EXPLORING THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP THROUGH THE LENS OF AT-RISK TEENS PARTICIPATING IN AN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAM, ‘THE MENTEE’S PERSPECTIVE’

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Mentoring is a readily used intervention for at-risk youth and because of its prevalence and consensus of being viewed as a positive solution for curtailing high dropout rates, crime and violence it is important to understand how the mentee views and comes to understand the dyadic relationship of mentoring. Youth from urban communities plagued by violence, crime and low educational attainment are quickly labeled at-risk by federal and local governments, school districts, community centers and others who believe certain risk factors impede their chances of success but ironically the youth are unaware of these risk factors and believe the label is offensive and targeting.

This qualitative study used grounded theory methodology to examine how the mentor-mentee relationship is understood by the lived experiences of at-risk teens participating in an afterschool program located in a Midwest micro-urban community. As a result, five themes were discovered which included peer pressure, low-income, single-parent household, dysfunctional family and the negative implication of being labeled at-risk. For this study, 10 African American teens between the ages of 13-18 years of age were interviewed about their understanding of the mentor-mentee relationship and how their community and upbringing influence their experiences of mentorship. The interviews with teen participants were semi-formal and ranged anywhere between 8 to 15 minutes. In addition, three full time staff members were interviewed to understand their knowledge of the mentor-mentee relationship and how it impacts their job function but more importantly how they engage with at-risk youth. The interviews with full time staff participants were
semi-formal and ranged anywhere between 15 to 40 minutes. The prevalence of after-school programs like Extend a Hand exist because once school has been dismissed for at-risk teens, the time frame between school dismissal and evening is critical because during those hours they typically do not have adult supervision which undoubtedly increases the probability of engaging in a myriad of poor choices ranging from drug use to violence.

The results of the study provide a compelling and shocking account as to the need for at-risk teens to be involved in after-school programs but exposes the systemic barriers which make such interventions a small bandage attempting to cover a gaping wound. A wound that the at-risk teen is seemingly unaware exists and unfortunately at the expense of their own detriment.
Dedication

You departed my life when I was a young child but through the miraculous power of God you imparted upon me such love that I would have to live an eternity to reciprocate it to the world. I vividly remember standing on the chair by the stove as you made dinner and watched you intensely. I relished every moment and recall being a willing taste tester. I remember our frequent trips to the grocery store and small antique shops and your willingness to reward my good behavior with ice cream. I so appreciated your stern yet gentle nature as it kept me on a straight path. You taught me how to pray, love, forgive, share and be a humble servant. I dedicate my dissertation to Annie B. Moore, the uneducated southern woman from Isola, Mississippi who told me my shoulders were broad and my future was filled with endless possibilities. Your love has never escaped my grasp and continues to live today. You instinctively and prophetically knew your grandson would rise above the ashes. So every time someone refers to me as Dr. Eugene L. Moore my heart will smile because you believed in me first and prayed for my success. Your beauty, grace and integrity are everlasting memories that will never fade. I love you grandma!
Acknowledgements

It is always challenging to acknowledge those who have helped you through your journey because as you begin to construct the list you realize there are simply so many people to thank for their countless efforts to ensure your journey was filled with hope, optimism, feedback and encouragement. However, despite the difficulty, I would be reminisced if I did not make a valiant attempt to express my gratitude to those who imparted their wisdom and unwavering support.

Associate Professor Yoon Pak has been instrumental in her efforts to advise me through the process of completing my dissertation. She is the embodiment of a professional and understands the lives of graduate students which are often filled with unforeseen circumstances and setbacks. She demonstrates compassion, sympathy and empathy but not at the expense of ensuring you remain focused on the end goal of completing your dissertation. She is an adviser that laces her shoes up tightly and gets in the race with you to ensure your success and for that, I say thank you.

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Associate Professor Christopher Span has been my unofficial mentor. I deeply admire his intelligence and historical lens which is integral in understanding the hidden narratives of former slaves. He has always provided encouragement and his mantra of, "No complaints" repeatedly plays in my subconscious and conscious mind. He has received all of his degrees from Illinois and I too have followed in his footsteps. He is a remarkable man and I have seen how he interacts with his intellectually inquisitive son Langston which is always a delight to see as I come from single-parent home. I am always cognizant when I see a strong man providing a foundation of love and support for his family and for that, I say thank you.

Head and Gutgsell Professor James D. Anderson has been an integral contributor to higher education. The College of Education is forever indebted for his nearly 50 years of service and scholarship. To surmise his value I am reminded of the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his prerecorded sermon aimed to instruct the presiding minster during his eulogy which was played posthumously at his funeral at the request of his widow Coretta Scott King, “Tell him not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize--that isn’t important. Tell not to mention that have 300 or 400 other awards--that's not important. Tell him not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King Jr. tried to give his life serving others.” In my estimation James D. Anderson exemplifies what it means to be a servant and for that, I say thank you.
Professor Laurence Parker played a pivotal role in my pursuit to achieve a doctorate in Educational Policy Studies (EPS). One day in December 2009, I was walking the halls of the College of Education and in my direct line of sight stood Dr. Parker whom had previously stated he would be out of the office for the majority of the day. I quickly spoke as I did not want to infringe on his time but to my surprise he stated he had a few moments to talk and within mere minutes he introduced me to the department of EPS. In addition to his insightful advice he handed me a copy of the Harvard Educational Review which I vigorously read. I can unequivocally say this brief interaction was beyond serendipity but was a collision of ambition and opportunity and for that, I say thank you.

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a world renowned institution and when I first walked on the quad in 1997 I was simply amazed at how so many students from all around the globe converged with one single mission to be a part of the Illini family. I was happy as I received my Bachelor of Arts degree in 2001 but my excitement was not at its peak nor did my Master of Education degree conferred in May 2003 reach its pinnacle of success. I worked in the corporate sector and gained intangible skills from a Fortune 5 corporation and other leading organizations but I found myself perplexed by the state of the educational system coupled with injustices many marginalized groups faced. In an effort to provide solutions and not just criticism I looked to Illinois once more to open their doors of educational opportunity as my pursuit of a doctorate was never to adorn my office wall or fireplace mantle but to learn how I could move beyond my ideological
disposition and theoretical constraints by providing practical solutions. Illinois has provided me with a platform to represent the marginalized voices with integrity and scholarship and for that, I say thank you.

The Office of Minority Student Affairs (OMSA) has been a constant presence throughout my time at Illinois from the onset in 1997 they provided me with mentorship and needed resources to propel my academic achievement. As a graduate student you have the flexibility to move around campus and seek different opportunities which I have most certainly done but not at the expense of diminishing my commitment to the invaluable work OMSA provides. OMSA provided me a mentor as an undergraduate and as a graduate student allowed me to be a mentor and pay it forward and for that, I say thank you.

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Nikita, Elijah and Eugene L. Moore II (EJ) you all are the ones who have listened to me read countless pages without complaining. You all have seen me in my truest state which ranged from jubilation to extreme exhaustion but you never withheld your love or belief in me and for that, I say thank you.

Mother, Police Officer and Friend it is difficult to explain the impact you have had and are continuing to have on my life. Your resilience has proven to be a sight to see and I vividly recall the countless sacrifices you endured to ensure my future had boundless opportunities. As a single-mother you never complained about the lack of support or made me feel as if I was at-risk because of my ascribed circumstances. My dissertation focuses on the mentor-mentee relationship which is typically between a non-familial adult and a younger protégé but in all honestly you have been the master engineer on my figurative ship of life by mentoring and encouraging me to seek greatness. You gave me the courage to dream big and to be the captain of my ship but you where wise enough to understand it takes a village to raise a child. You exposed me to great mentors, demanded I strive for excellence and instilled in me the importance of speaking articulately. You were my first writing coach as we had frequent writing competitions ranging from short narratives to poetry which inspired me to use my written words to speak truth to
power. You insisted I stand up to injustice and to never concede to fear. You dressed me in suits as a toddler because you saw a future for me that demanded professional attire and leadership. You went so far as to tell me that with God I could do all things and you simply made me believe I was unstoppable and for that, I say thank you. I love you mom!

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have been more than just the Trinity but my true place of refuge and serenity. I am a descendent of former slaves and my great-great grandmother was a sharecropper. I remember my childhood vividly and my beliefs were no different than the average child. I came to believe in the Tooth Fairy and waited with expectation when I lost a tooth knowing that underneath my pillow would be a crisp dollar bill. I remember coloring so many eggs in anticipation of the Easter Bunny. As a child, I remember Christmas and the immense excitement I had waiting for the magical Santa Claus to descend down the chimney. In addition to those childhood memories my great-great grandmother told me a story of this baby born in a manger and from that very moment my life as I knew it was forever changed. My mother recently read to me a note in which I had written to God in my childhood and as I listened I was both humbled and amazed. It was evident my belief in Christ was more intense than the magical nature of the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny and Santa Claus as I soon learned those figures were no more real than the boogeyman who once lived under my bed. I have read in research articles how African Americans are typically Christ followers as it is evidenced in slave narratives. The vileness of slavery or the evilness of poverty is inherently void of
hope but once you factor in God He can dismantle any form of oppression. Father in Heaven you have bestowed such favor upon my life and for that, I say thank you.

For those who are not mentioned by name does not mean my appreciation is not actualized but I am deeply grateful to my many mentors, teachers, professors, colleagues and friends who have selflessly offered their support and for that, I say thank you.
Author’s Message of Hope

I will spare you the details about my upbringing as it is intricately woven throughout the dissertation but do know my story is not far from the many teens who I interviewed and observed for this study. Poverty, crime and violence are largely systemic issues and many young African American teens are in the midst of a horror film starring themselves. Often times when we turn on the television or read our social media feed we are inundated with stories of hopelessness. African American children slain in the streets sometimes as a result of an over aggressive police officer, gang violence, abusive parents or just as an innocent bystander. In no way should we indict the countless brave police officers who risk their lives daily to protect the citizens of their respective communities but to ignore the unconscious and conscious bias displayed by some which results in the loss of life of unarmed African Americans is a grave misstep in justice. Many politicians, judges, lawyers, celebrities, scholars, ministers, school districts, community members, parents and even children tune in for their daily dose of carnage but who will have the courage to change the channel and the narrative. History has produced such great leaders like the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to those who are less known but their tenacity to rewrite the stories of injustice speak volumes. It is time we destroy the labels of at-risk, low-income and single-parent which at best is coded language for those who some believe are destined to fail. It is perplexing and downright deplorable that we as a nation have a great indication of how the story of poverty, violence and poor education ends but instead of offering solutions some continue to turn a blind eye toward the perpetual horror they continuously indulge. It is my greatest hope that
teens will read this dissertation and come to learn they are no more at-risk than someone who lives in a gated community but what separates them is their extreme poverty which seems to impart its vileness upon those most vulnerable. It is time to get up from the dismal feature film of your life and not be a stationary target.

African American teens all around the world I have a secret, those systemic issues like poverty, gun violence and high dropout rates tried to target me as well and even with the unwavering support of family and mentors their tenacity was relentless but I learned to believe in my success more than a system that bet on my failure. The African American teen who wears loafers and a cardigan sweater is no less of a target than the teen who wears Timberland boots and a hoodie because what is truly under attack is your potential not your wardrobe. I encourage you to get up from this socially constructed label called at-risk which subconsciously and consciously screams to you that you are deficient. I was targeted because you did not want me to realize my potential. When I am given equal and equitable opportunity I am much more than an athlete or an entertainer but I am the same person you once claimed to adore at three years old. As I grew older your interactions changed and the labels began. I am not your free and reduced lunch, individualized education program, future inmate or at-risk student but I am a child of God with endless possibilities. My hope is that African American teens do not define themselves by their ascribed circumstances or the labels which have been conveniently used to describe their disposition and social condition but instead I implore you be resilient to withstand the bullseye that has been intentionally and disingenuously placed upon your back and when you one day walk across the stage
to receive your post-secondary degree you can boldly say, "I guess you missed the target." When life presents you an obstacle and trust me it indeed will please hold on to the message my grandmother and mother both taught me which is, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” Matthew 19:26 NIV.

Eugene L. Moore
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Research

This dissertation examines the widely used and respected intervention of mentoring. It focuses on African American at-risk youth who are often the predominant demographic for the intervention. However, the dissertation attempts to provide a deeper analysis of the readily used intervention of mentoring by focusing on the unique perspectives of at-risk youth who have been selected to receive mentoring during an afterschool program. Mentoring is a highly researched topic and the introductory chapter aims to provide a deeper context as to why this particular study adds value to the field. In addition, it provides a detailed explanation of how the study was conducted. The introduction has four sections which include the statement of the problem, purpose and rationale for research study, primary research questions and interview questions and the organization of the study.

Statement of the Problem

As a doctoral student I have been frequently asked by my peers, colleagues and faculty members the same question, “What is your research focus?” In the early stages of my graduate study I found this question to be somewhat overwhelming as I knew it would likely change as I had heard from so many scholars and graduate students that your research will likely evolve or take on a different trajectory than previously imagined. Not only was the question itself problematic but it created some anxiety as I felt I did not have the required knowledge or bolstered vocabulary to adequately answer the question but nonetheless I rattled off the most eloquent response I could intellectually muster. Initially, I emphatically wanted to explore diversity beyond the convoluted rhetoric that surrounded the heavily debated topic but I instantly discovered my research
was too broad and needed to be more narrowly focused. In fact, it narrowed so much that it morphed into a completely different research topic.

Having grown up in a single-parent home and attending a subpar elementary school I was exposed at an early age to mentoring and its benefits. My mother was intentional in her approach to expose me to positive non-familial male role models in an effort to combat some of the harsh realities which surrounded my community like poverty, gun violence and high dropout rates. However, as I reflected on my upbringing it began to inform my newfound research focus of the mentor-mentee relationship and created a litany of questions about this readily used intervention called mentoring. Questions like: What is mentoring? What makes mentoring an effective intervention for at-risk African American youth? What are the lasting effects of the mentor-mentee relationship? Truthfully, these questions were only a fraction of the questions that consumed my inquisitive mind. Not only did I grapple with these questions but I was trying to understand my success both academically and professionally as I was always mesmerized by those who deem meritocracy as the primary factor for my success at the expense of ignoring the inherent challenges both my peers and I faced. Often times those individuals never questioned why so many of my peers despite their efforts and dreams voluntarily and some involuntarily succumbed to the disheartening realities the community exhibited. Thus, while mentoring was an effective intervention for me it was not the case for most of my peers. The notion that I worked hard and because of my efforts alone I achieved success is preposterous. I contend my success is a culmination of many factors like supportive family, spiritual intuitiveness, resilience, good teachers, mentors and other influential circumstances which helped to propel my accomplishments.
So as I began to unpack my research topic I knew I needed to define mentoring coupled with using qualitative methods to explore the varied experiences of African American youth in urban communities. One of the first things I had to come to terms with is what it means to be labeled at-risk.

Research suggests that more than three million young people are engaged in some type of mentoring relationship, with a large majority of them considered at-risk. “At-risk,” which is a term typically used to describe youth who struggle with the realities of poverty, including those growing up in single-parent homes, those with emotional or behavioral problems and those living in high crime and violent neighborhoods (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002). While I did not feel at-risk nor did I realize the constraints of being reared in a single-parent home it was apparent my mother was more than aware of these realities. She instinctively bought into the idea that exposing me to successful African American males through mentorship would allow me to escape the pillars of failure that surrounded my community. Rhodes (2002) defines mentoring as a “relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated younger protégé- a relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé” (p. 3). In retrospect, I had great mentors who exposed me to numerous positive experiences like Junior Achievement, Illinois Student Forum, golf outings and even employment at some of the top corporations like Citigroup and Merrill Lynch but my experience was simply that: “my experience.” I recall sitting at the terminal in Heathrow Airport in London with my mentor of nearly 20 years and listening to him explain how I was the only successful mentor-mentee relationship he had fostered despite offering the same level of support to
other mentees. This reality has played repeatedly in my mind and undergirds my research which attempts to expose the varied experiences of mentees. The majority of my experiences with my mentors took place after school. For at-risk youth the time between school dismissal and the late evening is extremely dangerous for those students who are not engaged in extracurricular activities like sports, clubs or mentor-mentee focused activities because they are likely hanging out and engaging in non-productive activity. Hence, national organizations like the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club of America, Big Brother and Big Sisters (BBBS) and even local churches play a pivotal role in helping to keep at-risk youth off the streets. In light of my lived experiences I gravitated toward researching the mentor-mentee relationship as it unfolds during an afterschool program situated in a micro-urban community amidst the gripping realties the community inherently presents.

**Purpose and Rationale for Research Study**

The purpose of this study draws on my lived experience of having mentors since as early as five years of age. Those experiences were extremely positive and in my estimation are contributing factors of my success. Nonetheless, my experience cannot and should not be indicative of all mentor-mentee relationships. The preponderance of research suggests mentoring relationships are primarily positive especially for those youth considered at-risk. In fact mentors serve as a critical support system for children who are deemed at-risk as a result of poverty and other debilitating social factors (J. Christiansen, J. L. Christiansen, and Howard, 1997). Hence, when children are exposed to positive adults or even peers it has proven to be an effective strategy to deal with challenges. In addition to providing children with productive alternatives to handle tough
circumstances the mentor-mentee relationship can make obtaining success more feasible.
However, as I began to unpack the complexities of mentoring I soon realized it was
important to understand the lived experiences of mentees irrespective of generally
thinking the mentor-mentee relationship has a favorable outcome. We have seen
communities, school districts and the federal government give a strong endorsement of
mentoring programs but when I reflect on my own experience juxtaposed with that of my
peers I am left with many unanswered questions.

I recall in seventh grade we had a new teacher from California and she was
exceptional. Despite her father’s disapproval she traveled nearly 2,000 miles in her Ford
Escort to make a difference in the inner city of Chicago. The Chicago Public Schools
(CPS) was well known for delivering substandard academic outcomes especially for
those students who reside in poverty stricken neighborhoods but what perhaps troubled
her father the most was the high concentration of crime and violence which surrounded
the school. One day when heading home from a long day our teacher was severely
injured trying to aid a dog that had been struck by an automobile resulting in her tearing
her anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). She was rushed to the hospital and had to undergo
emergency surgery and was in the hospital for more than a week. A few of us decided to
visit her in the hospital and met her parents. Her mother was loving and nurturing but her
father did not speak and quickly exited as we entered the hospital room. It was at that
time our teacher revealed to us her father had a strong disregard for African Americans
and vehemently disapproved of her teaching in the inner city for CPS. Despite her
father’s disdain, she intrinsically understood the importance of exposing her students to
positive non-familial adults and she went beyond her responsibility to fill the gaps so
many students faced. Sadly, many children enter school with varied learning, behavioral, emotional and social characteristics, some of which increase their risk of school related problems. Urban youths are particularly vulnerable to school problems because of challenges associated with urban poverty (Broussard, Mosley-Howard, & Roychoudhury, 2006). In spite of developing lifelong relationships with her students our teacher felt as a privileged white woman her impact was limited not because she lacked empathy or compassion but because no matter how hard she struggled with the stark realities of the inner city she would never fully understand what it meant to be black in America. For the African American boys in her classroom she sought the support of mentors through the Junior Achievement Program. While she felt it was easier to connect with the girls in the classroom she believed the boys would be better served by successful African American male mentors. At that time we were introduced to two men who were highly accomplished in the corporate and the legal sector. To our surprise there stood two men, one who grew up in public housing and had risen to the ranks of Junior Partner at one of the world’s top law firms and beside him was a man who was the Vice President of a Fortune 500 company. I remember that day vividly as I watched in awe and I instinctively knew my current condition in which I was ascribed to would not negatively impact my future. Despite the mentors’ eagerness to make a difference in the community only three African American males decided to fully engage in the mentor-mentee relationship. In retrospect, my teacher injuring her ACL was a major turning point as she realized how racism and implicit bias hindered African Americans academic achievement and as a consequence she sought the help of mentors to combat this deplorable reality.
However, the purpose and rationale for my research is guided by the outcomes of these three boys nearly 25 years ago. If I only used the three boys then the success rate of the mentoring relationship would be 33% but if I include those who decided not to participate then it is roughly 5%. Although success is relative these outcomes seem beyond subpar especially when the program was introduced as a positive intervention to curtail the realities of urban poverty. Despite the many studies that strongly support the effectiveness of mentoring I am compelled to ask some pertinent questions relating to my experience in elementary school such as: Why was the mentoring program which included two highly accomplished African American males insufficient in overcoming the inherent barriers of poverty and learned helplessness? Why did so many young and impressionable boys decide to opt out of the mentoring program? For my two peers, why were we exposed to and given the same opportunities but only I managed to escape the encapsulating environment? As a result, I desired to unpack the mentor-mentee relationship beyond its popularity of being an effective intervention for at-risk youth and discover how mentoring is experienced through the eyes of the mentee. The lived experiences of the mentees had some variance but within those experiences we uncovered what needs to be done to produce more favorable outcomes. In an effort to add my scholarship to the already robust research of mentoring I not only focused on those who had successful mentor-mentee relationships but looked to those who did not and explained why their experience did not garner success.

**Research Questions and Interview Questions**

Mentoring has become commonplace as an in-school intervention with the purpose of helping at-risk youth cope with their circumstances. Schools frequently use
mentoring as an intervention for at-risk students and look to pair them with individuals who can hopefully provide guidance and help them build self-esteem coupled with a high level of resiliency (Converse and Lignugaris-Kraft 2009). The ubiquitous nature of mentoring is not only present during school hours but is seen in most communities like Prairie Urban where at-risk youth attend after-school programs in hopes of preventing their chances of being engaged in nonproductive activity when school is no longer in session. Perhaps poverty is the driving force which makes mentoring programs a readily used intervention to combat and/or cope with the circumstances the condition of poverty presents. The primary research questions guiding the study are as follows:

RQ1: How can mentor-mentee relationships provide a positive and/or effective alternative for at-risk youth to combat systemic issues like poverty, gun violence and high dropout rates?

