relevant to the youth. In this chapter, I applauded these efforts and used it as an opportunity to emphasize the importance of relevance in after-school programs. Generally speaking, youth will respond favorably to programs, which seem meaningful to them.

### **Positive Youth Development**

More broadly, this study hoped to embrace Positive Youth Development and emphasize the importance of including youth in the implementation of programming which directly influences them. These youth were often incredibly perceptive as to what best practices were within the

after-school program and how it was influencing their lives. They were honest with themselves about what was best for them within the program. It was my observation that they largely enjoyed the opportunity to share their opinions because of the unfortunate rarity that it represented. If we are going to truly value our youth, it is my position that we need to value their opinions and take them more seriously.

### **Implications for Stakeholders**

This study aimed to gain a greater understanding of youth's perception of after-school programs that they are involved in. Interviews, observations, and photographic data was collected to understand how youth perceived the services provided by the after-school program, relationships developed in the program, and how their level of engagement in the program influenced its degree of effect on their lives. Because after-school programs often represent a convergence of multiple enterprises, both public and private, it is hoped that they are a wide variety of stakeholders that might find this study useful.

First, I believe that after-school program practitioners can find this study useful. In this space provided, I have contributed to existing literature on after-school programs, particularly concerning the importance of relationships. I have also attempted to demonstrate the potential for asking youth their perception of the program. Additionally, I hope that this study is a reason for reconsideration of initial selection procedures and the role of extrinsic motivation in after-school programs. Finally, I believe that this study can cause after-school programs to take the time to understand their individual students' motivations, interests, and perceptions relative to their program in order to create a program that can best serve each of their youth.

This study shows potential usefulness to researchers of after-school programs. I have aimed this study at playing a small part in filling a void in existing literature on after-school

programs and the potential for qualitative research on after-school programs. As discussed earlier, qualitative research often gives greater depth of understanding in fields that have previously been researched through quantitative methods.

I also believe that this study can be useful to policymakers. In this study, I aimed to recognize the important role of after-school programs within our greater educational system. After-school programs, both private and public, need our continued support through legislation, school district policy, and individual action. If we are going to take our children's education seriously, after-school programs look to be one of the most promising areas for growth, particularly concerning its potential for leveling the playing field for youth that need more individualized support services than the school systems can reasonably provide in order to be successful. After-school programs are so promising partly because they have the potential to appeal to a wide range of Americans. After-school programs are a relatively cost effective means of educational reform, appealing to fiscal conservatives but also appealing to the social welfare reform interests of most liberals.

As an educator myself, I believe that this study shows potential usefulness to educators. This study demonstrated the important role that after-school programs can have on academic performance in youth. Jackson, John, and Sadie all perceived significant academic benefits as a result of being involved in the program. This is undoubtedly at least in part because of the program's ability to provide individualized support to youth. Experienced educators wouldn't be surprised to see individual support lead to positive outcomes, but this is often unrealistic for teachers to be able to consistently do. Educators need to be familiar with after-school programs that serve their students, communicate with appropriate mentors or directors, and do what they



can do to support programs in a way that can maximize their potential positive outcomes for youth.

### **Future Directions of Research**

There are many avenues for future research that could advance through this study. In this section, I will briefly mention a few possibilities. First, I have demonstrated that youth in after-school programs are capable of being highly perceptive of the benefits (or lack thereof) that after-school programs are offering them. Greater understanding is needed regarding the long term retention of those perceptions. For example, do youth who perceived that the after-school program was having a meaningful influence on their future maintain that perception as young adults? A longitudinal study following a group of youth into young adulthood and allowing them to reflect on the influence that the after-school program had on their lives would be potentially rewarding and fruitful.

After-school programs such as the one involved in this study rely heavily on extrinsic motivation. Here, I considered the effectiveness of such strategies on all youth, as John and Donna both perceived that it did little to motivate them. Much more can be understood about extrinsic motivation in after-school programs. For example, what are the long-term consequences of using extrinsic motivation as a primary motivator for academic success? To what degree can intrinsic motivation be learned in an environment that emphasizes extrinsic motivation? Is it possible that such strategies stagnate the development of intrinsic motivation? To what degree is student motivation malleable? As mentioned in Chapter Three, several years ago, the after-school program involved in this study decided to scale back its extrinsic motivators offered to youth, particularly those in high school. It felt that the youth were developing a sense of entitlement to rewards offered in the program and becoming less motivated. This line of

thought is far from research-based, and there is significant potential for qualitative and quantitative research to develop greater understanding of the effectiveness of similar practices of after-school programs.

In this chapter, I offered greater specificity to the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development in *After-school centers and youth development: Case studies of success and failure* (Figure Nine).

Greater research is needed to determine if my categorization of youth's perspectives on after-school program relationships is sufficient. Designing a study, potentially as a grounded theory research project, researching the various perspectives that youth approach relationships in after-school programs might be useful and significant.