RQ2: How are non-familial relationships like the dyadic relationship of the mentor-mentee perceived from the mentee’s perspective?

The following questions were asked during the semi-formal interview process to the participants to help guide the conversation about their lived experiences as it relates to the mentor-mentee relationship(s). They include:

1) Tell me about yourself as it relates to your upbringing?
2) How do you see the community in which you currently live?
3) What is mentoring?
4) What has been your previous experience with mentoring programs?
5) Please share when you were first introduced to mentoring and how did you feel about having a mentor?
6) How long have you been coming to the Community Youth Center?

7) Why do you come to the Community Youth Center?

8) What programs or activities are you involved in at the Community Youth Center?

9) What do you consider to be a good mentor-mentee relationship?

10) What do you consider to be a bad mentor-mentee relationship?

11) Do you have a preference of whom you would like to be your mentor? For example do they have to be the same race, ethnicity or gender?

12) How do you like the Extend a Hand Program?

13) When you hear the term at-risk what immediately comes to your mind and how does it make you feel?

14) What are your short term goals and how do you plan to achieve them over the next year?

15) What are your long term goals and how do you plan to achieve them over the next 2-5 years?

16) How do you value mentor relationships?

17) How are mentor relationships different or similar to the relationships you have with family members like parents, siblings, cousins, etc.?

18) If you had a good relationship with your mentor how likely would you share some of your inner most thoughts and feelings?

19) How likely do you believe your mentor can relate to your upbringing and be effective in understanding your circumstances or what you are going through?

20) How safe is the neighborhood where the Community Youth Center is located?
21) Do you believe the Community Youth Center helps to reduce crime, violence and dangerous activity in the community?

22) How comfortable would you be to invite your mentor to your home and how comfortable would you be to visit their home?

23) What is the most positive experience you have had with your mentor and what has been the most disappointing?

24) Do you believe your mentor has the capacity to help you escape the realities of your circumstances?

25) What person has inspired you the most and why? (Your response can be family, friends or people you have never formally met.)

These questions guide the discussion beyond the consensus of mentoring being an effective intervention for at-risk youth to a more personalized account as to how the mentor-mentee relationship is viewed from the perspective of the mentee. At times questions were not clearly understood by the participants whose ages ranged from 13-18 years old but were reworded to account for the varying levels of education and understanding. In addition to asking questions to the participants I was given permission by the Community Youth Center Director of Operations to question staff members about programmatic functions of the Extend a Hand Program and any other pertinent information needed to inform the study. The questions I asked staff members are as follows:

1) What is your name, title and current role at the Community Youth Center?

2) What is your educational background?

3) What made you decide to join the Community Youth Center?
4) What are your goals for the members you serve?

5) What is your definition of mentoring?

6) What is your definition of at-risk?

7) What is the biggest challenge and greatest reward of working with members at the Community Youth Center?

8) What are the primary issues or circumstances members face and how do you help to address those issues?

9) Explain the Extend a Hand Program and its structure?

10) Explain how mentors are selected for the Extend a Hand Program and do they have any formal training prior to meeting with their mentees?

11) How do you develop and or oversee programs and how do you measure their success?

12) Have you been a mentor or mentee and if so explain your experience?

These questions posed to staff members coupled with the questions asked to participants are aimed to inform the study.

**Organization of the Study**

Chapter one has covered the statement of the problem, purpose and rationale for research study, rationale for using interviews and the primary research questions and interview questions. Chapter two provides the literature review and theoretical framework of mentoring which offers a comprehensive discussion ranging from the history of mentoring to the challenges the intervention presents. Thus, the literature review covers a wide range of topics aimed to bring insight and understanding about mentoring. Chapter three provides an overview of the research design and
methodological approach. Chapter four includes the findings of the 13 (10 youth, 3 staff members) participants and observation. Chapter five provides a discussion and analysis of the data derived from the primary research questions. Chapter six encapsulates the overall conclusion of the study and provides implications and suggestions for future research as it is imperative to continue in our quest for a deeper understanding.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Mentoring is a broad topic and to best understand its complexity, it is important to be cognizant of the many reoccurring themes it entails. The literature review explores a vast level of topics surrounding mentoring and begins with defining the term at-risk which has almost proven to be synonymous when defining mentorship in the context of micro-urban communities. After gaining a deeper understanding of the term at-risk and what it signifies the dissertation explores ten subcategories which include: ‘The history of mentoring’; ‘key components of effective mentoring programs’; ‘mentoring structure and programming’; ‘resiliency’; ‘race, ethnicity and gender’, ‘competitive students and at-risk students’; ‘college students and elders as mentors’; ‘challenges of mentoring’; ‘negative effects of mentoring’; and ‘Mentee Perspectives’. The history of mentoring provides a concise yet thorough account of how mentorship has become a readily used intervention. The key components of effective mentoring programs provides the reader with the infrastructure of an ideal mentoring program. Mentoring structure and programming provides insight into what we know about mentoring programs and their design. The section on resilience provides some insight about what it means to be resilient as the term is heavily correlated to at-risk African American youth and their ability to withstand challenging circumstances. Race, ethnicity and gender is a contentious relationship surrounding mentoring as some believe same race, same ethnicity and same gender offers the best platform for a positive mentor-mentee relationship. The relationship between highly competitive students and at-risk students offers an interesting perspective of mentorship. Understanding how college students and
elders serve as mentors and the unique challenges both populations present add value to the dichotomous relationship of mentoring. It is equally important to understand the challenges mentoring entails coupled with the negative effects the intervention can cause for both the mentor and mentee. The literature review would be lacking if it did not include mentee perspectives. These ten sub categories while appearing disjointed offer a unique insight into the field of mentoring.

At-risk Youth

The troubling reality for many at-risk youth is that resources are scarce and although mentoring receives favorable acclaim those who are likely to be effective mentors are busy (Hamilton, 2010). This scarcity exists because the demand is simply greater than the supply as the rise in single-parent households has vastly increased coupled with poorly resourced communities and smaller extended families (Hartley, 2004). Although research has proven the benefits of a mentor and mentee relationship the scarcity of mentors can overshadow any potential results. Nonetheless, having an older more experienced adult to mentor youth will continue to be a readily used intervention. It is this reality, which makes mentorship such an important intervention for at-risk youth as it attempts to build relationships that in most cases would not be formed. This example provides a gripping reality for children who are at-risk and the inherent challenges they face stating:

Children in today’s schools bring with them diverse learning, behavioral, emotional, and social needs as they enter the school door. With the use of effective teaching practices and well-developed support services, the needs of many of these students are met routinely in the school environment. However,
there are still children who are at-risk for school failure primarily due to such factors as environmental stresses, chronic school failure, and abuse and neglect.

To meet the needs of these students, schools need multifaceted approaches (Christiansen, Christiansen and Howard, 1997).

These realities provide some credence for the need to have strong mentoring programs to help establish relationships where at-risk youth can feel a sense of belonging.

Unfortunately, many of these at-risk youth become lost in an educational system where they are placed in special education courses and eventually they drop out to escape the non-nurturing classroom setting where they feel isolated and ostracized. Fortunately, when a child is paired with a mentor who is committed and they have not become overwhelmed by their circumstances it can prove to be beneficial and in many cases life changing. Christiansen, Christiansen and Howard (1997) define the benefits of mentors stating:

Mentors serve as a critical support for children who are at-risk as a result of poverty, trauma, substance abuse, or other life events. Children who have a significant attachment to or a bond with an adult, or sometimes another child, tend to face their challenges more productively and are more likely to experience success.

Mentorship has a robust history that is equipped with both benefits and burdens. Since its introduction, it has been heavily focused on eliminating some of the social ills that plague many urban cities across America.
History of Mentoring

Although mentoring has existed for over a century, it has only been in the past 20 years or so that researchers have heavily highlighted its prevalence. Mentoring is the matching of a responsible adult with young people who might benefit from such a relationship. While mentor-mentee relationships can be familial, it is typically an unrelated adult who volunteers their time and resources to the mentoring program or initiative (Pryce, 2012). Mentoring programs can come in many different forms like school based, community based and faith based which offer variations in how mentoring is delivered whether it be natural or program based. Hence, faith based organizations play a key role in serving vulnerable populations. Churches will host events like block parties, cook outs and others activities aimed to keep at-risk youth off the streets. Although these community hosted events have the potential to attract youth it is important to connect them to positive mentors in hopes of fostering an environment aimed to rewrite their life chances. The realities many of these youth face create a huge demand for mentor relationships outside of the home to provide guidance and encouragement (Randolph and Johnson, 2008). Given the influx of attention toward mentoring it has been defined by many researchers and scholars. Rhodes (2002) defines mentoring as a “relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated younger protégé- a relationship in which the adult provides ongoing guidance, instruction and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé” (p.3). A mentor is traditionally defined as someone who is older by 8 to 15 years than their mentee. The mentor typically takes a parental role where they provide the mentee with teaching and feedback about their prospective career and personal life circumstances.
(Day, 2006). Moodie and Fisher (2009), define mentoring as, “the commitment of time and specific efforts by a more experienced person to the development of a mutually beneficial, supportive and nurturing relationship with a less experienced person” (p. 41). While there are many definitions of mentoring there seems to be a common thread among them which includes an older adult with more experience than their younger counterpart. The mentor’s goal is to provide a meaningful relationship characterized by their experiences and serve as a positive role model (VanderVen, 2004). The interest and appeal of mentoring is not surprising as it is a low-cost intervention which utilizes local resources and caring individuals to assist at-risk youth. These mentoring programs have some flexibility in structuring as it can be altered to meet a variety of needs. In recent years the federal government has funded mentoring initiatives which accounts for the increase in new programs (J. Miller, Barnes, H. Miller and Mckinnon, 2012). Given the extreme interest in mentoring as an intervention, researchers are beginning to unpack the programmatic infrastructure to determine its effectiveness. Furthermore, it is equally important to develop a clear expectation of what key components are necessary to ensure an effective mentoring program.

**Key Components of Effective Mentoring Programs**

It has been evidenced throughout the literature the positive effects mentoring can have for at-risk youth which inherently makes it a go to intervention but prior to providing mentoring services it is imperative it entails some key components if it aims to be an ideal mentoring program. To aimlessly target at-risk youth without adhering to some key components would elicit a poor outcome at the expense of the vulnerable child. The obvious component needed is the ability to establish a strong bond between the
mentor and mentee which is best achieved when the relationship is maintained over a long period of time (Rhodes, 2002). Given this factor is maintained it improves the chances the at-risk youth has to improve their academics and social behavior. Mentoring is an activity which is frequently driven by one's passion to help vulnerable populations who are often targeted to benefit from the intervention but passion void of training is a sure way to attract failure. Herrera et al. (2013) believe mentors who receive early match training and support from their program staff have a better chance to enhance the mentor-mentee relationship. Early match training provides the mentor with clear and reasonable expectations of the mentor-mentee relationship coupled with delivering an understanding of the mentee's responsibility. This support is not disjointed but extensive and provides the mentor with the necessary tools to develop the mentor-mentee relationship without feeling as if they are tackling the intervention in isolation. In addition to establishing a bond with the mentee and providing quality training for the prospective mentor, it is also equally important to develop a relationship with the parents of the at-risk youth. Dortch (as cited by Jackson 2003) contends communication between the mentor and the parent(s) or guardian(s) is essential to maintaining a strong mentor-mentee relationship. As a mentor you have to establish a relationship with your mentee but when that relationship is strongly supported and encouraged by the parent or guardian it makes the ability to foster such a relationship less cumbersome.

It is imperative for mentors to have a passion and commitment to do the valuable work of mentoring but without extensive training, screening, support of program staff and parental support their efforts can prove to have little to no impact. Rhodes (2002) contends when programs lack the infrastructure of screening, training and mentor support
the chances for a successful mentor-mentee relationship are greatly diminished. Thus, the potential to use mentoring programs to curtail poor behavior and improve academic performance is threatened when the program has not adhered to these essential components leaving the mentor less quipped to establish a meaningful mentor-mentee relationship. The next section provides more insight into how the structure and design of mentoring programs play an essential role in ensuring mentor-mentee relationships can produce successful outcomes.

**Mentoring Structure and Programming**

As communities, school districts and parents seek mentor programs more scrutiny is placed on the structuring components of the program and its effectiveness. Mentoring programs can include cross-age peer mentoring, intergenerational mentoring, e-mentoring and group mentoring. However, each of these structures presents its own levels of success and challenges (Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe and Taylor, 2006). Despite these programmatic issues mentoring continues to be the go-to intervention for some of the most vulnerable youth. J. Miller, Barnes, H. Miller and Mckinnon (2012) state, “Estimates put the current number of programs and youth population served at more than 5,000 and approximately 3 million, respectively” (p. 440). Meyer and Bouchey (2010) offer common themes of successful mentoring programs. First, successful mentoring programs are not random acts but are situation focused and target youth who are most vulnerable. Secondly, mentoring relationships, which last for a minimum of a year or longer have a more successful impact than those mentoring relationships that operate for shorter periods. Thirdly, the socioeconomic background of the mentor plays a role in the mentor-mentee relationship as studies show mentors from
higher income levels have more flexibility in their schedules which affords them more time to spend with the mentee. Lastly, successful programs match mentors with mentees of similar race, gender and interests coupled with setting clear expectations. Mentoring structures generally include site-based or community based activities. Site-based programs can be held at schools, faith-based organizations, or local service entities. Some of the national based programs are Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club of America and United Way which utilize a one-to-one mentor structure (J. Miller, Barnes, H. Miller and Mckinnon, 2012). Anatasia, Skinner and Mundhenk (2012) offer three types or combinations of mentoring which deal with the connection, setting and intent of the mentoring relationship. The connection in which the mentor and mentee meet can be either natural or assigned. The setting can be either community-based or school-based. The intent can be either developmental or prescriptive. By selecting one component from each pairing, you can derive eight different combinations like natural community-based developmental (NCD) which means a mentor and mentee met under organic conditions, their focus will likely be on more cognitive and social-emotional outcomes and their activities will be more than likely youth-driven and actively focused. Whether you assign a mentor to a mentee or their interactions are natural, making sure your services are aligned to the needs of the youth is imperative if you desire positive outcomes. Although the rise in mentoring programs in now commonplace it is imperative these programs and structures be assessed to discover their effectiveness. It is equally important to understand what conditions render the greatest outcomes (Rhodes and Spencer, 2010). Furthermore, it is important to expose some of the complexities of the field as it can ultimately better serve youth by being cognizant of the potential
shortcomings of mentorship. Although at-risk youth are typically lumped together not all of them are a good fit for mentoring. Despite it seeming insensitive to suggest an at-risk youth cannot benefit from a mentor relationship such relationships do not eliminate the need for professional treatment for youth experiencing severe emotional, behavioral and academic problems. Thus, mentoring is not an all-inclusive remedy for at-risk youth (Rhodes and Spencer 2010). Perhaps mentoring has been deemed appealing to many organizations because it is highly attractive to funding sources within the private sector (Philip and Hendry, 2000). It is important not to allow the consensus of mentoring being effective to cloud our judgment nor should we find contentment in knowing some children will not benefit from the intervention. However, even the most effective program cannot account for all the children who become victims of systemic issues outside of their control. The rapid growth in mentoring programs across the United States is largely due to the belief it is an effective intervention for at-risk youth. However, research has been mixed and little research has been done to assess the effectiveness of mentoring programs (Keating et al., 2002). Thus, theory and research has to play a pivotal role in the development and growth of interventions to provide merit for the relationships forged through mentoring programs (Rhodes and DuBois, 2008). The structure of mentoring programs is a critical part in developing quality outcomes. Another major theme in relation to mentoring is resiliency. Program leaders in an ideal world desire to create a safe space for youth to be resilient as their daily challenges require them to possess such a trait in an effort to survive. In fact, some would argue it takes a great deal of resilience and determination to overcome the pitfalls of the systemic nature of poverty.
Resiliency

Mentoring has become commonplace as an in-school intervention with the purpose of helping at-risk youth cope with their circumstances. Schools frequently use mentoring as an intervention for at-risk students and look to pair them with individuals who can hopefully provide guidance and help them build self-esteem coupled with a high level of resiliency (Converse and Lignugaris-Kraft 2009). For some adults, resiliency is their mantra as they have overcome some troubling circumstances and when they share their stories with at-risk youth it can serve as a roadmap to escape failure. This interaction can serve a dual purpose as it can empower youth and give the caring adult a sense of pride for their societal contributions (Brown, 2004). Day (2006) defines resiliency using a definition (as cited in Newman 2002) stating, “A positive adaptation where difficulties—personal, familial, or environmental—are so extreme that society otherwise would expect a person’s cognitive or functional abilities to be impaired” (p. 196). VanderVen (2004) defines resilience as “the ability to adapt to adverse life consequences in a healthy way and is a major rationale for current youth development practices that encourage attributes, such as interests and social skills that increase coping skills” (p. 94). J. Christiansen, J. L. Christiansen and Howard (1997) define resilience as, “the ability to respond actively and positively to life conditions, stress, and trauma in such a way that we are able to bounce back and continue to approach life with positive actions” (p. 86). Unfortunately, this level of resilience is needed daily as at-risk youth are forced to deal with a litany of uncontrollable issues like poverty and high concentrations of crime. Another factor to consider when trying to understand the effectiveness of
mentoring programs is how race, ethnicity and gender play a factor in the mentor-mentee relationships.

**Race, Ethnicity and Gender**

Seeing that mentoring is a common intervention for at-risk youth and that those youth are typically populated in urban areas with a high concentration of minorities, race becomes a factor in matching mentees with mentors. When structuring successful mentoring programs matching mentors with mentees of similar race, gender and interests is standard but there remains a debate if matching mentees with mentors of the same race is more effective. Those opposed to cross-race matching argue that racial minorities will have a better connection with someone who has experienced racism. In addition some suggest there is an inherent cultural mistrust of white mentors when paired with at-risk minority youth. Perhaps mentees will perceive feedback as bias or lacking cultural sensitivity. Despite these arguments research has produced mixed findings as to whether race or ethnicity negatively affects the mentor relationship (Lee, Germain, Lawerence, and Marshall, 2010). It is important for at-risk youth to have greater exposure to positive role models outside of professional sports and the entertainment industry. Mentorship is important for underrepresented students and they stand to gain insight on the importance of working hard. It is a gross mischaracterization that those who are equipped with talent can achieve success without demonstrating a strong work ethic. Thus, at-risk students need to expand their role models to include more than athletes or entertainers but scientist, doctors and engineers. This reshaping of their outlook of success becomes a key purpose of the mentor relationship (Dawson, 2009). Future research needs to explore the implications of race, culture and ethnicity on mentoring as it is only in the infancy
stages of understanding their implications. Specificity is needed to develop a hypothesis about how race, culture, or ethnicity influences the mentoring relationship. Such research would ultimately benefit the vast number of programs and the youth in which they serve (Darling et al., 2006). It is a common theme to discuss race when talking about mentorship as many of the programs were implemented to combat social ills, which typically affect minority youth that are considered at-risk. However, in addition to the social interactions, which focus on race, ethnicity and gender disadvantaged youth still have to deal with their counterparts as it relates to their socio-economic differences which can create disparities in opportunities. What determines if a youth is considered to be at-risk can be many factors ranging from living in a single-parent home to poverty but the unique challenges they endure compared to more affluent youth seems to place them at a greater disadvantage.

**Competitive Students and At-Risk Youth**

Most middle class children have a commitment from their parents to expose them to a level of competitiveness in an effort to prepare them for their future endeavors. Internalizing the importance of winning, developing a strategy to learn from your failures, organizational and time-management skills, managing stress and the ability to receive feedback are key factors in building social capital. Middle class parents are keenly aware of the benefits and innately impart these beliefs into their children in an effort to retain their place in society or secure a competitive advantage (Friedman, 2013). While this reality is commonplace for both the children and parents, it further places at-risk youth at a greater disadvantage compared to their more affluent counterparts. Although the efforts of middle class parents appear to be far more advanced than at-risk
youth their efforts do not always produce stellar results. In fact they often times lack flexibility, are self-centered and can lack resiliency. They find themselves depending on their parents to right their wrongs and have a high sense of immaturity. As it relates to leaders of the future they lack interpersonal skills and often confuse effort with excellence and quantity with quality (Levine and Dean, 2012). This debate over the parenting style and motivation of middle class parents and if their efforts produce positive results can distract us from the reality at-risk youth face, as more than likely their homes are void of caring adults who are accessible to advocate for their future. So whether we are talking about the overzealous competitive kid or the over confident college student, mentorship serves as a needed component in the development of at-risk youth as their circumstances coupled with a lack of positive influences creates a higher level of vulnerability.

In the United States, approximately 25% of all youth and 50% of minority youth live in households headed by single-parents. Some parents work long hours and consequently youth are at home without adult supervision or interaction. The isolation the youth experiences can decrease the number of positive relationships they have with adults. These realities fuel the demand and interest for mentoring programs. All children need to feel a sense of belonging which in most cases is provided by parents and extended family but sometimes due to uncontrollable circumstances they fail to adequately meet the needs of their children. Single-parents have to work as they are the sole provider for their children which consequently removes them from the home and although extended family appears to be an option it is not always available (Anatasia, Skinner, and Mundhenk, 2012). These realities make mentoring a needed resource for
children who face many obstacles and stand to gain a positive influence from a dedicated mentor who can potentially fill the void of an absent parent or guardian. This persistent reality makes after-school mentoring programs a feasible solution for youth who would otherwise be home alone. When mentoring is merged with tutoring it can help at-risk students. However, mentoring largely focuses on relationship building and is less centered on academic achievement (Shepard, 2009). The goals for many mentoring programs are admirable but given the high demand for mentors, organizations must explore the resources of nontraditional mentors to cover the shortfall. By not acknowledging the need to fill mentoring gaps and providing feasible solutions many at-risk youth will be forced to contend with their struggles without the support of a caring adult.

**College Students and Elders as Mentors**

Despite the fact there are more than three million youth participating in mentoring there is a constant need to secure more mentors. In some cases prospective mentees have to wait a year or more before they are assigned a mentor. As a result some programs recruit college students to contend with the shortage as they typically have more free time than working adults. However, because of the transitory nature of college students some do not believe it is a dependable resource pool (Lee, Germain, Lawerence, and Marshall, 2010). Having a positive relationship with an adult that is outside the home can prove to be a protective factor for at-risk youth who are dealing with physiological and environmental changes but the challenge entails securing a dependable adult who can meet the needs of the youth (Leyton-Armakan, Lawrence, Deutsch, Williams, and Henneberger, 2012). Thus, elder mentors especially those with similar experiences can
be effective for at-risk youth as they can relate to their lived experiences. In fact, the elder mentors can feel similar emotions of isolation and feeling misunderstood by family and community members (Mano, 2007). Consequently, elders need to be used in mentoring more purposefully as their ability to contribute to the development of young people can play a critical role. Unfortunately, these relationships are declining for at-risk youth as they are more likely to have younger grandparents who offer less support in their upbringing (Mano, 2007). Despite the efforts of mentors young or old, familial or non-familial mentoring is fraught with many obstacles as it attempts to minimize the challenges at-risk youth endure on a daily basis.

**Challenges of Mentoring**

Mentoring continues to be a heavily sought after intervention and has gained credence both federally and in the private sector but with such demand comes a need to demonstrate the effectiveness of the services provided. Consequently, assessing these programs can cause some issues because they operate on two levels which include the dyadic relationship between the mentor and mentee and the overall program structure. Thus, it is imperative to assess mentoring based on the interconnected components of the mentoring relationship and the program (Deutsch and Spencer, 2009). Mentoring at-risk youth is not an easy task. For example, in a school setting it requires extensive training for staff and at a personal level it requires a high level of commitment (McCluskey, Noller, Lamoureux, & McCluskey, 2004). Despite the research that suggests mentoring has some positive effects it is imperative not to forget the significant responsibility that comes with mentoring especially when the results can be less optimal. However, it is important to interrogate the intervention of mentoring beyond just knowing it has the
potential to deliver positive outcomes. Mentoring is generally understood for forming a connection between a young person and an older adult but what lacks is a deeper understanding about the nature, quality and the path the mentoring relationship encompasses (Deutsch and Spencer, 2009). It is equally important to be aware that mentoring can have some negative effects on youth and programs must account for this reality in an effort to avoid placing the at-risk youth at a greater disadvantage.

**Negative Effects of Mentoring**

In (Mullen, Cox, Boettcher, & Adoue, 1997) the author describes her negative mentoring experience as an African American youngster in kindergarten stating:

I remember also my persistence in talking. I talked of learning and every wonderful experience of acquiring knowledge. I never disrespected my teacher, in fact, I never said a mean word to or about her. She was a messenger of power. She represented learning, and I wanted every morsel available. My conduct grades were deplorable, while my academic grades were superior. For many children, such an experience could have been traumatic in many nonproductive ways. However, that kindergarten teacher was a negative mentor who attempted to, and succeeded in, silencing the persistence and resilience of my voice, instead of molding it.

Mentoring has proven to have some great outcomes but unfortunately, there are times when mentorship can have a negative impact. Fortunately, for this inquisitive young girl she had a multi-level support system, which reinforced her thirst for knowledge.

Typically, at-risk youth are exempt from these resources and are heavily reliant upon the relationships forged through mentoring which makes the need for excellence and quality
essential. In cases where younger youth are placed with older adolescents from high school the mentor has limited support. Cross-aged mentoring can prove to be problematic despite having some positive effects as it typically offers less staff support, contact and direction (Karcher, Herrera, and Hansen, 2010). While mentoring is effective, we must be cognizant of making sure mentors are equipped with the needed resources to deliver a meaningful experience for the mentee. Recent research is moving from the broader question of if mentoring works to more specific questions of how and under what circumstances is it most effective (Pedersen, Woolum, Gagne, and Coleman, 2009). Thus, it is important to fully understand the inner workings of mentoring and make any needed adjustments to ensure at-risk youth are receiving the best services possible. In (Mullen, Cox, Boettcher, & Adoue, 1997) the author uses poetry to explain the salient reality of mentoring and the need to embody the collective to gain a greater sense of self and provide a commitment to the future stating, “The circle embodies who I am, what we must become, and where we must go to transform the lives of the future” (p. 4). The poem captures the need for effective mentorship where effective means a mentee has established a relationship with a mentor that is consistent and produces positive outcomes. At-risk youth are faced with many challenges and a feeling of belonging is one of the many obstacles they endure. Whether an at-risk youth is exposed to school-based mentoring or a community-based intervention creating a positive relationship for these children is imperative. The options for failure seem inescapable but success can seem like an impossibility, which further undergirds the need for positive mentorship. Stumbo, Blegen, and Lindahl-Lewis (2008) state, “Mentorship programs, however need to be well planned and designed, and have both a comprehensive implementation and
evaluation plan in place prior to initiation” (p.45). Wandersman, Clary, Forbush, Weinberger, Coyne, and Duffy (2006) state, “Mentoring programs have the potential to contribute to positive youth development, yet that potential is not always realized” (p. 783). Pryce (2012) offers some level of opposition to the perceived notion that youth mentoring is a total win-win but adds a point of contention to the debate stating:

Although mentoring represents a popular and widespread intervention, the experience of transformation aspired to by the iconic mentoring relationship represents an exceptional level of effort and commitment. In fact, research suggests that many youth mentoring relationships fall short; instead, many have limited positive effects or positive effects that are temporary.

Like all things there will be good and bad. Fortunately, many youth have benefited from the positive effects of mentoring but an attempt to minimize the bad should always be the goal. The familiarity and potential to produce positive outcomes should not allow us to be less critical of mentoring as an intervention but instead we should aim to unpack the complexities the intervention inherently creates.

**Mentee Perspectives**

Darling, Bogat, Cavell, Murphy, and Sanchez (2006) state, “At its core, the mentoring movement tries to foster relationships that promote positive developmental trajectories in protégés and, potentially, in mentors as well. Mentoring relationships are shaped by the unique qualities each partner contributes to the dyad” (p. 766). Mentors face many challenges ranging from scheduling to being paired with a mentee in which they do not connect. Liang and Rhodes (2007) state, “To be effective, mentors need to tolerate all kinds of uncertainties, to address ethical dilemmas and disappointments as
they arise, and to know whom to turn to for consultation and how to work through
uncharted territories” (p. 104). Day (2006) provides an anonymous poem written by a
mentee which exemplifies the power of mentoring and the appreciation of great mentors.

Some people specialize in doing thoughtful deeds,
Before you ask they understand your problems
And your needs.
They help because they want to;
They find that being kind,
And making others happy is the first thing on their mind.
They make this world a better place by practicing art,
Of reaching out to others
And by giving from the heart.

Mentees have often experienced disappointments and when they are exposed to a positive
role model, it can be life changing. Anda (2001) offers a personal perspective from a
mentee who described a perfect mentor:

A perfect mentor would be someone you could always talk to; someone you could
ask them for advice, and they would always give you the best advice. And in the
future when you’re grown up, you could look back and say ‘they really helped
me; they’ve really been there and a great role model.

Such testimonies prove the inherent power of mentoring which is not only an
advantageous experience for the mentee and mentor but often meets the expectation of
parents who often times encouraged the caring adult youth relationship. These mentor-
mentee relationships must continue to be molded and refined in an effort to provide a
consistent service to at-risk youth.

**Conclusion**

Our youth are at the center of the mentoring debate and despite the issues in
which they face we cannot lose track of the goal to ensure all children are afforded the
same opportunities. Programs must be focused on improving the quality of service and the overall relationship that is forged through the process. Figuring out how the relationship is effective may present a challenge but it is imperative for programs and researchers to address it in order to ensure that we are providing youth with the most favorable experiences to best support their growth, development and overall future (Deutsch and Spencer, 2009). It seems obvious that mentoring will continue to be an intervention for at-risk youth but above the shortcomings within mentoring there needs to be measures to eradicate the social ills, which these youth face. In an effort to ensure at-risk youth, have great mentoring programs we must continue to solicit and train mentors to serve these vulnerable populations. We must not shift the responsibility or blame failed mentoring programs but be unwavering in our commitment to ease the burdens at-risk youth experience by providing them with mentoring relationships with positive outcomes. This chapter began with the exploration of America’s at-risk youth and discussed the broadness of mentoring and the populations in which it serves in an effort to understand the complexities of mentorship but more research must be done to discover how these mentor-mentee relationships can be strengthened as society continues to change. Perhaps the goal is lofty but maybe the term at-risk will not be a common descriptor for so many of African American youth. It was disheartening to learn in the research how these youth are the most vulnerable and despite efforts to provide support we have made minimal progress. Nonetheless, mentoring certainly has some substantial benefits. All mentoring has the potential to enhance young people’s lives by bolstering their social capital, their knowledge of and contacts with, a network of people who may be able to help them meet their goals through various activities and interactions. These
relationships allow two worlds to be bridged, the advantaged and disadvantaged in hopes that the bridge produces hope and opportunity for at-risk youth (Hamilton, Hamilton, Hirsh, Hughes, King, and Maton, 2006). Success is not easy even for those who are equipped with abundant resources but it is hard to imagine the resiliency an at-risk youth must have to overcome some of life’s most difficult circumstances. Perhaps bridging the social capital of the affluent or those who have experiences outside of poverty, single-parent homes and other challenging societal issues will provide some needed hope for at-risk youth who are often times searching for a much needed positive relationship. Like many single-parents my mother sensed the gravity of our ascribed circumstances and instinctively encouraged and fostered an environment which welcomed the mentor-mentee relationship. Fortunately, those more than thirty year old relationships proved to be life changing and continue to produce positive outcomes. However, the mentor-mentee relationship continues to be a common intervention for school-aged African-Americans who face some troubling realities which makes it imperative for researchers, scholars, policy makers and all those committed to the betterment of at-risk youth to ensure its programmatic structures are capable of delivering positive and sustainable outcomes. Chapter three is the research methodology and provides a detailed account of the research design and methodological approach used to guide the study.
Chapter Three: Methodological Approach and Research Design

This chapter covers the design used to guide the research study. Data were obtained using interviews of at-risk youth participating in an afterschool mentoring program. More specifically the chapter covers the research methodology and includes the research setting; the rationale for using interviews; structure sampling and participants; snowball sampling; advantages and disadvantages of snowball sampling, description of participants, equipment usage, qualitative research methods; grounded theory; data collection; data analysis; data reliability and validity; methodological limitations and considerations; and cultural context and cultural understanding. These sections are intended to bring context and clarity as to how the study was conducted.

Research Setting

In 2013 the Community Youth Center was on the verge of closing as their membership had fallen under 50 members. Today the center has nearly 500 members and is on target to impact 1,500 children in 2017. On an average day the center attracts nearly 160 kids from kindergarten to 18 years of age. There is a membership fee of $20.00 but for those families who cannot afford to pay the fee is waived. The hours of operation are from 7:30am- 9:00pm. Afterschool programs for non-teens begin at 2:00pm until 5:00pm and for teenagers it begins at 4:00pm until 9:00pm. Despite being open for more than 12 hours daily and producing impressive membership numbers it does not reflect the need to hire more staff as they lose staff members for many reasons but primarily due to low wages and the transitory nature of the community. In addition to experiencing high turnover the facility has outgrown the community demand for quality programs and often do not have the capacity to meet their needs and most of their game
equipment like the pool table is outdated or simply missing key parts to support its functionality. The Community Youth Center is nearly 50 years old and despite a renovation in the early 90’s it is most certainly in need of some structural upgrades as well as funding to support current and prospective programs. The Community Youth Center is a non-profit and their ability to leverage their resources is contingent upon the generous donations of their donors. Although, the upgrades are needed the center manages to serve kids despite these limitations. When you enter the center shortly after 5:00 p.m. Central Standard Time you walk in to what appears to be utter chaos. The intercom system is continually in use as kids are called to meet their parent, guardian or authorized adult to pick them up after a long day. Most kids begrudgingly come to the front as they want to continue to play and have to be called multiple times and their parent, guardian or authorized adult is quick to express their frustration often saying, “I am ready to go!” As the younger kids are picked up the center is filled with teenagers who are dispersed throughout the center, some in the multipurpose area, game room, computer lab, the teen lounge, upstairs or in the gymnasium which is by far the most popular gathering place as the teens love to play basketball. The environment is filled with fun, laughter and occasional banter as the members are engaged in various supervised activities. The multipurpose room is an open space with various floor games like pool, carpet ball, hockey and arcade games which serves as a meeting place for all members.

**Rationale for Using Interviews**

Interviews were used as they were the most effective data collection method for the research study. Although there are other notable forms of qualitative methods like
focus groups or ethnography the researcher strongly believes individual semi-formal interviews allowed room to gather more personalized data and provide a rich dialogue for analysis. Kvale (1996) state, “The knowledge generated by interviews is related to five features of postmodern consideration of knowledge: the conversational, the narrative, the linguistic, the contextual, and the interrelational nature of knowledge” (p. 42). These five themes were incorporated throughout the interview process as it is important to understand how the interview process gains knowledge. In the researcher’s experience as a mentee and now mentor, they fully understand the importance of intrinsic value as it relates to mentoring which is the inherent value the mentor-mentee relationship has within itself and for its own sake. (Zimmerman, 2014). As humans we innately try to make sense of our relationships and we often reflect and rely on stories which represent those lived experiences. The researcher imagines if they talked with their peers from the seventh grade class their stories would be different but the difference does not negate their unique experience. The variance in our stories should not delegitimize the importance of knowing how others can experience the same situation differently. These individualized accounts allow us to understand how each mentee is responding to the mentor-mentee relationship and its overall effectiveness or lack thereof.

The research presents the narratives provided by participants who are involved in a structured mentoring program for at-risk youth called the Extend a Hand Program. While it might seem more advantageous to use focus groups the researcher elected to use individual interviews because they wanted to ensure the authenticity of the responses. Group settings can greatly affect the comfortability to share information whereas individual semi-formal interviews gave the participants more freedom to share their
narrative without any filter or the subconscious desire to compete. The environment fostered a safe space for participants to tell their stories without the fear of being judged by their peers or program leaders which is more likely when using a focus group. The participants were asked 25 questions during the interview session which produced large amounts of information but fortunately it was within the scope of projected data. The data was thoroughly analyzed and presented using the highest level of integrity.

The researcher conducted semi-formal one-on-one interviews of the participants as they wanted to create an environment that was conducive to rich dialogue. The Community Youth Center has multiple after school programs running concurrently. The Extend a Hand Program is unique because it is based on referrals from school officials, the juvenile court system, or community leaders unlike the majority of programs which are voluntary. This reality made semi-formal one-on-one interviews more advantageous because this targeted population is highly at-risk and according to staff are less focused in group settings as they are easily distracted. Later in the chapter the researcher provides insight about sampling and participants coupled with the advantages and disadvantages the methodology presents. Nonetheless, the researcher did not want to be perceived as a researcher who desires to take participants on an emotional journey aimed to bolster their research at the expense of leaving the participants vulnerable and exposed. Interviews allowed participants to engage in casual conversations without feeling overly analyzed by the interviewer/researcher and have the freedom to openly express their feelings. The perceived limitations of a focus group far outweighed that of semi-formal interviews because the researcher could not account for the time it would take to engage in a collective conversation where varying viewpoints are often happening simultaneously. In
addition, qualitative interviews afforded the researcher flexibility to respond with follow up questions when appropriate without having to consider multiple viewpoints which would have likely been present in a focus group. Therefore, with great consideration and reflection individual semi-formal interviews where selected as the primary form of data collection.

**Structure Sampling and Participants**

In qualitative research there are several strategies to select potential participants which can include simple random sampling, systemic sampling, cluster sampling and stratified sampling. Most of these techniques use two approaches one which hinges on the theoretical and the other which is based upon a single case. Theoretical sampling operates under the premise that the ideas about the case in the beginning are vague and only materialize during the course of the investigation whereas single case techniques have more concrete ideas about the study at the onset which allows for a more generalized conclusion for the group who shares the same characteristics (Flick, Kardorff and Steinke, 2004). After careful analysis and consideration of these techniques, the researcher elected to use snowball sampling which proved to be more appropriate based upon the potential pool of participants at the research site and the amount of time the researcher could feasibly give to support the study.

**Snowball Sampling**

Snowball sampling is a readily used method for qualitative research as it can be easily implemented to reach a targeted population especially when the study is primarily explorative and descriptive. Researchers frequently use snowball sampling because of its ease of application and cost effectiveness. Conducting a large scale research study which
accounts for all members of a population like census data is inherently taxing both financially and as it relates to the amount of time needed to collect and analyze the data. Frey, Botan and Kreps (2000) refer to snowball sampling as network sampling as the network incorporates potential participants who they believe have the necessary experience to be included in the study. The Extend a Hand Program is funded by the State of Prairie Urban and requires 20-30 participants and according to staff, it currently has 22 members (73% male and 27% female). As a result, the sample size was rather small which made purposive sampling less feasible for participant selection. Thus, snowball sampling was an effective method given the sample size. The researcher interviewed 10 participants (8 males and 2 females) which were diverse in age and gender given the overall population of the program. The majority of participants self-identify as African American and come from households where the income is at or below state poverty indicators. In general, snowball sampling proves to have both advantages and disadvantages which will be later explained to ensure transparency. It can be applied both as an informal and formal methodology (Hendricks, Blanken and Adriaans, 1992). Snowball sampling is called nominated sampling which elicits the support of participants to nominate others to participate in the study (Brink and Wood, 1989). This process assumes there is a bond or connection between the initial participant/informant and the same target population allowing a series of nominations to be provided (Berg, 1988). The researcher connected with new participants by introducing themselves to the prospective informant or the previous participant reached out to his or her suggested participant. Both sampling processes have fluidity and unlike other methods has a better chance of connecting with potential informants. The process of finding participants can
be laborious but snowball sampling has proven to be effective when the researcher adheres to the potential limitations the method presents. The participants of the Extend a Hand Program were more than willing to refer future participants coupled with the staff informant who offered suggestions.

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Snowball Sampling**

Some of the known disadvantages to snowball sampling are as follows: 1) the community in which the pool of participants are to be selected could present some level of bias which would negatively impact the findings 2) the snowball sampling method can be limiting for the researcher as they are reliant upon the current participant to generate future informants 3) there is no way to determine the size and depth of the total population 4) it is impossible to determine if the sample population is a true indication of the target population and 5) it fails to incorporate random selection. For example, if the informant has ill intent they can suggest an informant that will align with their views which would inherently present bias. The researcher lacks control of the sampling method which can delay data collection. However, the researcher asked the participants to refer individuals based on certain criteria like age and gender to guard against the potential bias of just referring individuals who may share similar viewpoints of the recommender. Providing clear instructions about what characteristics are sought can reduce the inherent biases snowball sampling can produce (King and Horrocks, 2010). Given that the total target population of the study is large in scope the snowball sampling method cannot reasonably reflect the overall population. It is equally important to note the snowball sampling method contradicts many of the assumptions and or benefits of random selection.
The advantages of snowball sampling are as follows: 1) it allows the researcher to access hidden populations 2) provides the flexibility of locating people of a specific population and 3) it is cost effective. When you enter a research site your access to hidden populations can be limited even when you extend financial resources like offering gift cards or monetary incentives. As you conduct your research one of the primary goals is to ensure you are strategic in your methodological approach to locate the targeted population which is an effective advantage of snowball sampling. Conducting research can prove to be costly irrespective of the scope of the study. Attempting to survey a large population similar to that of the U.S Census data can produce an astronomical price tag which makes snowball sampling a cost effective alternative. The Extend a Hand Program Coordinator provided full access of each participant’s file which includes their school grades, infractions and case notes. In addition, the Program Coordinator provided the researcher with a brief overview of each participant as it relates to her interaction with them and why they were referred to the program. The support of the Program Coordinator and her ability to help the researcher connect with respondents allowed snowball sampling to be easily incorporated.

Description of Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of at-risk African American teenagers aged 13-18 years of age who are members of the Community Youth Center and more specifically those actively participating in the Extend a Hand Program. To protect the identity of the participants, the Community Youth Center and staff pseudonyms were incorporated. Members of the staff who are closely linked to the program were interviewed and asked questions to glean a deeper understanding of how they viewed the
mentor-mentee relationship. The researcher employed snowball sampling to select participants who are capable of providing robust data which can be generalized for the larger population. Hence, the researcher accounted for those participants who chose not to participate because of various reasons whether they were clearly stated or unknown as the study could have unintentionally created inherent obstacles. Gaining accessibility is critical to ensure the researcher has the ability to select participants for the study (Flick, 2004). The study relied heavily upon the integrity, comfortability, honesty and validity of the participant to provide meaningful information. Thus, the researcher used the interview questions as a guide and allowed the participant to lead the dialogue in an organic and unanticipated direction coupled with incorporating staff to assist with establishing trust with the participants. In addition, because the researcher used snowball sampling it was equally important the participant recommended or referred potential participants who adhered to the guidelines set forth by the research study. The participants served as key informants based on their expert knowledge and familiarity of the Extend a Hand Program, programmatic structure of the Community Youth Center, the community demographics, historical context and their individual experiences. When a participant or informant provides critical context and content it adds relevant value to the overall study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2011). All participants are members of the Community Youth Center and a requirement of their membership is to consent to participate in potential research studies approved by the center. In addition to their consent with the center the researcher provided them with an additional consent form explaining the parameters of the study and request their voluntary consent. As mentioned earlier each member of the Community Youth Center is required under the terms of the
membership agreement to participate in research studies approved by the Community Youth Center. However, to further protect the interest of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the researcher and the research subjects gained an approved consent form through the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Equipment Usage**

The researcher used a digital voice recording device to audiotape conversations among participants and when conducting one-on-one interviews. Although the recording device was on throughout the duration of the interview the researcher took detailed notes of the dialogue to supplement the recording. In addition to using the voice recorder the researcher also used their smart phone to simultaneously record the conversation to minimize any potential technical difficulties which might have occurred while using the digital voice recorder. The smart phone was set to restrict incoming alerts, texts, or calls to prevent any interruptions to the recording. When conducting one-on-one interviews the participants wore an external microphone to ensure the recorder could clearly pick up the respondents answers and or utterances to the questions. The recording devices were plugged into an external power source to ensure the devices were not solely reliant upon their internal battery mechanisms. All information retrieved from the voice recording devices were transcribed and coded to protect the anonymity of the research subjects. The interviews were conducted in the staff office where members are not allowed unless accompanied by a staff member. The Program Coordinator assured the researcher that the space was the best place to conduct the interviews without posing any disruptions which in fact proved to be true.
Qualitative Research Interview Methods

The researcher conducted a qualitative study incorporating grounded theory. Grounded theory is not predicated on preconceived theory nor does it function as a priori theory but is established using data that is methodically retrieved during the course of research inquiry (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, grounded theory postulates the information gained during the research process and informed the theory in which the data analysis renders. Earlier in the dissertation the researcher disclosed their prior experiences with mentoring programs which have heavily influenced their curiosity making grounded theory a feasible method to apply to the study. The study has greatly informed the researcher’s understanding of the mentor-mentee relationship. Hence, the study gained a deeper knowledge of the Extend a Hand Program from the acquired personalized accounts of how research subjects define, value and understand mentoring in general based on their past and present experiences.