Finally, in this chapter, I offered suggestions to after-school programs for criteria to consider when screening potential youth to be enrolled in an after-school program such as the one in this study. They included: need for academic support, social/emotional wellbeing, need for extrinsic motivation, need for enrichment experiences, and need for personal growth. First, further qualitative and quantitative research is needed to determine if these categories are sufficient. Secondly, there is a need for a universally applicable, validated screening tool that could be quickly completed by teachers, parents, and other adults familiar with youth that could assist after-school programs in selecting youth that would hold the highest potential for positive outcomes within their program.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have offered my views on the implications of the research project, including putting it into context within phenomenology and positive youth development. Next, I responded to my research questions in a holistic format, which is common among qualitative

research because of the overlapping nature of many of my findings for my respective research questions. I then provided insight into this research project's place among current literature, particularly Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois's PARC profile in *After-school centers and youth development: Case studies of success and failure*. Additional contributions to positive youth development and the Rhodes model of youth mentoring were discussed. Then, I offered my reflections on this study, particularly its implications for after-school program and best practices associated with them. Next, I offered this study's implications for stakeholders including practitioners of after-school programs, researchers of after-school programs, policymakers, and educators. Finally, I offered suggestions for future areas of research concerning this study specifically and after-school programs in general.

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## Appendix A

### Tentative Timeline of Research

August 24	Submit IRB Application
September	Advisor Approval of Chapters 1-3
October	IRB Approval
Early October	Committee Meeting to Review Proposal
Mid October	Initial Observations to Select Potential Participants
Late October	Distribution of Parent Consent Forms
Late November	All Consent Forms Collected/Alternate Participants Selected if Necessary
January-March	Data Collection – Interviews and Observations
April-May	Writing/Approval of Chapters 4 & 5
August	Dissertation Defense

## Appendix B

### Email Correspondance

**From:** Undisclosed A

**Subject:** Request to Research

**Date:** August 29, 2017, 4:11 PM

**To:** EnglishAlan@ksu.edu

Alan,

Thank you again for forwarding the information to me last week regarding your proposal to conduct a research project in \_\_\_\_\_. Superintendent \_\_\_\_\_ and his executive team reviewed your proposal and have agreed to give their approval that you can proceed with this project.

When it is completed, they would appreciate you sharing a copy of your findings. You can forward that to me and I will share with the group.

Thanks again and good luck.

***Undisclosed***

Appendix C  
Email Correspondance

**From:** EnglishAlan@ksu.edu

**Subject:** Observations

**Date:** Nov. 7, 2017, 8:55 AM

**To:** Undisclosed B

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_,

\_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_ in \_\_\_\_\_ gave me your contact information. I am currently preparing to conduct my dissertation research on \_\_\_\_\_. My dissertation committee thought it would be advisable to spend some time observing other after-school programs in order to give me better context and perspective. I wondered if I could schedule a few times/dates that I could come and observe your program.

Thank you for your considerations,

Alan English

Appendix D  
Email Correspondance

**From:** Undisclosed B

**Subject:** Observations

**Date:** Nov. 7, 2017, 8:55 AM

**To:** EnglishAlan@ksu.edu

Hi Alan,

We'd be happy to help. Do you have a specific age group you'd like to compare programs to? We could do elementary (k-6) or Teens (7th & 8th) after school. We also host Teen Nights (7th-12th) on Tuesday/Thursday evenings.

Let me know what your interests are and send over a few dates that work for you.

Thanks!

## Appendix E

### Email Correspondence

**From:** EnglishAlan@ksu.edu

**Subject:** Observations

**Date:** Nov. 7, 2017, 2:21 PM

**To:** Undisclosed C

Ms \_\_\_\_\_

As you see below, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ gave me your contact information regarding my interest in conducting a few observations of your after school group. I am a graduate student at KSU that is working on my dissertation on an after-school group in \_\_\_\_\_. My committee would like me to observe other after school groups to get greater context. I hope you don't mind the dates that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ and I agreed upon. If they don't work, I can be very flexible. Could you tell me specifically where at \_\_\_\_\_ I should go when I come?

Thank you very much for your assistance,

Alan English

## Appendix F

### Email Correspondance

Hi Alan—

The 27th should work just fine. Are there specific aspects of the program you'd like to observe/learn more about? We begin with snacks right after school before moving into tutoring, so if you'd like to see the full program you might want to be here a few minutes before 3pm that day. When you get to the \_\_\_\_\_, if you come into the main office (just inside the front doors), I can meet you here to take you to where our program meets.

Thanks,

\_\_\_\_\_



Appendix G

Adapted PARC Profile Observation Notes Page One

**PARC Profile Observation Notes**

Youth: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Program</b>	
<b>Activity</b>	
<b>Relationships</b>	
<b>Culture</b>	

Appendix H

Adapted PARC Profile Observation Notes Page Two

**Observation Checklist**

- Student is actively part of the group.
- Student is responsive to Program staff.
- Student is drawing appropriate meaning out of the group objectives.
- Student is helpful to other students and staff.

**Observation Field Notes**

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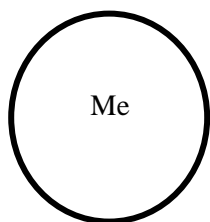
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Appendix I

Youth name: \_\_\_\_\_



 = A person in the program