Qualitative research is a widely used form of research where the researcher plays a pivotal role in collecting and interpreting data thus representing the dichotomous relationship between the researcher and participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). There are many approaches and variations to qualitative research and the researcher employed the theoretical framework which they believed was most appropriate for their research design. These variations and approaches inherently gave room to different modes of conceptualization used to describe and explain the research findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher received a more robust understanding of what happens during the afterschool Extend a Hand Program using qualitative research methods as they incorporated their inherent curiosity about mentoring and its effectiveness or lack thereof.
These methods account for how we as humans epistemologically approach knowledge and debate its truth and limits. Qualitative research does not use mathematical procedures or other forms which incorporate quantification. In fact, it refers to research which can have varied interests like a persons’ lived experiences, feelings, emotions, culture and social contexts. These experiences are largely understood by the researcher using interpretive methods based on interviews or observations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, the feelings and lived experiences of mentees would be difficult to understand using quantitative methods. Given these considerations, the researcher believed qualitative research provided the best opportunity to understand the phenomena of what mentees experienced. Moreover, grounded theory helped to develop a theoretical interpretation of what was happening during the Extend a Hand Program from the perspective of the participants.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory operates with the understanding the researcher is on a journey to discover or generate a theory derived from the systematic collection of data guided by implicit standards (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As a result, grounded theory creates room for contextual introspection rather than just a mere description of what is occurring within the research setting. The fluid nature of grounded theory produces both substantive and formal theories where substantive theories serve as a springboard to develop a grounded formal theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher was extremely intrigued by the mentor-mentee relationship and grounded theory provided the flexibility for the research findings to inform and or shape how the data was analyzed. Grounded theory is well known for incorporating interviews and observations as methods
for data collection. In conjunction with grounded theory, the researcher incorporated the symbolic interactionist perspective which generally is guided by three principles 1) humans respond to things based on their predetermined ideas and meanings they have for them 2) meanings are derived from social interaction and 3) social action occurs by piecing together the individual elements of action (Boundless, 2016). The primary function and or rationale for applying symbolic interaction to this study is to provide credence between the dichotomous relationship between the researcher and his or her participants. It would be irrational to assume the researcher’s prior experience as a mentee and their professional experience as a mentor did not influence how they interpreted the data. Hence, symbolic interaction makes the relationship between the researcher and participant more natural and less awkward. The researcher used their personal knowledge of mentoring to help contextualize the data in an effort to bring a clear understanding of the findings. Grounded theory implicitly attempts through the analysis of data to develop a theoretical interpretation of what is happening both visually and through active listening (Kvale, 1996). Another major benefit of grounded theory is it gives the researcher the flexibility to begin research from a point of interest but not without adhering to the theoretical framework used to conduct data collection (Dey, 1999). The participants provided an authentic account of their lived experiences as it relates to their mentor-mentee relationships. As mentioned earlier in the chapter the participants have been referred into the Extend a Hand Program by their school, probationary officer, or community member as a corrective measure to improve their academic and social standing. The participants have numerous infractions within the
school system ranging from fighting and other behavioral indiscretions which were expressed during the interviews and observations.

**Data Collection**

It is imperative and essential that throughout the entire process of data collection the researcher maintain the highest level of integrity and sensitivity to all the information that is retrieved during the process. The researcher in no way wanted to trivialize, marginalize, or discredit the thoughts and comments received during the interview process. In an effort to maintain this standard the digital audio recording was meticulously transcribed, coded and will be securely stored for one year after the study has been conducted to ensure authenticity and that the conceptual framework was adequately applied. Therefore, at the onset of the interview process it was imperative to give forethought as to how the researcher would start and finish the interviews. How you start the process can have positive or negative effects as it relates to building rapport. Questions should be relatively non-threatening and somewhat simple in scope which could include more descriptive information (King & Horrocks, 2010). The Program Coordinator informed all 22 Extend a Hand Program participants of the researcher’s role and in addition to her support the researcher spent the first month observing the participants. During the observation the researcher took detailed field notes and used coding to develop possible themes. Through the observation and interviewing the researcher gained a detailed account of how participants came to understand their experiences within the Extend a Hand Program. Triangulation occurred as the researcher collected data from interviews and observations, coded the findings and created memos or themes. The researcher acknowledged their association with higher education was an
initial barrier based upon the contentious relationship between the community and institutions of higher education which was indicated by staff members. The researcher overcame this barrier by explaining their at-risk upbringing and their past experience as a member of a similar organization like the Community Youth Center.

**Data Analysis**

According to Kvale (1996), “Analysis is not an isolated stage, but permeates an entire interview inquiry” (p. 205). The permeation that Kvale speaks of ranges from coding to the categorizing of data. Coding allows the researcher to create reoccurring themes to further analyze data. Throughout the data collection, the researcher took detailed field notes and jottings to supplement the audio recordings. In an effort to be totally engrossed in the discussion the researcher continually took notes during the interview sessions and when the audio recording were reviewed to allow additional reflection. Once the information had been accurately coded the recurring themes were organized to reflect the developed categories. In a real sense each interview, interaction and occurrence informed the proceeding interview, interaction and occurrence. For example, if a participant revealed they had a learning disability, strained relationship with a family member, or a custodial parent who is incarcerated, the researcher expressed interest in knowing how prior participants have similar or varied experiences. Therefore, the concurrent data analysis becomes critical to further develop theory. Open coding is the process by which the researcher generates initial concepts derived from the data. Axial coding provides the necessary structure to create and correlate similar themes in a coding paradigm. Selective coding which can be termed substantive coding occurs after primary concepts, themes and categories have been identified through data analysis.
(Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The researcher incorporated open, axial and selective coding during the analysis process as the Program Coordinator had informed the researcher that the participants have similar backgrounds but how they manifested had some variance. For example, a participant coming from a broken home might exhibit aggression while another participant might demonstrate feelings of isolation. Having these various options when coding data was critical in ensuring the appropriate themes were derived.

**Data Reliability and Validity**

One of the major goals of conducting qualitative research is to demonstrate reliability. The researcher cross-checked the findings extrapolated from the data set to determine validity. The audio recordings, transcriptions, coded field notes and other jottings were memo and peer verified to ensure their accuracy. For example, when transcribing audio recordings the researcher had another peer to ensure they were hearing the correct utterances and recording the data accurately. The field notes and memos allowed the researcher to compare the recordings and even add some contextual meaning which were expressed nonverbally. Thus, the findings proved to be reliable and accurate as it is warranted when conducting a qualitative study. King and Horrocks (2010) state, “reliability is concerned with how accurately any variable is measured, while validity is concerned with determining whether a particular form of measurement actually measures the variable it claims to” (p. 158). It seems reliability serves as a necessary prerequisite to validity. For example, if the researcher was incapable of gaining a consistent level of observation it becomes more probable the findings would reflect that inconsistency. Similarly, validity is concerned with ensuring the credibility and or truthfulness of the research findings. Thus, the primary role of the researcher is to present plausible and
credible evidence which was garnered from the data collection process and analysis (Flick, 2004). Potential threats to validity are reactivity, researcher and respondent bias (Padgett, 2008). Reactivity occurs when the presence of the researcher causes the subject to alter their behavior. For example, when the researcher first entered the Community Youth Center it was undoubtedly clear they were an outsider and until they gained trust some respondents did not behave at their level of normalcy. In fact there were constant whispers among the teens trying to figure out the new face at the Community Youth Center. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the researcher has a longstanding experience with mentoring and if they were not cognizant of their own biases it would have created a greater probability of distorting the findings. Given the respondents former and current experience with mentoring their biases can greatly hinder the findings. Kvale (1996) states, “Bias may be on the side of the interviewee or of the interviewer” (p. 286). The researcher has to be aware of the unintentional and even the unacknowledged bias they or their respondents possess. When the researcher reflected on their past experience as a mentee, are their reflections totally void of their current knowledge or are they simply recalling the events based on how they felt during that time? In fact the researcher could have selective memory and choose to recall what they deem to be important. All of these realities if not addressed and adequately remedied can threaten the reliability and validity of the study.

**Limitations of Methodology**

In qualitative research no matter how your study is designed it will inherently present some limitations. The limitations of time, limited resources due to availability and financial resources and having limited access to potential subjects all served as
limitations. As mentioned earlier the researcher used snowball sampling to obtain respondents but this method inherently restricts access to all viable participants. The current interviewee suggested or referred who they believed would be a valuable participant of the study but it becomes highly probable all viable participants will not be included. Limited funding and time constraints of both the program itself and the researcher’s personal obligations limited those individuals they would feasibly be capable of interviewing. The researcher was limited by their outsider status and even in their attempts to bring some similarity of experiences some participants did not allow the researcher to gain full insight into their experience. However, the Program Coordinator provided critical and detailed insight about family background, school behavior, infractions with the law and overall knowledge of the participant which provided a holistic view into the individualized narrative of each teen participant of the Extend a Hand Program.

Methodological Considerations

   Even the most revered researchers and academic scholars openly admit there are missed opportunities due to human errors. When reviewing and analyzing data it can become abundantly clear there where some missed opportunities in the questioning process. Perhaps most researchers acknowledge the need to ask another question or to further examine a reoccurring theme with greater intensity. Therefore, the researcher informed each participant during the initial interview that it is a great possibility the dialogue would be extended beyond the predetermined questions. It was important for the researcher to be intentional and transparent in their approach to account for the need to ask more probing follow up questions post the initial interview to gain more pertinent
information. In addition to these methodological considerations it would be somewhat irresponsible to not acknowledge human error. Even with the greatest intentions of the researcher and participant they are human which inherently begets error. Beyond the error in which humans are likely to create it is equally probable during the collection process there will be misunderstandings and misinterpretations which can create some missteps in interpreting the intended message of the interviewee. It is important to consider the age and varied level of educational astuteness the participants exhibited as it could possibly impede the study if not properly addressed. For example, a 14 year old participant might not understand the level of questioning and questions might have to be reworded to garner their understanding. Additionally, the level of experience a younger participant might have could be far less than an older participant who has potentially had more mentor-mentee relationships. The researcher’s awareness of their potential occurrences strengthened their level of interpretation as they conducted the research study.

**Cultural Context and Cultural Understanding**

The cultural content and cultural understandings informing this study are important to consider because if they were not addressed potential issues could have arisen. The Community Youth Center is situated in a micro-urban community with a population of approximately 231,891 according to the US Census conducted in 2010 which includes a transient college-student population from the local university. As mentioned earlier in the chapter members of the center are required to consent to participating in approved research studies. It is important to consider that participants could demonstrate a preconceived mistrust of researchers because of their frequency at
the center but this was certainly not the case. The researcher engaged with the participants by playing basketball, pool and carpet ball which allowed the researcher to gain trust among participants. The community in which the center exists is predominately African American and has high concentrations of crime and poverty based on crime reports from Neighborhood Scouts this micro-urban site has a higher crime rate than the state of Prairie Urban at 6.8% and 3.8%, respectively. It has the third highest poverty rate in Prairie Urban at 23.4% according to Social Impact Research Center. Researchers who choose the Community Youth Center as their research site are more likely to come from more affluent backgrounds than their potential subjects and if not are still seen by center members to represent the affluence the neighboring university represents. If the researcher did not appear trustworthy and authentic irrespective of their shared experiences of being African American and having had mentor-mentee relationships the researcher would not have gained the trust of the participants. The academic language used in scholarly journals, university classrooms and national conferences would have little to no value in the setting of the Community Youth Center so consequently the researcher fostered an environment void of convoluted rhetoric where subjects could freely express themselves without feeling their language was inferior or inadequate compared to that of an academician.

**Conclusion**

Qualitative research can be convoluted and in an effort to declutter the process the researcher provided a detailed account of how they conducted the study. The researcher began the opening chapter discussing the purpose and rationale for the study which is a key component to qualitative research because it identifies how the study contributes to
the field of scholarly research. Once the researcher established the rationale and purpose of the study, they provided the central questions used to guide the research coupled with indicating the interview questions the researcher asked the research participants. However, it is equally important to inform the reader how the researcher sampled the teen population and found viable participants which was covered in this chapter. Finally, by explaining the methods, data collection and analysis, researcher bias and methodological limitations and considerations the reader has the full scope of how the study was conducted. The researcher believes the study produces a greater understanding of the social phenomenon which occurs at the Community Youth Center during the Extend a Hand Program and ultimately contributes another facet to the robust scholarship of mentoring as it relates to the mentor-mentee relationship.
Chapter Four: Research Findings

This chapter will walk through the lives of 10 African American at-risk teens participating in the Extend a Hand Program during the fall of 2016. Their lives are far more dynamic than some might assume. During a four month period the researcher observed the participants 2-3 times per week for a minimum of one hour while they were engaged in structured activities and social interaction. The lives of these participants unfolded by merging their responses to the 25 interview questions with the researcher’s observation and the Program Coordinator’s detailed report of each participant. We will begin the chapter discovering the narratives of twins, Jalen and Justin, siblings Marion and Marshauna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason and Destiny. The chapter concludes with the 12 interview questions posed to staff which provides their unique understanding of mentoring and how it plays out at the Community Youth Center. The table below provides a quick snapshot of each teen participant which includes their names, ages, grade level and reason for being referred to the Extend a Hand Program.

Table 1.

Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Reason for Referral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jalen</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Extremely Low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Extremely Low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marion</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Poor Academics, Behavior and Family Dysfunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshauna</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>Family Dysfunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaundrel</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Poor Academics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcus</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Criminal Infraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrell</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Criminal Infraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cortez</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Family Dysfunction and Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Criminal Infraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8th grade</td>
<td>Family Dysfunction</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introducing Jalen and Justin - Both 14 years old

Jalen and Justin are fraternal twins who have been attending the Community Youth Center for a long period of time. Jalen is far more mature than his 14 year old twin brother Justin which makes their personalities starkly different but despite their differences they both exuded a kind, respectful and gentle nature when dealing with adults. The Program Coordinator had this to say about the twins:

Jalen is very mature, very much mature. Justin is the one that we struggle and work one-on-one with a lot because he struggles academically and just with behavior, peer pressure, a lot of that. But Jalen is extremely mature – and it’s actually shocking how more mature he is than Justin and they’re twins. It’s just like they’re on two different playing fields.

Their differences in personality and interaction with their peers is evident at school as Jalen does exceptionally well in his academics whereas Justin struggles but his struggles are not at the expense of being disrespectful to his teachers or school personnel.

Although they are mostly respectful while at the Community Youth Center they are occasionally redirected for using foul language as most teens at the center engage in such language but how they differ is that their words are never intended to harm or offend others. Their risk factors are mainly due to their extreme low-income status. The Program Coordinator provided some insight as to why they were referred to participate in the Extend a Hand Program:

They have very, very low income. I know because we’ve had donors donate actual clothes to them in the past because their income is so low, the clothes and shoes and stuff like that. They live with their grandma now because their mom passed away, I think about three years ago. Their mom passed away and she was their primary caregiver. So now they live with their grandma and their uncle kind of helps out, too. But, yeah, she does a lot for them. I mean, I don’t have a lot of parent involvement, I’ve met their grandma like twice and it’s only because she’s older so she can’t really get out the car. It’s hard for her to sign papers because she’s really old. So they don’t have the mentorship. A lot of the love and the fun and all that stuff, they get that here
because they just don’t have the relationship when they’re at home because they
stay with their grandma and she can only do so much.

Jalen and Justin are truly good kids and for no fault of their own they find themselves
trying to navigate a world with little to no resources which makes their narratives
compelling as they represent a great deal of resilience. Oddly enough the twins see
themselves as different despite having endured the same traumatic experience of losing a
parent and having an absent father and naturally communicate the effects of those events
differently.

During the early stages of the observation period both Jalen and Justin introduced
themselves to the researcher who sat in a distant corner of the multipurpose room wearing
a long winter coat with a notebook and pencil frantically taking notes. Jalen said, “Hello
sir” and Justin said, “Hello sir what you doing” which was a comforting moment as the
researcher received numerous stares from the participants and frequently heard them
mutter, “Who’s that?” After weeks of observations, it was time to begin the interview
portion of the research study and the first interview was with Justin.

The Interview

When asked about his upbringing he stated:

I grew up in a bad neighborhood, but I grew up with my grandma and my mother.
But my mom-well, I have a twin brother, too. When me and my twin were 11, our
mom died, so we stayed with our grandma.

Justin was eager to answer the questions and talked about his neighborhood being
somewhat violent saying, “A quiet neighborhood, kind of. But then, again, more street
violence and stuff like that or something.” Justin has had a mentor since he was in the
fourth or fifth grade when he joined Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS). He believes a
mentor has the capacity to teach him how to be a man. He started coming to the Community Youth Center when he was in the seventh grade because he felt it was a great place to do homework, get out of the house and have fun after school. At the Community Youth Center he is a part of the Extend a Hand Program, Sports Alliance and he leisurely plays basketball but not nearly as frequently as other participants. He believes a good mentor will serve as a positive role model and is someone who is considered a great person but his example of a bad mentor was descriptive stating:

Someone who cusses all the time, who is someone acts like – who cusses all the time, who’s such a bad influence, and has a bad reputation.

He believes a mentor’s gender is not a determining factor in forming a meaningful bond with a mentor but when asked if he’d be comfortable to talk about sex with a female mentor he bashfully said, “Kinda” and eventually concluded he’d prefer a male mentor. When asked about the Extend a Hand Program he stated it was a good program but all participants do not get a chance to fully participate but after further questioning he was referring to kids in the community which is true because the Extend a Hand Program is based on referrals. When asked about his understanding of the term at-risk and how it makes him feel he stated:

At-risk to me means if you’re – say you have something like your job is at-risk or something. It’s kinda abandoning. Like I did something.

His short terms goals are to improve his grades and get a job and when he gets older he wants to become an Emergency Medical Technician and finish college. He values mentoring and believes it can have positive results:

I think it’s very important to have a mentor. Someone just to – if you’re going through something, they could probably help you with a problem or something. Or just someone to talk to. I think it’s very important.
According to Justin mentors are not like family members but they can have the capacity to help you navigate through tough situations and he is comfortable sharing information about his personal life with his mentor. When asked how he felt his mentor could relate to his upbringing he said he could not because he is Caucasian and does not know what it means to grow up in a black neighborhood nor could he understand what it means to lose a parent given he had not loss a parent. Justin initially expressed race, ethnicity and gender would not have a great effect on the mentor-mentee relationship but similar to his response about gender he clarified his response about race and believes race might play a factor given the subject being discussed. As we ended the interview we discussed if he thought the neighborhood surrounding the Community Youth Center was safe and how they helped to reduce crime, violence and dangerous activity. Justin expressed the community was safe and if he were not attending the center he would likely get into trouble because he’d be hanging out in the streets. He feels comfortable inviting his mentor to his home and he equally feels comfortable visiting his mentor’s home which he has done several times. He cannot recall any disappointments he’s had with his mentor but his best experience was attending a college basketball game. He even believes his mentor has the capacity to help him escape the realities of his circumstances by teaching him things he needs to know about life. We concluded the interview with him expressing who he considered to be the most inspiring person in his life:

My grandma has inspired me a lot because she always teaches me not to steal. She tells me not to do things. She tells me do my best every day.
The Interview

Jalen states he was raised to respect elders and believes his community is pretty good as it is small and everyone knows each other. His definition of mentoring is someone who is going to help you and guide you in the right direction. His previous experience with mentoring was when he was in fifth grade and participated in the BBBS program. When asked about how he felt about having a mentor he stated:

My mom, she felt that I needed somebody to help me, instead of being on the streets and like that. I guess it was kind of a mystery finding out who it was gonna be. That’s why I signed up.

He has been coming to the Community Youth Center for three years and states why he comes:

It’s the greatest place to be. It helps you with homework. There’s a lot of activities you can be in. It basically just give you the opportunity, you know what I’m saying? The center, it helps you out with scholarships and like that.

He is involved in several activities at the Community Youth Center like the Extend a Hand Program, the basketball team and biking. He believes a good mentor is someone that connects with the mentee and gets to know them and helps them when needed by teaching them the steps they took to be successful. Conversely, he believes a bad mentor is someone who doesn’t connect with the mentor and they rarely see each other. He believes the mentor does not have to be the same race, ethnicity or gender and expressed he would be comfortable discussing sensitive topics like sex with a female mentor. He believes the Extend a Hand Program is good but he hasn’t really done any activities outside the center except go skating. When asked what he felt when he heard the term, at-risk he stated, “In harm or you’re in danger.” His short terms goals are to achieve
good grades but basically just do good in school. He wants to graduate high school and
go to a community college. When asked how he valued mentor relationships he stated:

I think it’s a wonderful idea, having someone that can guide you in a way that no
one else could. A mentor is a great opportunity to learn something and also you
can have a friend to be there for you.

He believes that mentor-mentee relationships have some similarities and differences
compared to family. Similarly, family and mentors can establish trust and they can
always be there for you but the difference is the mentor is a stranger and has to earn your
trust. He expressed being uncomfortable expressing his inner most thoughts with his
mentor but would disclose things like how he was doing in school. As it relates to the
mentor understanding their circumstances Jalen expressed it is difficult because they do
not have the ability to walk in your shoes. He felt the neighborhood in close proximity to
the Community Youth Center is safe because it is near a police station. When asked if he
thought the Community Youth Center could reduce crime he quickly said yes, stating, “If
it wasn’t for the center, people would be outside, you know what I'm saying, gang bang.”

He is comfortable inviting his mentor to his home and visited his home and watched a
game with his brother. The most positive experience he has had with his mentor is when
he visits him at school and takes him to lunch or they go to the movies. He has not been
disappointed by his mentor as their relationship has been positive. He believes his
mentor has the capacity to help him escape his circumstances by providing resources and
guidance. We concluded the interview with him expressing who he considered to be the
most inspiring person in his life:

It would have to be my grandma. My grandma and my mom. Those two that raised
me best. No male in the house, so it’s up to them. It wasn’t too bad because I have
two wonderful women who guide me in the right direction. My uncle, he’s stepped
up and he tries to teach manhood.
Introducing Marion-17 and Marshauna-13

Marion and Marshauna are siblings and have been long term members of the Community Youth Center where their mother is a staff member. Marion struggles academically but his grades often fluctuate due to a lack of effort. The Program Coordinator had this to say about Marion:

So Marion is very strongly influenced by his peers, I’ll say that. He is very strongly influenced. I think if he hung around better peers, he had a better peer circle, he’ll do well. But he likes hanging around kids and try to be tough. And he’s already stated to me, “I’m not tough. That’s not me.” I’ve already had that conversation with him about that. But, yeah, as far as his risk factors he struggles a lot academically. He doesn’t have an IEP, though, but he does struggle a lot. We actually were trying to get him in an alternative school program, but we were not able to because you have to be referred there so we weren’t able to get him in there. Just to see if a different learning environment will help him better academically.

In addition to his struggles in school he struggles with his relationship with his mother and is often openly disrespectful. On several occasions the researcher witnessed Marion scream at his mother and even at one point he pushed her but immediately changed his posture as she responded authoritatively. Their relationship seems strained but Marion expressed love for his mother on her birthday and told the researcher she was in the hospital due to complications of a long-term blood disorder. His ex-girlfriend who was also a member of the Extend a Hand Program was frequently pushed and talked poorly to by Marion and was continually reprimanded by his mother and several center staff.

Despite his poor relationship with his mother and ex-girlfriend, he has a good relationship with his father who lives outside the home. He mostly visits his dad on the weekends but talks to him frequently. However, despite their connection his childhood memories of his
father are laced with violence and disappointment. The Program Coordinator provides
some context about their tumultuous relationship:

And a little background about that, a lot of his trauma coming in, and he even told
me that he tried counseling and stuff. He and his dad and his mom had a really
abusive relationship when they were together and he witnessed a lot of that and he
actually tried to intervene as the oldest brother. So that’s a lot of trauma that he
was dealing with and he went to counseling for that because he saw a lot of that
trauma. So now he feels like he has to be like this big, ultimate brother that does
everything for his little sister Marshauna and for his mom. So I witnessed a lot of
that with Marion, just him feeling like he needs to be the protector and being
tough, but he know that’s really not necessarily his role. That’s just his family
dysfunction.

He has no juvenile justice involvement but is frequently suspended from school as he
struggles when he is around his peers. Ironically, when he is at the Community Youth
Center he does better as the environment is different and he sees it as fun. According to
the Program Coordinator his mother enables him by allowing him to act out in school
which is usually because he has gotten into huge brawls.

Marion’s sister is 13 years old and like her brother has a close relationship with
their father. He often brings her lunch to school and by all accounts she is a daddy’s girl.
According to the Program Coordinator there seems to be some resentment displayed by
the mother as the children desire to spend lots of time with their father, she has heard her
say, “So you going to your daddy’s house again? No, you need to stay home and do your
homework!” The Coordinator contends the family dysfunction is mostly represented
with the parents and not necessarily with the children. The mother refers to their father
as, “the sperm donor” and refers to him as such when the children are visiting their father.
Another interesting family dynamic is the father has a daughter from a previous
relationship who attends the Community Youth Center and her and Marshauna are best friends despite the tension between Marshauna’s mother and their father.

The Interview

Marion was open during his interview and disclosed a lot of the information provided by the Program Coordinator. When asked about his upbringing he stated:

I grew up in a home where there’s a lot of abuse. My mom got abused a lot. It was just me, my mom, and my baby sister. Well, I was young, so I really couldn’t do nothing about it. So I felt like it was my fault.

When asked about where he currently lives he initially stated it was okay but needed some improvements but when further probed he stated:

All the shooting and crimes they can stop it. People could get off the streets if they really tried. If they had somebody in their life that could push them to the right success.

He believes a mentor is someone who cares about you and displays love towards you and most importantly is willing to help you if needed. When asked about his first time having a mentor he stated:

First introduced to mentoring, I think it was when I was 14. Mr. Young (Program Director of the Community Youth Center) had got me a mentor, and it was pretty nice. Me and my mentor we got a lot in common, and it was nice to see that I wasn’t the only one that had come from a bad family.

Marion comes to the center frequently and has been coming for more than 10 years but will miss some days if he is working and he is involved in the Extend a Hand Program and a member of the basketball team. When asked why he comes to the center is stated:

I guess because I don’t want to be on the streets like most people, and I want my mom to care for me. And I know there are people here that I can trust because they helped me get my first job was here. So they helped me with that, and then the job that I have now they helped me get it too because, like, the guy that used
to work here his wife, I mean, his girlfriend’s dad owns the place where I work at. So he helped me get the job.

When asked what he considered to be a good mentor he stated:

Where a mentor checks up on you almost every two weeks and just talks to you and see how you’re doing in school and how life is going and if you need help doing anything or need help getting anything.

Conversely, when asked what he would considered a bad mentor he stated:

Where you don’t talk to your mentor at all, and you just only see him, like, probably once a year or something like that.

He believes the race, ethnicity and gender are important and that a female mentor would have a more difficult time to show him how to live in the world and compares his example to the contentious relationship of him and his mother. He likes the Extend a Hand Program because of the vast activities the program features. He believes the term at-risk demonstrates someone who is trouble and is in desperate need of help which can create some anxiety for the person who is in trouble. His short-term goal is to graduate high school which will require him to improve his grades. His long-term goals are to attend Tuskegee University in Alabama and become an automotive engineer with hopes of building his own car. He values mentoring relationships stating:

Because, like, some people they don’t have either a father figure or a female figure in their life, so they get a mentor so they can feel better and have somebody that they know that can care for them.

He believes mentor-mentee relationships can be similar to that of family members given the closeness of the relationship. He is comfortable sharing his inner most thoughts and
feelings with his mentor because he believes a mentor is capable of listening and would not share his thoughts with others. He believes his mentor can relate to his upbringing because they are similar and he can possibly have a huge effect on his decisions. He thinks the neighborhood around the center is relatively safe but it mostly depends on the day of the week. For example, the weekends are more violent as more people are on the streets doing crazy things. He believes the center plays an integral role in reducing violence as they help to keep kids off the streets. He is comfortable inviting his mentor to his home and recalls when he visited for Thanksgiving two years ago and he has visited his mentor’s home. The most positive experience he has had with his mentor is when he was going through a difficult time with his dad and his mentor helped to calm his anger and disappointment. Fortunately he has not had any disappointments as it relates to his mentor-mentee relationship and believes his mentor has the capacity to help him escape the realities of his circumstances stating:

By pushing me to do the right things and pushing me to do everything the right way so that I won’t be, like, other people that’s done failed already.

To conclude the interview he provided an example of who he believed has inspired him stating:

There’s a lot of people that I could say, but, like, the main one is – I have to go with Mr. Young because he’s a great influence person. He influenced me on a lot of things, and he helped me get my very first mentor that I know that they cared about me and that would be there for me and work things out with me.

The Interview

Marshauna was raised to treat people how she wants to be treated but most importantly she was taught to respect others. She informed the researcher that she lives
in a single-parent home as her parents divorced when she was younger. She contends the community in which she lives is good and bad and is largely contingent upon where you hang out. She said, “It depends on who you hang out with. If you hang out with the wrong people then you can get into too much drama.” She believes mentoring is getting help from others and forming a relationship of mutual respect. She recalls being in the BBBS program but has no memory of the experience other than she had a mentor. She did recall her first mentoring experience which was with IMP (Infocus Mentoring Program) as she said it had lots of fun activities and helped students with homework. She has been coming to the Community Youth Center since kindergarten and enjoys her time at the center because she is able to participate in fun activities with her friends and complete her homework. She is involved in several activities at the Community Youth Center like Operation Care, Hairstyle and the Extend a Hand Program. She believes what makes a good mentor-mentee relationship is the ability to share information, have mutual respect and the ability to learn new things. Conversely, a bad mentor is some who exposes the mentee’s personal information and offers little to no help. For the most part she does not have a preference about the race, ethnicity or gender of her mentor but believes certain sensitive topics like sex or female issues are best had with a mentor of the same gender. She likes the Extend a Hand Program because it exposes her to new opportunities like college trips. When asked about the term “at-risk” and how being defined as such would make her feel she stated she did not know what it meant. The researcher explained the definition as someone who has high risk factors like low-income, substance abuse, single-parent homes and communities with high drop rates. Once she understood the term and its implications she stated, “I would feel offended.”
Her short term goals are to get her grades up by receiving mostly A’s and B’s in her classes. Her long term goals are to complete high school and go to college. She believes mentor-mentee relationships are important because it provides someone you can trust.

When asked how mentor relationships are similar to family she had this to say:

My family, if you tell somebody one thing then they'll tell the other person and then everybody in the family knows your business. Same with my friends – well, some of my friends. With my mentor, it's just like whatever we say in between each other, it stays in between us.

She is comfortable sharing her feelings with her mentor but is unsure if they can relate to her circumstances without her fully explaining what she has experienced. She believes the neighborhood surrounding the Community Youth Center is safe and they do a good job of helping to prevent crime stating:

They teach you new lessons and get you more involved and stuff, to where you have things to do and you can't get in trouble if you have other things to do and not hanging out with those friends that get you in trouble.

Marshauna is comfortable inviting her mentor to her home and visiting their home because they have developed a level of trust. She has had only positive experiences with her mentor. She believes her mentor has the capacity to help her escape her circumstances because they can redirect her path toward a more positive one.

The people who have provided her the greatest inspiration are her grandmother, mother and Michael Jordan. She said:

I said my mom because she's been through a lot but she's pushing harder, she never gave up. My grandma because she’s encouraged me and helps me do my best and not let me give up. Michael Jordan because even though he wasn't that good of a basketball player at first, he kept trying and he got better.
**Introducing Shaundrel-18**

Shaundrel is a good kid and has no juvenile justice involvement. According to the Program Coordinator he is one of their longest members but is a participant in the Extend a Hand Program due to his poor academic performance. She provided some insight about his academic struggles and family background stating:

Shaundrel struggles a lot academically. So I know his background, he has an IEP, an individual learning plan, so academics is a huge thing for Shaundrel. Just a little background and I’ll just touch on academics, family, and then general behavior or whatever. Yes, he struggles academically. He’s actually behind so we’re working with him one-on-one to make sure that he can graduate in May because he’s a senior. He’s 18. So his biggest thing now is graduating in May and finding a job. Just family background, Shaundrel comes from a large, very large family. He has very little involvement with his dad. I believe – I know that his dad has about 11 other children so his dad isn’t really that involved with his life. And that’s something that has been documented and we kind of had conversations with that about how he struggles with his relationship with his father.

According to the Program Coordinator he struggles with authority sometimes as he is hesitant to listen. One day the researcher observed him negatively responding to a staff member attempting to clear the gymnasium for the evening and he continued to play and expressed his discontent but eventually exited without further disruption. Despite having family dysfunction his mother is extremely supportive and the Program Coordinator had this to say about her support:

His mom calls all the time making sure that he’s in the homework room, that if he’s here he’s looking for a job. If he messed up or had an incident at school, she makes sure that he’s not playing – he’s not here playing basketball that he’s here to get his work done. So his mom has been a huge support system just with him in the program and making sure that he’s on track.
Shaundrel stated he grew up in a single-parent home with two younger sisters and lives in a violent community which is inundated with gang activity. He believes mentoring offers someone you can look up to and who is willing to help whether it be academically or with other issues. He currently has a mentor but when he was first introduced to mentoring he was unsure of what to expect and was scared and shy but seeing he has had several over the years he is more comfortable with the mentor-mentee relationship. He has been coming to the Community Youth Center for seven years and believes it helps to keep him off the streets and working toward future life goals. He is an active member of the Extend a Hand Program, Men of Change and the basketball team. He believes a good mentor helps their mentees academically and supports them in the development of life goals. He believes a bad mentor is someone who does not communicate or help their mentees academically. When asked if he had a preference of whom he would like to be his mentor as it relates to their race, ethnicity or gender he initially stated he had no preference but when asked if he’d be comfortable discussing sex with a female mentor he said, “it depends.” He enjoys the Extend a Hand Program and the programs offered at the center. When asked how he felt when he heard the term at-risk he stated:

Like I’m being watched –Like, “Hey, you at-risk,” and then you feel like I’m being watched, like I’m isolated.

His short term goals are to graduate and get an apartment and in the future he desires to earn an Associate’s degree. He values mentoring program and feels fortunate the center is willing to offer the support to the community. He believes mentor relationships and
family are similar because you can disclose personal things with your mentor in hopes they can offer some guidance. He has some reluctance with sharing his personal thoughts with his mentor because he has to ensure he can trust them completely. He believes his mentor can relate to his circumstances but he has to make sure he tells him exactly what it encompasses. He believes the community surrounding the center is extremely dangerous based on its location due to gun violence and gangs. He believes the center helps to reduce violence stating:

Because I can see it for myself or Terrell or somebody, and say it like, “What if we weren’t here?” Like if we weren’t in the center, then we could be out somewhere playing with a gun or fighting or something like that.

He is uncomfortable visiting his mentor’s home or to allow him to visit his home because he feels they have yet to establish a relationship that would warrant such an interaction. The most positive experience he had with his mentor was when they went fishing and hunting which he thoroughly enjoyed. He expressed no disappointments in his current or past mentor-mentee relationships. He believes his mentor has the capacity to help him escape his circumstances by teaching him necessary skills needed to overcome them like focusing on his academics. When asked who has inspired him the most he stated:

Probably my mom. Because she gave me my life, and I know she wants me to do good, like do better than what she did. So, I use that as motivation.

Introducing Marcus-17

One of the first participants the researcher came to know was Marcus as the Program Coordinator and other staff members seemed to have a strong desire to see him excel. During the observation period his attendance was sporadic at best but once the basketball team was implemented his attendance no longer fluctuated. He does not
struggle academically and does not have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). He is supposedly cousins with Terrell but staff members are unsure if the familial connection is accurate. He is fairly new to the center and the Program Coordinator offered an overall assessment of his background stating:

Marcus has probably one of the best family structures in the program, which is surprising because a lot of people that have come from two-parent households, they don’t have behavior issues like he has. Marcus has a two-parent household. I think his dad actually owns a cellular phone company so they’re very well off. He just chooses to, you know, like ignore all that. I don’t even think – I’d have to check his address, but he’s not even from this area. But Marcus is from a two-parent household. He is very well off. I’ve met his mom several times; she’s a very nice lady, very supportive of him. She loves her son. Similar to Marion he has support but when he’s with his peers he chooses to be tough and have this life that he has. And when he was referred here is because he had got into an accident, like with a stolen car, and then a couple weeks before that he had just got expelled for fighting with a knife. He had a knife on him. After they broke up the fight they found a knife and he got expelled because he was on school property. He said, “Me getting kicked out of school, and me being caught with a stolen car,” he said, “I ain’t never did anything, nothing like that and it was an eye-opener for me.” So he knows better.

In addition to his infractions with the law Marcus has a temper. During the observation period his temper was on full display and he had to be redirected by staff but he has to let those around him know why he is upset which is evidenced by him pushing a chair or punching a wall. Since joining the program he has not had any encounters with law enforcement but he has been suspended twice for fighting. The Program Coordinator believes it is easier to be an advocate when the student is at the center but when their behavior is disruptive at school the center is less likely to have a positive impact. The Program Coordinator hopes he can control his anger and successfully finish high school and perhaps go on to college.
The Interview

Marcus was raised near the Community Youth Center in a single-parent home. His dad is from Ohio but lives in Memphis. He does not live near the center and states his community is relatively good and void of violence and gangs. He believes mentoring is the ability to get help from people at work. Prior to his involvement in the Extend a Hand Program he has never had a mentor. So his first mentor experience began at 17 and he didn’t feel any particular way about being assigned a mentor. He had been a member of the center years ago but was kicked out twice but does not remember what prompted his dismissal. He states he now comes to the center to play basketball because he is on the team and to do homework. In addition to playing basketball he is a part of Sports Alliance which help to develop his physical agility and strength. He thinks a good mentor-mentee relationship is one where the mentor tries to help the mentee. Conversely, when a mentor offers little help or no support he believes that is an example of a bad mentor. He does not have a preference about the race, ethnicity or gender of his mentor and would have no issue discussing sex or personal matters with a female mentor. He likes the Extend a Hand Program as he thinks it is fun and offers lots of activities like skating on Tuesdays. When asked what the term at-risk means he stated he did not know its definition. The researcher explained the definition as someone who has high risk factors like low-income, substance abuse, single-parent homes and communities with high drop rates. Once he understood the term and its implications he stated, “Uncomfortable. Because you don’t know, like, you gotta watch out – watch what you do. Like you being targeted.” His short term goal is to finish school and one day become a construction worker. He did not fully answer the question about if he valued mentor
relationships but later disclosed that he infrequently sees his mentor due to his lack of cooperation and the mentor’s inconsistency. It is important to note he disclosed his recent mentor-mentee relationship was relatively new being a little over a month old. He believes mentor-mentee relationships are different from family because you grew up with them and have more comfort talking about your issues. Hence, he finds it difficult to talk with a mentor about his inner most thoughts. He believes his mentor cannot relate to his upbringing because he did not come from the same background nor did he have the same experiences. He believes the community around the center is somewhat safe but because he grew up in the neighborhood he knows what happens in the community. When the researcher asked that he further explain the activity in the community he said, “Like, I don’t even – I don’t want to talk about that.” Despite his lack of disclosure he did state the center helps to reduce crime, violence and dangerous activity in the community stating:

Because, instead of being – as soon as you get out of school, being outside on the streets, you can come here. And do better. Do, like, programs and activities and stuff like that.

He would be comfortable visiting his mentor’s home and he would invite his mentor to his home. Seeing that his mentor-mentee relationship is not yet developed he had no positive or disappointing experiences. Although he believes a mentor has the capacity to help him escape the realities of his circumstances he is being intentionally resistant to forming a mentor-mentee relationship. We concluded the interview by him expressing that his older cousin is his greatest inspiration because he keeps him out of trouble.
Introducing Terrell-15

Terrell is a dynamic kid whose charisma is enigmatic not only do the participants flock to him the staff seem to be pretty fond of him as well. The Program Coordinator had this to say about Terrell:

I usually don’t have favorites, but Terrell is literally mine. If I had to pick a kid that I love more every day it would be Terrell. It’s just his behavior. Terrell is a very good kid. I always call him a big baby. But his family and how he was raised shape so much of who he is, just his stepdad and his mother, they shape so much his character, that I don’t really think that he feels like he can be himself.

His behavior has drastically improved but he was referred to the Extend a Hand Program because of his involvement with law enforcement. About a year ago he was involved in a mob action fight and according to the Program Coordinator is not afraid of violence. The Program Coordinator offered a telling story about his step father saying:

He even tells me like his stepdad blessed him into the gang, he blessed his friends into the gang. They kind of advocate for that – I’ve tried to meet with his mom before to sign some paperwork. She was already high in the car smoking weed trying to sign the paperwork. I think that if his family background and structure was better, he would have a better attitude, but his family structure is so dysfunctional he never had a chance to be Terrell because he had to be whatever his stepdad or his mom or his dad wanted him to be. And his dad, actual dad is in jail. He gets out this summer and he does not have a good relationship with him at all. I’ve already tried to talk to him. He’s just like, “My daddy never did nothing for me.” He got suspended one time for fighting in school and I said, “Well what’d your mom do about you being suspended?” He said, “She called my daddy while he was in jail.” And I said, “So what your daddy say?” He said, “He tried to discipline me. He ain’t had nothing but the sixth grade education. He can’t tell me nothing about high school.” He has so much resentment to the point where his father can’t do anything for him because he’s just like, you weren’t there kind of thing.

In addition to his family dysfunction he has a son named Quinton. The Program Coordinator asked him who he loves in his family and he responded, “I love my son.”

The Program Coordinator is under the impression he is having conflict with his child’s
mother so Terrell doesn’t talk about him often as it seems to be a frustrating and
disappointing issue. Although one day he entered the center and found the Program
Coordinator and said:

“Man, look at these shoes.” I remember him telling me he was so happy and I’m going, “Where did you get those shoes? What’s in that box?” He’s like, “I got these shoes for my son, you’ve gotta see them.” They were Jordan’s. I’m like, “Where you get all that money from to get your son some shoes?” He’s like, “Don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it. Just know he good, he good.” And it was just so cute because he just found something to love on, you know, and I was happy for him because in his mind, he buying his son a pair of shoes is just the best fathering thing ever he could do in his life.

The neglect and dysfunction he endures on a daily basis seems to be overbearing from the
Program Coordinator’s perspective and she was reminded of another time when he was
expressing his mother’s lack of parental involvement saying:

He told me one time, he’s like, “Man, I’ve been up since 1:00.” No, he’s like; “I was up all night, 1:00.” I said, “What you doing up?” I’m like, “Your momma let you stay up that late?” He’s like, “She don’t care.”

The lack of parental involvement from Terrell’s parents makes it difficult for him to
listen to authority figures especially when his parents condone and even encourage his
poor choices. In addition, to his family dysfunction he has an IEP largely due to his
struggles with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). He attends an
alternative school and has shown some improvement.

*The Interview*

Terrell was raised in a single-parent home with his older brother. When asked
about the neighborhood in which he was raised he stated:

I was raised in, in a bad gang related neighborhood. Lot of shootings and – shootings going on throughout the community, throughout the years of me growing up, and – yeah.
He believes his current community is not as bad as how he was raised but it is still violent just not as much as it was a couple years ago. He believes a mentor is someone who is older than you and helps with homework and other things designed to assist the mentee in improving their behavior or academics. His previous experience with mentoring programs have been their ability to help him in school. When asked about his first mentoring experience he stated:

My first time I was introduced to mentoring? It was through Big Brothers Big Sister program. They used to always come to house, or we used to go to the library, help me out with my homework, and we used to go to fun places, or whatever I liked to do.

He has been coming to the center for two years and simply comes to stay out of trouble. He is involved in the Extend a Hand Program, Men of Change and the basketball team. He believes a good mentor is someone who checks on you weekly and provides any needed assistance. Conversely, he believes a bad mentor is someone who does not check up on you or doesn’t assist you with homework. He doesn’t have a preference of the race, ethnicity or gender of his mentor and would feel comfortable discussing topics like sex with a female mentor. He enjoys the Extend a Hand Program and believes it helps him to stay off the streets and out of trouble coupled with him being able to improve his grades. Initially when asked what the term at-risk means he was unaware of its definition. The researcher explained the definition as someone who has high risk factors like low-income, substance abuse, single-parent homes and communities with high drop rates. Once he understood the term and its implications he stated, “Paranoid and stressed.” His short term goal is to keep his grades up and be promoted to the next grade.
His long term goal is to stay out of trouble and graduate high school. He strongly values mentoring relationships stating:

“Oh. Yeah, they’re important because a lot of kids need help and they just need someone to be there to talk to about their problems and just want to be there to help them with their work or whatever.”

He believes mentor relationships are different than family relationships because mentors are not always around whereas family is permanent. He also believes it is easier to talk with family about everything and sometimes with your mentor you don’t feel as comfortable. Hence, he struggles with sharing some of his innermost thoughts with his mentor because the duration and quality of the relationship is not strong. He believes his mentor can semi-relate to his upbringing because they too grew up in a single-parent home. He believes the neighborhood around the center is not safe but he does believe the center helps to reduce crime and violence by keeping kids off the streets. He is not comfortable inviting his mentor to his home or visiting his mentor’s home and would prefer to meet him in the library or somewhere else other than their respective homes.

His most positive experience with his mentor was when he helped him finish a project for school. His most disappointing experience is when his mentor fails to check on him weekly. He does however believe his mentor has the capacity to help him escape the realities of his circumstances stating:

“By helping me do what I need to do to graduate high school and go to college and graduate college, and probably starting my own business, or help me in a way I can get money to, I mean like to help my neighborhood or my community.”

His brother is his greatest inspiration saying:
He's in college. He, he has two jobs. He, he moved out of town. Like four or five years ago. Yeah, he goes to the – he lives in Austin. He goes to like University of Texas. Oh wait, he's going for arts and graphic design.

**Introducing Cortez-16**

According to the Program Coordinator Cortez does well academically and does not have an IEP nor does he have any infractions with law enforcement. He use to attend the Community Youth Center years ago and just recently returned due to his anger displayed at school. His mother is extremely supportive and works with the center to ensure her son is behaving. His father is absent from his life and has 11 other children where all the boys are named Cortez. The Program Coordinator met one of Cortez’s mentors and he concurred that his temper was explosive stating:

I’ve also met with a mentor of Cortez. It was a guy from the school district who said he’s been mentoring Cortez since he was younger and he literally has had the same observations that I have had. Cortez is a good kid when he’s good, but when he’s bad it’s bad. His temper-if I had to put a scale out of the 40-50 plus students that I work with, he would probably be like No. 2 on the list. That’s how 0 to 100 his temper is. I actually had him in this one corner one time because it was just too much, like he was just screaming at the top of his lungs, chairs flying. It was ridiculous. 0 to 100.

On one particular occasion the researcher observed his temper and it was simply astonishing. He was pacing back and forth with his fists tightly clinched and he had to be barricaded by staff to halt his movement. The incidence calmed after about twenty minutes and he eventually took a seat in the multipurpose area under the supervisor of staff until his mother arrived. The researcher was curious as to what triggers his anger and it is believed to be a reaction to not getting his way and being falsely accused.
Cortez contends he was raised well and had no struggles. He lives with his mother and stated he spends time with his father everyday but he seemed to alter his response saying, “Or every time I need him.” He says he lives in a quiet neighborhood. He believes mentoring is when someone looks out for you. He believes he has a good mentor because he helps him with his grades and keeps him out of trouble saying:

Like sometimes – like I usually get in trouble a lot at school, this has been my mentor I started third grade, and he helped me with my behavior problems, so it's like tenth grade now I don't get in trouble like that anymore. I know how to stay to myself and keep it, keeping my own, what I have up here, in my mouth, and I stop speaking my mind.

As Cortez indicated he’s had a mentor since third grade but initially he didn’t care about having a mentor even though he came to talk to him two times per week. Now that he is older and his mentor owns a business he talks to him once a week but Cortez wishes it was more frequently. He just returned to the center at the beginning of the school year and believes it helps to keep him off the streets saying, “ain't nothing out there for you.” He is involved in Sports Alliance and the Extend a Hand Program. He believes a good mentor helps out with many things like school and behavior. He thinks a bad mentor is someone who doesn’t help and doesn’t talk to the mentee. He does not have a preference of race, ethnicity or gender but would feel comfortable talking to a female mentor about sensitive topics like sex. When asked if he liked the Extend a Hand Program he stated he was unsure why he is in the program and what it entails. When asked what he feels when he hears the term at-risk he said, “It’s like you're taking that chance, you're risking yourself, you taking the chance.” His short term goal is to graduate next year. His long term goals are to attend college, play basketball and be successful. His ultimate goal is to
be an engineer or play in the NBA. He values mentor-mentee relationships and believes it is important to be respectful. He has a close bond to his mentor and believes the relationship is similar to a parent because his mentor is always looking out for his best interests. He shares a lot with his mentor and has no problem sharing some of his innermost thoughts. They have had personal conversations about his mother like when she was hospitalized. He believes his mentor has the capacity to help him escape his circumstances saying:

   He helped me a lot. He can tell me that I can get through it. He really religious person. He tell me like Jesus won't put me through nothing that I couldn't handle, and stuff like that.

He believes the neighborhood around the center is safe but when you go a little further into the community it is violent he described it as, “hectic-a lot of shootings.” He believes the center can reduce crime and violence but because there are so many shootings they probably can’t make it all stop. He feels comfortable to visit his mentor’s home and to invite him to his home but never really thought about it. He provided an example of the most positive experience he’s had with his mentor stating:

   Most positive experience was when he took us to the Muhammad Ali Museum, me and his other mentees to the museum, and we had a lot of fun together.

The most disappointing experience was so many of his friends stopped coming around for trips and mentoring activities but he eventually got over it. He believes his mentor has the capacity to help him escape his reality and offers an example of his assistance stating:

   He tell me every day he come get me. He ask me, like do I have any missing work and to go get my work, we, like we usually go to lunch, he take me to lunch and
then we come back to school and eat, but like some days we don't eat because I got to get some work together and we do it in the mentor office.

His greatest inspiration has been his teacher Ms. Riley because she helped him to pass his classes last year.

**Introducing Jason-15**

Jason is fairly new to the Community Youth Center and was referred to participate in the Extend a Hand Program by the Youth Assessment Agency. He does not have an IEP and does well academically but struggles around his peers to stay focused.

He comes from a stable two-parent home. The Program Coordinator had this to say about him family stating:

> His home very good. His mom, very supportive, at every basketball game. Dad is there every basketball game. We had an orientation, mom and dad was there, sisters were there. You know, so his family background is very close-knit.

He does have a juvenile case for retail theft which is the primary reason he is at the center. Prior to his arrival at the center his peer circle was destructive causing him to make poor decisions but he has since changed his group of friends and has not gotten in any trouble. The Program Coordinator talked with his mother recently and stated:

> I just recently talked to his mom maybe a week ago and she’s just like, since he’s been at the center he’s been doing phenomenal, as far as like behavior wise. She hasn’t had any behavior issues with him or whatever and I think it’s because he’s just in a better place. He has better people to hang around with, he doesn’t feel the need to, like, do things to get in trouble. You know, because he’s at the center every day.

Overall Justin is doing great but as a consequence of his prior behavior he is required by the court to comply with certain requirements to avoid being charged for retail theft. He is like the typical teen and is somewhat goofy and uncoordinated. Prior to the interview
he proudly walked over to the researcher with a huge smile and said, “My friend told me I should talk with you sir, so can I do the interview?” He hasn’t shown any level of disrespect to staff members or his peers but can find himself playing too much and has to be redirected.

The Interview

Jason explained he was raised in a two-parent until his parents separated but he has had a step father who has been there since birth so his home was never void of two parents. He is originally from Missouri and just moved to Prairie Union. He has no idea where his biological father is located. He states his current community is good and does not have any crime or shootings. He believes mentoring is when someone gives you advice and you can learn from your mentor. When asked about his previous experience with mentoring and how he was first introduced to the mentor-mentee relationship he stated:

I’ve been having a mentor ever since 5th grade. He comes every day to my school and talks to me and stuff like that. It’s been for a long time. We just talk about my grades and behavior and all that I wasn’t really introduced. I was just seeing a lot of people with a mentor, and back then, I was like, “Oh, this is gonna be fun. We’ll probably just play. I get out of class and stuff.” But then once I just started getting into it, I actually just learned what it really is, and then I just started liking having a mentor.

He has been coming to the center on-and-off since he was in the 6th grade but stopped coming because he was involved in other activities. The primary reason he comes to the center is because he is on the basketball team and he does his homework which he proudly reported, “My grades are fully up because I’ve been doing work here.” He is involved in the Extend a Hand Program and on the basketball team. He believes a good mentor is someone who can give advice like staying out of trouble and doing well in
school. He believes a bad mentor is someone who is not involved with the mentee and
doesn’t come to hang out with the mentee and doesn’t really try to help. When asked if
he had a preference of whom he would like to be his mentor he stated:

    Nope, it doesn’t really matter to me because I literally can look up to anybody if I
can relate to them and if I can know what they’re saying and stuff.

He went on to say he would not have any issues talking about sex or other sensitive
issues with a female mentor. Although he just started the Extend a Hand Program he
thinks it is pretty fun especially because they do a lot of activities. When asked about
how he feels when he hears the term at-risk he stated:

    At-risk like danger or something, like something bad is about to happen, or it’s
already happened, or something like that. It makes me aware. If someone says,
“You’re at-risk,” or something, I would be aware and know. I would feel bad
because that means I’m not being a good role model or something.

His short term goal is to receive A’s and B’s while maintaining a 3.5 GPA. His long term
goals are to graduate high school, attend college and play basketball or football in
college. He values mentor relationships because they allow him to learn new things and
Teaches him right from wrong. He believes mentor relationships and family are similar
stating:

    With certain mentors, it’s like the same because I could talk to them or tell them
how I feel or something, and I’ll be good. It’s basically like I talk to my parents. If
I can’t talk to my parents, I could talk to the mentor.

He is comfortable sharing his innermost thoughts with his mentor given they are close
and have established a trusting relationship. He believes in order for his mentor to relate
to his circumstances or situation he has had to have gone through a similar situation or at
least know someone who has and if he does not it would be unlikely he could relate. He
believes the neighborhood around the center is safe and the center can help to reduce crime and violence because it keeps kids out of trouble. He is comfortable visiting his mentor’s home and inviting him to his home. His most positive experiences with his mentor has been going to various places like banquets and other fun activities. He has not had any disappointments with his mentor-mentee relationship and believes his mentor is capable of helping him escape his circumstances. His greatest inspiration is his older brother.

Introducing Destiny-14

Destiny has been coming to the Community Youth Center on-and-off for a while. She was referred because she was going through an adoption and was placed with her aunt. She does well academically and doesn’t have an IEP. According to the Program Coordinator she is one of the smartest kids at the center. Her biggest struggle is being a part of an extremely dysfunctional family. The Program Coordinator had this to say about her family stating:

Her family is very dysfunctional and that’s kind of why she’s here for that support. So I know recently probably about four or five months ago she was adopted—she was taken from her mom and her dad because of just drugs and alcohol. It was terrible. They didn’t have anywhere to sleep, they were sleeping on the floor. And this is what was told to us when she came to the center, under no circumstances are her mom or dad allowed to pick her up, they cannot. We have her court document files in her case management file because we need to keep that on file just in case her dad tries to pick her up. The same day that they signed the papers for her to be taken away, she was just like I’m running away, I don’t wanna live with my aunt. Because they took her to her aunt. And she was like, “I don’t wanna be at the center, I’m not staying here. They can’t tell me who I can live with, they can’t tell me that.” And so when she first got here she struggled a lot because she was still adjusting to living with different family members.
When Destiny returned to the center she often talked about running away but overtime she has developed a better attitude. Her relationship with her aunt has slightly improved but according to the Program Coordinator her aunt uses drugs and Destiny has reported she has stolen money from her on several occasions even a $50 gift card she won in a raffle. She believes she was placed in the home simply because the aunt had a residence not because the environment was any less toxic. She has no juvenile justice involvement and her aunt picks her up every day from the center.

*The Interview*

When asked how she was raised she sternly said, “Nicely, rudely” She grew up in a single-parent home with her mother but now lives with her aunt but excitedly reports it’s only temporary. She says her relationship with her mother is good but with her dad it is terrible. When asked how her relationship with her dad makes her feel she said, “Terrible!” When asked about her community she said it is irritating and she doesn’t like it. Her understanding of mentoring was basic as she stated it was when someone mentors you but did not provide any specifics even when prompted. She states she has never had a mentor despite being involved in the Extend a Hand Program which has a mentoring component. When asked about other mentor programs like BBBS she stated her uncle is trying to sign her up for that program. Her experiences with a mentor are non-existent as she has never had a mentor to her knowledge. She has been coming to the center since she was in the 6th grade. She says she comes to the center to get away from her auntie because she is irritating. She is a part of the Extend a Hand Program which she thinks is okay and Sports Alliance which she does not like. She believes a
good mentor will help her with her homework and make sure she gets home safely. She had this to say about what she perceived to be a bad mentor:

Cursing me out, yelling at me, trying to slap me, being rude and not doing anything, just being on her phone or his phone.

When asked if she had a preference of whom she wanted to be her mentor she stated she would prefer them to be of the same race and gender. She says her mother and auntie do not want her to be around men because they might try to do something to her. When asked how she feels about the term at-risk she said, “Sad and mad.” Her short term goal is to receive good grades in school. Her long term goal is to attend and graduate from college. Although she has not had any mentor relationships she believes they are okay. However, when explaining the difference or similarity of a family member and a mentor she had this to say:

They're (mentors) pretty nice in a visit. They visit you like three times – twice a week and family members, some of them don't even like you. Some of them don't even wanna be around you. Some of them are just rude.

When someone displays rudeness toward Destiny it makes her angry, irritated and she often times responds rudely to who she perceives is being rude. She would be comfortable sharing her innermost thoughts with her mentor given that they have formed a trusting relationship. She believes her mentor can relate to her upbringing if she tells them about everything she’s experienced but if they haven’t had a similar experience then they could not relate. She believes the neighborhood around the center is okay as sometimes it’s good and sometimes it’s bad. She believes the center cannot reduce crime and violence although they try. She would not feel comfortable inviting her mentor to her home saying:
I would never bring my mentor around my auntie. If it's my mom, it's different. If it's my auntie, no. I'm never bringing anybody to my auntie's house. She talks too much. She's just irritating. She just talks too much. You don't even want to be around her. She won't even let you leave the house. If the mentor's in a good predicament with their family member then I'll go to their house if it's up to my mother.

Since she has not had a mentor she has not had a positive or disappointing experience.

She believes her mentor would have the capacity to help her escape her circumstances.

When asked who she felt was her greatest inspiration she surprisingly said, “Technically, my auntie even though she's irritating she's still helped me a lot and my mama.” The researcher was shocked by her response and asked why she continually said her auntie was irritating and was it because she talked too much. Destiny said:

It's not the talk she says it's how she acts and how she be around people. She tries to call me a dyke and all of that. She calls me a bull dyke. I said, “I thought you was just gonna say it around certain people. You weren't just gonna say it around people that I don't even know.” She goes out and tells my business to other family members that go tell my business to other people. She claims that I don't have business, but I do have business because it's my business. They don't need to know all of that. Only certain people – technically my mom and my dad, the rest of them don't have to know.

**Introducing the Staff (Program Director, Coordinator and Associate)**

The Program Director has been with the Community Youth Center for nearly five years and his presence is enigmatic as the researcher observed many teens engaged in a rich dialogue as he leaned against a table. He is quick to share his wisdom and provide youth with advice but his approach is not with harsh rebuke but encourages the youth to utilize self-reflection to analyze their behavior. He moves with purpose and is clearly under a great deal of pressure but he never shuns the youth and always makes them feel like they matter.
The Program Director oversees operations and other duties as assigned. He has earned a master’s degree and joined the Community Youth Center for a number of reasons stating:

I agree with the mission. Our mission is to enable all youth, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as responsible, productive, and caring citizens. My previous experiences are from running community centers for the Park District, Juvenile Detention, and other youth at-risk programs. The Community Youth Center provided me an opportunity to take the most holistic approach in serving the youth in our community, or any community, and I really believe in that; that embodies everything that we do. To enable them, to provide opportunities for them to learn and develop; for them to have an opportunity to work with caring adults. A lot of youth in every community struggle with the after-school times, and times when school is not in session for having places to go or finding things to do. Just providing those opportunities and enlightening them. One of my favorite sayings is that you can’t aspire to be anything you’ve never seen. So providing that opportunity through the caring adults or recreational opportunities or programmatic obviously is going to teach us what’s important to help a child reach their full potential.

He believes mentoring is a helpful tool as it provides leadership and guidance and can happen in many forms and he believes we all have mentors in some capacity. He believes the role of the mentor is to provide food for thought and not make decisions for those they are mentoring. When asked to define at-risk he seem to quickly ponder how he would approach the question saying:

At-risk? Well, the Community Youth Center and most programs are based upon risk factors; family background, demographics, etc. For me, it could be a variety of things. Just because you’re from an affluent area doesn’t mean that you’re not at-risk. It could be that you’re lacking in whatever department can classify you as being at-risk.

The researcher was struck by his response and asked had he ever been labeled at-risk and he responded, “Yeah” but said at the time he was unaware he was at-risk. He believes his
job presents a lot of challenges but namely the most pressing challenge is being a nonprofit which inherently makes funding and resources a challenge saying:

Challenges is that it’s a nonprofit, so funding and resources has always been an issue. Because the need is so great, and the ability to serve and have a holistic experience is a great challenge. The biggest reward is that I like to say “we do the impossible.” We make the most for our buck from a business model. I take one dollar, and we get a dollar and twenty out of every dollar, and that’s the goal. So that’s the biggest reward is to take these challenges and make them into rewarding situations, like seeing a kid graduate from high school on time with a plan for the future, because that’s our goal for every member. That’s the biggest reward.

He believes youth face many risk factors ranging from low-income to being reared in a single-parent home but what gives him hope is being able to encourage kids to graduate from high school with a plan to become whatever they choose because he realizes so many children are void of hope for the future. Graduating from high school is only the beginning as he desires for youth to be excited to attend college, learn a trade or enter the workforce but his mission is to serve as a caring adult who helps to make those goals materialize. In his effort to provide youth meaningful options for the future he believes the support of parents and the community is invaluable saying:

Parents play a huge role. One of the challenges, and I always like to use authority, is that sometimes it’s challenging for us because we’re telling our youth that they can become anything they want to. Some of the challenges with that is that to some individuals, that’s not what they want their child to do. They want their child to do exactly what they do, whether it’s the family business or whatever it may be. I like to look at it as parents getting involved with their kids at the center or any other type of community engagement is beneficial because our community becomes better. If there’s a young person that’s in your family and they’re struggling they may consider attending the center because of your connection with me. The community gets a chance to see us working together and the youth know that we’re all in this together. And the respect that you have may give me more respect, and the respect that I have may give you more respect. And you being in higher education and me working at the Community Youth Center is viewed differently; oh, the Program Director just works at the Community Youth Center. Well, you’re obtaining a PhD. It’s showing I know somebody that’s obtaining a PhD that’s successful, because that may be success for that kid. Or I
know somebody who’s a director at the center; that may be success for that kid. So parents having kids influenced by others makes the community better all the way around.

The Extend a Hand Program was initially targeted for youth 13-18 years of age but there is a need to interact with youth much sooner as some kids are being kicked out of elementary and middle school. He contends peer pressure is heavily increasing youth behavior and without intervention youth will likely surrender to the negative pressure. The center attempts to offer that support from 7:30am -9:00pm to ensure youth understand their commitment and investment in their success. He contends that even when a youth sees a staff member after hours they are still making an impact even if they cross paths in a grocery store. He provides details as to how mentors are selected saying:

We look for mentors all the way through. One of the challenges with the program is that we’re in a transitional community. And what that means is that college students, when they come in and mentor, they’re only there for three to four months, and then they graduate or go home for the summer. So one of the challenges we face finding mentors who can stay at least for the whole year. Because once that relationship is established the kid will have expectations and if you abruptly leave they will feel you abandoned them which is one of their major concerns because everyone has left them or given up on them.

The center does not want to perpetuate the culture of abandonment. The center tries to elicit the support of graduate students primarily those working on their doctorate to commit to the mentor-mentee relationship because they are more likely to provide a longer commitment due to the time it will take them to finish their degree. Training is provided to mentors and the Program Director provides more details stating:

We do provide training for them. We provide orientation, we provide fitness form, and we also provide an opportunity for input on how we can assist said youth. Part of the mentors training is they meet with us for case management, because we do modified case management. That case management is to find out what’s going on. So if Terrell is struggling, what is the real issue behind Terrell?
It helps me as a director to deal with Terrell differently because I have more information on why Terrell is mad when he comes to the center. It could be because Terrell doesn’t eat all day and he’s coming angry because he’s hungry. Me knowing that from a caring, trusted adult is better than saying hey, you’re not following the rules, and getting kicked out of the place.

Programs are primarily developed from a national curriculum but the Community Youth Center also develops programs based on community needs derived from strategic planning using a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis. To evaluate the effectiveness of programs the center uses surveys, parent advising groups and enrollment numbers to determine their effectiveness. Currently the center has a waiting list due to the overall demand for programs. We concluded our interview with the Program Director responding to his experience as a mentor and a mentee stating:

I guess I would say the reason why I am a mentor is because of what my mentors have done for me. When I was coming up and I’m just using the career; I’m not even going to go back to my adolescent years. Just in my career, politics is challenging if you don’t have some guidance through it. It’s like a mirror; things are bigger than they may appear. Things aren’t what they appear in real life, in the real world. And having mentors to guide you through it and understand gives you perspective which was integral for me. You heard me use the word politics.

It’s really not politics; it’s really perception. We view things from our vantage point and that makes things what they are, but that may not be it because you have to understand everyone’s role. Part of me being a mentor is helping kids understand a police officer’s role, helping them understand what a teacher’s role is. And understand it’s not everyone's responsibility to do things for you; you have to help yourself. I always tell kids: help me help you help yourself. That’s the mode of mentoring and I want to know what’s going on, and I want to help you help yourself to become everything that you would like to be. Because it’s not about me; I’m here to help you. I want you to have the plan for the future. I want you to develop things you want to do.

And so that’s kind of a philosophy, and that kind of details my experiences. I think a lot of mentors want their mentees to be like them, and mentoring really is not that for me. Mentoring is what that mentee wants. If that mentee wants to grow, we guide them and help them grow. And guess what, understanding we don’t have all the answers, but we know some people who may have the answers for that particular youth along the way to help guide them. It’s about putting
everyone in the position to succeed. That’s the philosophy, and that’s what mentoring is to me.

The Interview - Program Coordinator

The Program Coordinator decided to work for the Community Youth Center because it aligns with her interest of providing positive youth development. The center offers a variety of opportunities for youth and having a master’s degree in social work allows her to be an advocate for youth by exposing them to needed social services. Her role gives her the flexibility in programming but allows her to work with the population she prefers which is the population the center currently serves. She stated her goals for the population she serves as such:

The goal is to have all members on track to graduate high school or with a plan for the future. So just to work with kids individually and make sure they’re on track, to encourage them to make sure they have some kind of plan for the future, and give them the tools to succeed, basically; just make sure they’re being the best person that they can be.

The researcher asked what does a plan for the future look like and does that apply to those kids who do not finish high school and she responded stating:

Yeah, either or. So of course I want them all to finish high school but some people just don’t have either the resources or the interest, really, to finish high school. That path isn’t always for everybody. So whether it’s getting a GED and whatever course you may have to be, whether it’s going to an alternative school, or a trade school or whatever the case is so if they don’t want or they can’t make that direct path to just graduate high school, make sure that they have some sort of plan for the future and that it’s a positive plan, and that it puts them on track for some kind of future ahead of them.

Her definition of mentoring is the ability to work with an individual one-on-one or group to guide them by utilizing her experiences and resources. It is her goal that her efforts help the mentee stay focus by serving as a positive role model. She sees her biggest
challenge of working at the Community Youth Center as her inability to help all the kids because many of their lives are filled with obstacles and the center is only a small part of their reality. Unfortunately, those challenges are often presented by their parents who are either unwilling or incapable of encouraging their children to do their best. She finds joy when kids show improvement despite the odds against them and expressing that excitement saying:

Like just a couple days ago I had a kid that was struggling academically. I put him in alternative school because he was refusing to go to class, refusing to do any homework or anything. And his grades at his alternative school have been awesome; literally A’s and B’s. The entirely different setting was perfect for him. Now he looks forward to going to class. All of a sudden he said it’s less strict so he feels more comfortable with engaging with the staff and the teachers there. I was just happy to see his grades and to see his growth. Because at first, you think of a negative shift; oh, my kids, they’ve got to go to alternative school; they can’t function in the public school. But in actuality, that may be a better space for some kids and I was just happy to see that that worked for him.

She expressed the kids who attend the center do not just have one risk factor but often have multiple high risk factors. Members of the Extend a Hand Program come in on probation or are referred by the Youth Assessment Agency. One of their biggest areas of struggle is being influenced by their peer groups which contributes to their poor behavior at school. In addition to peer pressure their families are often dysfunctional which ranges from physical abuse to drug addiction or is multifaceted. Many of the members of the Extend a Hand Program come from a single-parent home and often time this risk factor warrants mentoring especially those seeking a positive role model. When asked how programs are developed and measured she stated:

We have a mandatory curriculum so we don’t necessarily develop or create our own programs but we receive curriculum-based and evidence-based programs from our national office. Then we also document those programs and then we put them into a system. So the kids, they also do a pre-test and post-test before every
quarter. The Extend a Hand program is a little different because we have case management as well so we can measure progress pretty quickly. For example, if I’ve been documenting in August that a kid has been struggling in biology, or has been struggling getting along with other kids. In September, October and November I am continuing to write case notes so in late November I would indicate if he’s met a couple new friends, or he actually increased his F to a B.

She has served in the capacity of mentor and mentee and often interacts with the kids playing basketball, taking them out to lunch and just trying to build a positive relationship. She believes the relationship is best formed by being transparent and she offers insight about her upbringing and listens to them talk about their families. She is not trying to be their friend but serve as a caring adult. She has had multiple mentors throughout her life and values the relationships it fostered. She explains the Extend a Hand Program and its structure stating:

The Extend a Hand Program is a program through the Mental Health Association, so they funded us to do a program and work with an additional 40 kids. We received referrals for those kids, 13-18 year-olds from different community organizations that work with youth. However, some were already members of the center and enrolled in to the program because they met the risk factors not because of being referred due to juvenile justice. They would just come here to the center and we provide them with programing, mentoring and case management to help them get back on track. A lot of times we work with the Youth Assessment Agency; that’s probably one of our biggest organizations here that we work with. They have juvenile justice system adjustments, where if they come to the center a certain amount of times a week and they do their programs they can drop the charges that they have. So we work with them. We also get kids directly from the police department and school district.

As far as the training mentors receive an orientation. The recruitment process is done internally through fairs, the local colleges and universities, parks, listserv, advertisements and word of mouth. Mentors are required to be a least 18 years of age, pass a criminal background check and agree to adhere to the rules, regulations and polices of the Community Youth Center. They seek mentors who are interested in youth development
and can commit to coming at least once or twice a week. Mentoring is typically done in a
group setting and mentors have a caseload of students they mentor so they are seeing the
same kids. In addition to asking the Program Coordinator the 12 predetermined staff
interview questions we fielded one more question after the formal questions were
answered.

*How effective is the Community Youth Center in dealing with systemic issues like poverty,
crime and violence?*

I think that’s a very interesting question because if we’re talking about systemic
issues, I think the center has very little chance of changing it especially poverty,
crime and violence. That’s very hard for the center to do. I think the center plays
a huge role but a lot of times the parents don’t wanna work with you. They don’t
want their family business out there, the kids feel like they don’t have no issues.
They don’t even know what at-risk factor is. So when we have kids that are really
interested in change and they wanna do better and they take advantage of the
resources we have, we see a lot more progress as far as shifting and changing that.
But a lot of times we don’t get kids and families that are interested in that because
a lot of them, they don’t think they have an issue at all. They don’t care, like
Cortez and them; they don’t think that they got an attitude. He just pissed me off,
that’s why I’m mad. I don’t have an attitude, you know what I mean? So it’s hard
to work with them when they just don’t wanna take advantage of the opportunity.

Parental involvement is key when you working with kids. Because you can’t do
anything without them. There’s so many things that you can’t do without a parent
unless you get, like I said, those kids that are very self-motivated that have that
confidence and that self-esteem. You don’t get that from teenagers a lot. Very few
kids that are able to control their own future themselves. You know, a lot of times
they don’t have that voice. Young people don’t have that voice. They need
parents, adults and mentors advocating for them and if we don’t have that, we
can’t really do nothing about it. The center can’t do anything if we don’t have a
parent or guardian or somebody advocating for that kid.

*The Interview-Program Associate*

The Program Associate actually began as a volunteer before being hired as full
time staff. He has received his high school diploma and has taken some college course.
In his hometown of New Orleans he was working with kids at his church and once he came to Prairie Urban he was committed to making an impact in the lives of African American children. When asked about what goals he had for the youth he serves he stated:

So basically, I try to change their thoughts, their outlooks on everything negative that’s going on in their life. So I have heart to heart conversations with each member and basically anything negative that’s going on, I try to change that a little, change turning it positive. Show them steps that they could take, you know, to fix things like that.

He believes mentoring is providing one-on-one interaction with youth where the mentor is attempting to impart their knowledge about life to help the mentee make sound and smart decisions. When asked to define at-risk he stated:

Wow. That’s a good question. That’s a good question. I mean, society thinks at-risk is a kid that made a mistake, one mistake, and give him a title and they call that at-risk, an at-risk kid. Does he have an anger problem and at that second it went too far. I call things like that a mistake, but an at-risk kid is someone that’s has no positivity. They don’t want to change for nothing, you know. I feel like a kid that made one mistake is not at-risk. An at-risk kid is just reckless in their behavior and a kid who’s made a mistake would be more of a proper term for the kid. I feel that society easily labels kids. They easily label kids, put a title on them if they’re, you know. They put the title on them if they make one mistake, they say they’re at-risk. Society labeled me at-risk but I labeled myself as determined.

He sees the biggest challenge of working in the center is the multitude of unresolved emotions which all need to be addressed and acknowledged ranging from anger to hopelessness. He contends the greatest reward is when you have a breakthrough and you see a kid making a turn down the right path. He believes the biggest issues kids face is the need to fit in which often results in the making poor choices. He did not answer any questions pertaining to the structure of the Extend a Hand Program as it is not in his
scope of duties. However, we concluded the interview with him explaining his childhood experience as a mentee stating:

My cousin, he’s the pastor of my church back home. Amazing! So the experience was from about nine years old until I graduated from high school. He just explained to me that, you know, we are human. We make mistakes. You know, we can feel like we’ve been oppressed by the world. We can feel like nobody’s in our corner. But the thing that he says the most is life goes on and you have to know, like you have to find that courage and that motivation. You’ve got to dig deep just to keep going with whatever situation or obstacle or shortcoming, you know, and just keep moving through that just to get to your goal.

These interviews that were conducted provided a rich dialogue aimed to detail the lived experiences of 10 at-risk teens participating in the Extend a Hand Program at the Community Youth Center. While their stories had eerie commonalities there were stark differences which adds needed depth to the mentoring debate. Their responses to the interview questions reflected the notion that no two stories are the same because how each person walks the same path and how they experience it has variance. Even among the staff members we learned how their views of mentorship varied and influenced how they interacted with members of the Community Youth Center. Thus, chapter five provides a detailed discussion and analysis of the findings.
Chapter Five: Discussion of Findings

Justin...

After reviewing the interview transcripts from Justin and the Program Coordinator, jottings and memos it became clear Justin’s immaturity and poor academics coupled with a high risk factor of low-income were major hurdles for his trajectory toward success. The assessment of Justin by the Program Coordinator and his responses to the interview questions produced five reoccurring themes elicited from the use of grounded theory which were peer pressure, low-income, single-parent household, dysfunctional family and the negative connotation of being labeled at-risk most of which were evidenced by the teen participants. Peer pressure for Justin seemed to present itself mostly while he was in school and despite his gentle and respectful demeanor it did not prevent him from making poor decisions that ultimately resulted in disciplinary action. The Program Coordinator emphasized his low income status stating him and his brother where extremely poor so much so that they were given support from donors to assist with clothing and other basic necessities. In addition to his low income status he had to contend with the death of his mother at the age of 11 which undoubtedly had an effect upon him despite him not being as candid talking about the life altering event. However, when asked about his mother he had some level of resilience as if mourning or grieving her loss would inflict unwanted pain. The Program Coordinator contended due to the age of their grandmother and her weakened mobility the Community Youth Center serves as a space of love, fun and support which is somewhat void in the home. Even Justin acknowledges one of his primary reasons for attending the center is to get out of the house and have fun. Family members like his uncle attempt to offer some support but the
majority of the weight and pressure to raise Justin and his brother sit on the shoulders of his elderly grandmother whose commitment is unwavering despite her diminished functionality. For Justin like most of the participants of the Extend a Hand Program being a product of a single-parent home has presented challenges which he seems to believe can be overcome with effective mentoring. Justin like all the participants took offense to the term at-risk expressing it makes him believe he did something wrong. These five reoccurring themes were also present when interviewing Jalen and had little variance despite Jalen being deemed mature by the Program Coordinator, staff and the researcher.

*Jalen...*

Jalen quickly endorsed mentoring as he believed his mother was intentional in ensuring he was paired with an older non-familial adult to lessen the chances of him being engaged in poor activities in the streets. It was obvious he saw the Community Youth Center as a place of opportunity. His love for the center is evidenced by his strong involvement with programs. He really valued mentoring and it is likely due to his mother being so supportive of the intervention and now that she is gone it makes it even more important for him to build positive mentoring relationships. However, these relationships lack consistency for Jalen as he has not had the same mentor throughout his mentoring experiences as they would often change. Regardless of the lack of consistency it did not cause Jalen to believe these relationships do not have impact. In fact, he contends such relationships are a wonderful idea. However, despite his raving of the mentor-mentee relationship he expressed apprehension about sharing his innermost thoughts with his mentor. This admission led the researcher to believe his comfortability with his mentor was not sufficient to render enough trust to confide in him as he would with an adult who
he trusted despite exclaiming their relationship was meaningful and positive. He responds to peer pressure somewhat better than his brother but still makes an attempt to fit in with other members at the center. His ability to play basketball is not as stellar as his peers but he makes a valiant effort to contribute to the team by being aggressive on the court. His aggression is demonstrated by going after every loose ball and closely guarding his opponent. Seeing that he and his brother are reared in the same home in addition to the theme of peer pressure he too contends with the realities of low-income, single-parent household, dysfunctional family and being labeled at-risk. He found the term at-risk to mean eminent danger or harm. The Program Coordinator stated he performed better academically than his brother but still contended his level of support was actualized at the center not necessarily from his teachers or school. When expressing her sentiments about other participants she concurred the center has less of an impact while the members are at school. This led the researcher to believe the school due to many uncontrollable factors like classroom size, time and resources prevent teachers from having the capacity to serve as mentors. Although schools offer in-school mentoring programs the environment seems to be less conducive for the members of the Extend a Hand Program. The Program Coordinator stated the participants enter the center with high levels of emotions due to their day at school and utilize the center to calm and regulate those emotions. Jalen is no different as he enters the Community Youth Center as he is trying to escape the pressures of his school environment and also the mundane reality his home life presents due to his ailing grandmother.
Marion...

Marion was extremely candid during his interview and given the information provided by the Program Coordinator it became evident his greatest opportunity was his inability to withstand peer pressure which was only a portion of his self-reported struggles. It was interesting to learn that despite his ability to be influenced by his peers he does not perceive himself as tough which makes him getting into self-initiated fights somewhat peculiar. He like most kids are trying to fit in but his chosen group of friends garner bad outcomes like school suspensions. He does not state any issues or concerns about his low-income status as it seems to be the norm for the majority of teens at the center. Many of the teens are provided basketball shoes because they do not have a pair that fit. This is one of the many accommodations the center provides coupled with a nominal membership fee or waiver to those who cannot afford the cost of membership.

His single-parent household is beyond strenuous and despite having a good relationship with his father his childhood was set on the center stage of abuse. He watched helplessly as his mother was physically and emotionally abused by his father which provides credence for their family dysfunction. It is apparent this abuse caused a significant amount of trauma and despite seeking help from a psychologist it appears to continue to haunt Marion. The school seems to offer the greatest level of peer pressure because when he attends the center he does behave in a reckless or uncontrollable manner. The family dysfunction according to the Program Coordinator is a huge obstacle for Marion and consequently he treats his mother disrespectfully despite knowing it is unproductive and hurtful. Although others are aware of the tension between him and his mother he seems to not acknowledge the emotional abuse he inflicts. Marion was not hesitant to express
how he grew up in the face of horror as the abuse was intense causing him to feel like he could not protect his mother or sister. The tension between Marion and his mother was difficult to flesh out because at one point he candidly stated he wanted his mom to care for him which implies he seeks her approval and validation. The term at-risk led him to believe someone was in desperate need of help which he believes innately causes anxiety. Despite him being unaware of his risk factors perhaps as a child the continual abuse inflicted upon his mom caused great anxiety and emotional instability.

Marshauna...

Marshauna was raised to treat people with respect and dignity despite being continuously exposed to the blatant disrespect caused by her father. She understands peer pressure to be of grave importance because when you hang with the wrong people you are more likely to engage in inappropriate behavior. While she comes from a low-income family she did not express it directly or the limitations that the risk factor presents. Her brother and the Program Coordinator spoke of the dysfunction present in their family but Marshauna just quickly mentioned her parents were divorced. It was not apparent if her omission of key facts surrounding her childhood was due to her uncomfortableness or the fact she is four years younger than her brother and perhaps does not have a vivid memory of the abuse. However, she did slightly state her disapproval of her family members who spread rumors or disclosed information in which she provided in confidence. As for how she would feel if she were labeled at-risk she stated, “I would feel offended.” Those four words were not said in her normal voice which was somewhat low and subdued but she said it with such anger. Her facial expression also exemplified her disdain for the term as she rolled her eyes and tilted her head as she responded to the
question which was a clear deviation from how she answered the previous questions. Her response prompted the researcher to be more aware of other participants as they described their understanding and reactions to the term.

Shaundrel...

Shaundrel has attended the center for many years and struggles academically in school. The Program Coordinator indicated he is attempting to graduate from a traditional high school but it has been difficult. She mentioned he has an IEP but did not indicate if it was due to a learning disability. He has the demeanor of a leader and when he is interacting with other members they seem to adhere to his leadership. It was not clear how peer pressure affects him directly as he is somewhat reserved when talking about his personal life. He has a younger sister who attends the center and their relationship appears to be close as they go back and forth like typical siblings. Although Shaundrel can have a slight temper he is mostly well behaved at the center and his behavior at school was not reported other than having an IEP due to poor academic performance. His low-income status while known was not discussed in detail. He comes from a single-parent home and his mother is extremely supportive in trying to encourage him to graduate high school. His family dysfunction is evidenced by his estranged relationship with his father who is believed to have 11 children. He expressed being labeled at-risk makes him feel like he is being watched and is isolated. Shaundrel is one of those kids who you really want to succeed but it is such a struggle as he contends the violent community is inundated with gang activity. He desires independence and wants to get an apartment as he pursues an Associate’s degree. He like many of the teens have a goal to attend college but with his struggles academically college will likely present some
difficulty especially if he does not receive the needed learning support. He like most teens have goals where some are typical like graduating from college and others are lofty like becoming a professional athlete in the NBA. However, having a well-articulated goal is not the same as having the resources necessary to help the goal materialize.

*Marcus…*

Marcus is well liked by the staff at the Community Youth Center and the researcher also acknowledges his charisma and charm but it is unclear what exactly makes his presence enigmatic. The Program Coordinator indicated he does not struggle academically but more often than not concedes to peer pressure and has a volatile temper which has gotten him into major trouble. He has been expelled from school and has had numerous suspensions. As noted previously the Program Coordinator’s analysis of the teens occurred after the researcher interviewed the teens so what was reflective in their case management reports was not always revealed during the interview. It is unclear why Marcus stole an automobile or fought with a knife but according to the Program Coordinator it is largely due to peer pressure and his flaring temper. He is not considered low-income according to his case file and the Program Coordinator emphatically stated he is not from the poor side of the tracks nor is he raised in a single-parent home. However during the interview he indicated he was raised in a single-parent home and that his dad currently lives in Memphis so it is likely he lives with his mother and stepdad not his biological father. Despite living in a good neighborhood and having supportive parents it seems his family dysfunction is evidenced by the strained relationship he has with his biological father. The term at-risk makes him uncomfortable because he feels it forces you to be on guard as you are being watched. It is interesting to note Marcus was
unwilling to discuss the criminal activity surrounding the center but did concede that a
diversion from school to the center would likely produce bad outcomes due to the
violence present in the community. It is a mystery as to why he willingly engages in bad
choices but did show remorse for his previous infractions with the law. Maybe the
Program Coordinator has it correct to suggest his behavior is directly correlated to him
having a negative peer circle and being pressured to engage in activities in which he
knows are unproductive. His negative peers are at school and when he comes to the
center he does not engage in non-productive activity.

*Terrell*...

Terrell is a clear favorite of the Program Coordinator despite her calling him a
bully on numerous occasions when he was dealing with his peers. However, she did
contend he is not afraid of violence and is frequently the perpetrator. Unlike other teen
participants the Program Coordinator did not talk about how Terrell responds to peer
pressure of his friends but she did spend a great deal of time explaining the negative
pressure displayed by his mother and stepdad. He stated he was raised in a low-income
neighborhood in a single-parent household. His greatest obstacle is the dysfunction his
family presents. It was disheartening to learn his stepdad blessed him in to a gang which
is an initiation of sorts. He definitely displayed some restraint when answering questions
and did not disclose he had a son or the contentious relationship he has with his
biological father and the poor guidance rendered by his mother and stepdad. The
Program Coordinator did indicate he has Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
(ADHD). Perhaps his disorder explains some of the infractions he has while at school
due to a lack of focus coupled with his family dynamics and temper. As mentioned in the
interview his behavior has resulted in him having to attend an alternative high school where he has shown some progress. The researcher is led to believe he is attempting to receive some sort of validation from his stepdad and mother as they often support him in his wrongdoing. His response to the term at-risk was interesting as he stated it made him paranoid and stressed. It is evident the term at-risk causes concern for the teens and while they are seemingly unaware they have been categorized as such all those around them like teachers, scholars and the center staff see them as such and respond to their needs based upon their at-risk factors. Terrell at 15 years of age is living the life of an adult but it is evident he too needs the same nurturing support he desires to give to his 1 year old son.

*Cortez*

Cortez has been receiving mentorship for years and as stated earlier was referred into the Extend a Hand Program because of his severe anger displayed at school. The researcher witnessed his anger on full display and it was beyond intense. However, when Cortez is not displaying extreme anger he is a friendly and personable young man. When he was playing basketball and his team was not winning he was very angry and began to lose focus and interest in the game. The Program Coordinator attempted to bring some clarity as to why he demonstrated uncontrollable behavior but it is still unclear what exactly causes Cortez’s anger. Cortez acknowledged his behavioral problems and believes his mentor coupled with his ability to calm himself down has allowed him to minimize his school distractions. The Program Coordinator seems to struggle between Cortez being furious when he is misunderstood, accused or with him just wanting to have his way. Regardless of the cause his behavior was unacceptable. The school seems to
not have the same capacity to calm Cortez down like the center who will quickly rush to his aid when he is displaying anger but at school such behavior warrants an immediate suspension. In the midst of his low-income and single-parent status he has an estranged relationship with father who has 11 other children which adds to his family dysfunction. The term at-risk makes him feel like you are taking a chance with your life. The researcher felt he explained it metaphorically like someone who is deemed at-risk lives their life walking a tightrope or jumping into a lion’s cage during feeding time.

Jason...

Jason is a good kid but peer pressure is truly his primary issue as he comes from a stable two parent home where he lives with his mother and stepfather. While his family has stability not knowing where his biological father is located could be a potential concern. Nonetheless, it was interesting to compare his responses to the Program Coordinator as she spoke highly of him and during his interview with the researcher he was perhaps the most well-behaved and well-mannered participant. However, the researcher witnessed how when he is around his peers his behavior changed. Prior to conducting the interview he was seen talking with his peers and was really trying to fit in by being active in the dialogue which mostly translated into him being rambunctious. Once he entered the interview he was calm and eager to answer the questions. Initially the researcher thought he was attempting to display a certain image because he was interviewing but it became apparent he alters his behavior when speaking with adult authority. He was eager to inform the researcher that he had been doing well in school and aspired to get high marks. The Program Coordinator and his mother attest to the fact that his behavior has drastically changed since he no longer has the same group of
friends. Jason being involved in retail theft was largely based on the friends he was
hanging with and seeing how he desires to be accepted it provided the prefect opportunity
for him to do something in which he clearly knew was wrong. Despite giving into peer
pressure the overall assessment of him from the researcher’s perspective is he is
extremely impressionable. According to him he can look up to anyone which is perhaps
why he was getting into unnecessary trouble. He like most of the teen participants took
issue with the term at-risk and felt is made you feel like you were in danger. His
explanation was perhaps the most detailed as he seemed to internalize the word and when
the label was applied to him he felt he was not being a good role model for others.

Destiny...

Destiny is by far one of the most disheartening stories the study features as she is
contending with extreme family dysfunction. She once lived in a single-parent home
before she was removed by a court order due to her mother’s drug abuse. The Program
Coordinator shared a great amount of information pertaining to child protective services
removing her from her home and placing her to live with her aunt which Destiny
vigorously opposed. In most cases the teen participant did not delve into personal stories
which would give credence to their dysfunction but Destiny held no punches when
speaking of her family in particular her disdain for her aunt. Although many of her
responses were short they were chilling. The relationship with her father, “terrible!”
How she was raised, “Nicely, rudely!” How she feels about her relationship with her
father, “terrible!” When asked to describe her auntie, “irritating!” As the interview
progressed she demonstrated some level of trauma as it seemed odd she felt a bad mentor
would verbally assault and strike her and be rude in their interactions with the mentee.
Based on her only providing one to two word answers even when probed further the researcher did not want to push her more because they did not want her to become emotionally agitated or perceive the follow up questions to be an interrogation. She stated the term at-risk was saddening and upsetting. She did express when someone treats her rudely she becomes angry. The Program Coordinator attempted to provide insight into how the trauma of being removed from the home made Destiny feel but the coordinator would likely be shocked to learn of the verbal abuse Destiny endures. It was shocking to learn she felt her auntie was an inspiration despite revealing her auntie calls her a derogatory term used to describe her sexual orientation. She was less concerned about being called a “bull dyke” but expressed more concern about how her auntie would refer to her as such in the presence of others which is infuriating. Destiny never disclosed her sexual orientation, sexual abuse or any trauma she experienced explicitly but clearly is dealing with deep levels of abuse. Despite her mother being addicted to drugs Destiny loves her and would prefer to be homeless with her mother than housed under the vitriolic scrutiny of her drug inflicted auntie.

Program Director...

It is obvious the members of the Community Youth Center are fond of the Program Director. He talked extensively about serving as a caring adult to vulnerable populations like the members who attend the center. He firmly believes providing kids with positive and productive options is critical in supporting their advancement. His goal is to provide a plan for the future. The researcher was unsure of what a plan for the future entailed and after further inquiry learned it could range from going to college or learning a trade but is solely based on the aspirations of the child. His definition of the
term at-risk was standard which included family background and demographics to name a couple but the most interesting aspect of his explanation was he believed affluent kids could be labeled at-risk. In addition to his definition he stated he was unaware as a child of his high risk factors like being reared in a single-parent home and being born into poverty. The challenges he faces at his level are likely similar to most nonprofits where funding inevitably becomes the organization’s Achilles heel. He expressed pride in his ability to stretch resources to serve more children but the researcher contends while his financial savviness is impressive it is not sustainable. The most vulnerable kids witness the support the center provides but seeing the effect of limited resources can have a negative impact leading kids to believe all they are worth is inadequate facilities and substandard conditions. He believes that parental support is invaluable as it helps the center better engage with the community and provides a narrative in which donors and sponsors would gladly support. He believes some parents are counterproductive and contradict the values and aspirations the center is trying to instill in its members. The researcher contends parental involvement would most certainly be a valuable asset but it is not the prevailing cause for program failure or for teens not having a viable plan for the future. The Program Director believes peer pressure is forcing many kids down a path of destruction and without some form of intervention they will likely succumb to the effects of their poor choices. Outside of parents and peer pressure finding quality mentors is a challenge but he aims to select mentors who can commit for at least one year to ensure members are not left with the effects of their premature departure. The researcher contends despite his efforts retaining quality mentors is simply difficult given the demographics surrounding the center. The Program Director provided insight about the
training mentors receive but it did not appear extensive but included an orientation and a fitness form. It is important that mentors are given the flexibility to offer suggestions which they believe would best serve the mentors. The best part or most informative aspect of the training is reviewing the case management notes which provide the prospective mentor needed context about the risk factors experienced by the prospective mentee. However, mentors need training as to how to deal with the complex issues these kids face to ensure they are not simply defining and seeing them only by their risk factors. The fact the center is aware Destiny has experienced abuse is good because it helps to explain her anger but in the end, how does knowing truly help Destiny overcome her obstacles? Programs are based on a national curriculum but the researcher contends these programs while they can be easily evaluated on a larger scale are not producing outcomes greater than numbers or a few testimonials. Shaundrel coming to the center every day and not getting involved in nonproductive activity is indeed a successful outcome. The waiting list for children to join the center is a successful outcome or indication their programs have merit according to the Program Director but if Shaundrel does not complete high school or find meaningful employment how impactful were the center’s efforts? The researcher agrees with the Program Director about the importance of mentors and community centers but they slightly diverge on the notion of “mentoring being what the mentee wants” as it is evident the mentees have goals both immediate and long term but what is not so clear is if they have the adequate resources to successfully see those goals come to fruition.
Program Coordinator...

The Program Coordinator’s goals are similar to the Program Director as she desires all members to graduate high school and have a plan for the future. She believes those goals are best achieved when members are provided opportunities designed to keep them on track. For those members who do not successfully graduate high school she will route them based upon their goals and plans for the future. However, as stated before what happens to the member who cannot seem to overcome their poor decisions what does the future look like for that kid? It appears that mentoring serves as a positive intervention but according to the Program Coordinator that positivity is often overshadowed by an unsupportive parent and the mounting obstacles the youth face.

Simply put, the Community Youth Center cannot help all at-risk kids. She believes peer pressure is another major obstacle preventing at-risk youth from succeeding coupled with having multiple risk factors. It is interesting both the Director and Coordinator find the greatest opportunity is the parents and the member’s inability to withstand peer pressure but do not account for the other prevailing factors which contribute to their misfortune like systemic poverty inadequate schools and oppression. Despite these omissions which the researcher contends they are aware exists they seem to suggest 100% parental involvement and the ability to resist peer pressure would reroute the paths for kids deemed at-risk but such an assumption is overly optimistic. Even when asked a more targeted question about how the center can help to deal with systemic issues like poverty she conceded to the fact they had little chance to curtail its prevalence. In fact, she somewhat doubled down on the need to garner more parental support. She believes young people do not have a voice and need caring adults, parents, advocates and mentors
in conjunction with places like the Community Youth Center to provide support and guidance because without a collective effort the center’s impact is limited. We definitely need a collective effort but we need an even stronger effort from our elected officials to provide resources to eliminate poverty because clearly the Community Youth Center and those alike are not equipped to do so.

Program Associate...

The Program Associate provided the strongest claim to eliminate the label at-risk as he feels it is debilitating. He believes the title alone places them on guard as others are watching their every move. The researcher agrees based on the participants the term is more than problematic but believes some will argue it is no different than any other category designed to provide a deeper understanding about certain factors. However, we cannot ignore the voices of the very group of people the term aims to help and perhaps need to look beyond risk factors or labels but to the true source that allows the term to have merit which is poverty. The Program Associate like his colleagues attest to the fact that members enter the center with many unresolved issues and their time at the center while productive and fun does little to solve them despite their efforts. The interviews produced five common themes derived using grounded theory which include peer pressure, low-income, single-parent household, dysfunctional family and the offensive nature of the term at-risk. These themes were discussed and analyzed and provided a greater understanding of the mentor-mentee relationship from the mentees perspective but how did they effectively answer the primary research questions aimed to guide the study?
The research study aimed to explore the mentor-mentee relationship through the lens of at-risk teens participating at an afterschool program in a micro-urban community. When the researcher entered the Community Youth Center and began trying to account for all the things they were observing one thing they wanted to ensure was that the voices of the deemed at-risk youth would not be lost in the chaos. Attempting to speak the lives of 10 complex individuals juxtaposed to the views of staff and the researcher’s own self-reported historical understanding to some might be a daunting task but it proved beyond a reasonable doubt that just knowing that mentoring is a positive intervention is surely not enough. The lives of twins Jalen and Justin, siblings Marion and Marshauna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason, and Destiny were far more dynamic than most could have imagined. Their stories helped to answer the primary research questions that guided this study. They had the courage to slightly open their lives up to a stranger and when you compare their responses to the Program Coordinator’s responses you soon discover some operated with a high level of constraint while others were more candid. The reason the researcher wanted to speak to the Program Coordinator is because they did not want to solely rely on the teen participants to tell their complex stories which are constantly being edited because of the inherent struggles they endure. So often these kids have opened up only to be left more broken than before. The researcher did not want these kids to be a product of an overzealous scholar who would prick their wounds of despair only to leave them lifeless in their departure. In fact, the researcher intentionally made it clear this research was aimed to awaken the voices of the at-risk mentee who often has been silenced by their pain and provide some level of hope to those who some have deemed hopeless.
Research Question One

How can mentor-mentee relationships provide a positive and/or effective alternative for at-risk youth to combat systemic issues like poverty, gun violence, and high dropout rates?

Like most kids these teens have faith in some caring adults despite being disappointed by family members and countless others. Jalen, Justin, Marion, Marshauna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason and Destiny enter the Community Youth Center five days a week carrying emotional baggage which weighs more than all the combined luggage on a Boeing 747 and although their lives are fraught with extreme turbulence they continue to fly. They are unaware of the label at-risk and even when told still don’t quite understand its implications. They have come to know a community plagued with violence, gun fire and crime and some believe it is unlikely to change. Mostly all the teens believed the Community Youth Center, their mentors and caring adults could save them from the circumstances which haunt their lives but unbeknownst to them their mentors or the Community Youth Center cannot save them all from the systemic nature of poverty for its hold on communities like Prairie Urban is too strong and perhaps through resilience a few might make it out but many will succumb to their environment unless we acknowledge the true cause of their affliction which is poverty. The research indicated a need to have a stronger parental involvement but within these 10 stories we had teens with stable homes and teens with homes filled with dysfunction but regardless of their family stability they all descended on the same runway of at-risk. While the researcher is not suggesting increased parental involvement will not render positive outcomes they are suggesting it alone cannot loosen the fatal grip of poverty. If
we could provide one-on-one mentoring to all at-risk youth could that impede poverty? Teens like Shaundrel, Jason, Marion and Cortez have had mentors for years and all contend those relationships have been positive but it clearly was not stronger than the weight of injustice poverty intrinsically creates. Lastly, peer pressure is indeed a force all teens must face irrespective of socio-economic status but that pressure is not nearly as intense as poverty. The teen who has solid grades, no legal infractions, supportive parents and they demonstrate leadership among their peers but lives in a community ravished by poverty has a definite uphill climb toward opportunity. So you see poverty is truly the figurative parent of crime, violence, low achievement and helplessness so if we desire to eliminate their existence we must make a conservative effort to not only target its offspring.

Research Question Two

How are non-familial relationships like the dyadic relationship of the mentor-mentee perceived from the mentee’s perspective?

The research produced another strong endorsement for mentoring. Shaundrel recalled when he and his mentor went fishing and hunting. Many of the teens expressed excitement when their mentor picked them up and took them to lunch or an activity outside of the community. Some have gladly visited the homes of their mentors and have invited them to their homes. Even those teens who had not had a mentor or only had one still believed the mentor-mentee relationship could help them to withstand the reality of their circumstances. The staff reflected on their mentor relationships and gave credence to its positive outcomes. The researcher throughout the dissertation provided their thirty years of experience with having positive mentor-mentee relationships but how are we
truly measuring the outcome. In the lives of Jalen, Justin, Marion, Marshauna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason, and Destiny yes they all believe in mentoring but can it truly help them with their struggles. Shaundrel has had a mentor for years but finds himself in a situation where graduation from a traditional high school might be unrealistic. Reports derived from census data show what the median income is for those without a high school diploma to the income of those holding an advanced degree but we have become more focused on reporting the data than on finding a solution to invalidate the findings. We should move beyond the mere notion that mentor-mentee relationships produce positive outcomes to the more taxing reality which is it alone cannot move the concrete pillars of injustice which poverty creates causing the most vulnerable populations to be inevitably trapped. How much longer will we blame everyone and everything for the consequences of poverty? How long will we throw our legislative prowess, our economic resources, passions and rhetoric behind something we know will only help a few vulnerable youth? It is imperative we not unfairly task nonprofits like the Community Youth Center to contend with a systemic issue in which they did not create nor have the capacity to eradicate. Perhaps we should make a conscious effort to utilize the full weight of justice to overtake the evilness of injustice. It is hard to imagine that Jalen, Justin, Marion, Marshauna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason, and Destiny said when I grow up I want to be a failure. I want to steal. I want to be born in to a family that has been generationally dealing with oppression, discrimination and hopelessness. I want to be a part of a marginalized group. I want you to shoot me so I don’t have to grow up. I want to live my entire life being labeled and targeted. I want to be at-risk, endangered and destined for failure. I want people to judge me by the color of
my skin. I want to go to prison not college. I want to have a child when I am still considered a child. And please, I want my future to be solely based upon my mentor and community center and not by the Declaration of Independence which states, “All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.” So the research is clear the mentor-mentee relationship is supported by these 10 teens but when will someone tell them the unfiltered truth. In a matter of time, for some sooner than imagined Jalen, Justin, Marion, Marshauna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason, and Destiny will no longer be between the ages of 13-18 and the doors of the Community Youth Center and high school will close leaving them to scurry along the streets of unfilled dreams and hopes. Where the only seemingly opened doors lead to a prison cell or a cemetery entrance. Morally and as a matter of right we owe it to these kids and all kids born into the sinful, shameful and unapologetic veracity of poverty more options than that…. 
Chapter Six: Discussion, Implications and Conclusion

Conclusion

At the onset of this dissertation it was evidenced from the robust body of research that mentoring proves to be an effective intervention for at-risk youth plagued by systemic issues like poverty, crime and high dropout rates. Despite the high level of consensus stating mentoring is effective this study aimed to provide insight from the perspective of the mentee and their lived experience. One of the most compelling themes this study showcased is that the teens who have been labeled at-risk by various systems like schools, legislators, social service agencies and others are completely unaware of their at-risk status. Yes they acknowledged their communities were violent because of gang and criminal activity, some even acknowledged their homes were dysfunctional but when they heard the label at-risk they expressed being offended, targeted and isolated. The Community Youth Center like many similar organizations are committed to doing their part to curtail violence in the community but their efforts often fall short because the weight of poverty is too taxing. Irrespective of this reality the Extend a Hand Program provides a safe haven for some of the communities most vulnerable populations but once they exit the doors of the Community Youth Center they are left to fend for themselves. They are in desperate need of more caring adults and as the African proverb instructs, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Perhaps the village needs to be expanded to include more than just immediate and extended family, community centers and local churches but wide enough to reach the moral consciousness and legislative authority of governments and heads of state to eradicate the vestiges of poverty which inherently births failure. It is time to destroy the label of at-risk because it only sends a message to our children that
they are endangered, targeted and should be on the run. If we can tirelessly fight to save and protect some of our most beloved animals then surely we can have the courage and tenacity to fight for the most vulnerable human populations within our great nation. Poverty is not a rural or urban problem but is a problem which effects everyone and no mentoring program or mentor-mentee relationship has the depth to confront its suffocating reality which turns dreams into horror films and hope into despair. The voices of the teens featured in this study should no longer be silenced or ignored but if we are to continue to embrace the positive factors of mentoring programs we cannot divorce ourselves from the reality of cause and effect. At-risk teens need more than the intervention of mentoring, they desperately need a solution to poverty which unequivocally undermines and limits their chances for a positive future. The potential solutions can include but are not limited to an equal and equitable educational system, opportunities for gainful employment, livable wages, providing safer communities void of illicit drugs and crime, provide resources to assist those with mental health needs, reimagining our penal system which unfairly targets at-risk populations and restoring the family unit. For those who have selective amnesia or tonic immobility caused by their privilege let us not forget we manage to provide these same opportunities and more for those who are not afflicted by the vitriolic nature of poverty because they live on the other side of the tracks.

The term at-risk is based on a deficit model which inherently limits a person’s ability to see others beyond the narrowed lens in which the term creates. Our ideation must move beyond the label of at-risk which only focuses on those things that we believe and sometimes even know can impede a child’s success. We must move toward a more
positive stance by focusing on the individual gifts and talents each child innately possesses. In every facet of our existence no matter how dire the situation we have the capacity to rise above our circumstances but to be clear such a reality is fraught with many obstacles. Those obstacles can be fear, anxiety, injustice, lack of opportunity, poverty and much more but all of them combined cannot destroy ones gifts but at best only make them dormant. When a child speaks for the first time it is cause for celebration and when that child moves from speaking single words to complete sentences all are amazed. If that same child begins to play the piano at three years old and other instruments to follow one might say he or she is gifted and despite their poverty if that gift is celebrated and continually honed perhaps they can rise above their circumstances.

I was by all accounts at-risk but my mother checked every homework assignment, insisted I had good penmanship, corrected me when I spoke improperly, examined my attire to ensure it was neat, taught me how to write and once she realized my gifts she never stopped trying to encourage me to perfect my talents. Jalen, Justin, Marion, Marshuna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason, and Destiny all have gifts but all we chose to focus on is their risk factors. If we took a walk down Hollywood Boulevard or Crump Boulevard which is one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in America you would find one commonality amongst children and that is they all have gifts irrespective of their zip code. The label at-risk boxes some of the most talented and gifted children in by focusing on their perceived deficits and not their God given ability. For some children school causes great anxiety and can be debilitating but there have been countless stories of a child who was deemed at-risk and unteachable who figured out their gift and rose above those labels. We see this evidenced daily in the entertainment industry. How is it
that a child who was born with sight then lost his vision and in blindness realizes he can play the piano? Someone must have celebrated his gift and not his deficit. That little blind boy grew into a man who later became known as a musical Genius and world icon by the name of Ray Charles Robinson. How about that family from Gary, Indiana who was improvised in a home of nine children but their parents focused on their gifts? The family would become known as the Jacksons and their youngest brother Michael Jackson would become a mega star and given the name King of Pop. And then there is this child abandoned by his father and raised by his grandparents. He too would become a world icon as he broke down the doors of the White House which slaves built to become the first African American president of the United States of America. His name is Barack Hussein Obama. I would be reminisced if I failed to mention the name above all names who was born into poverty in a small town called Nazareth. His father focused on his gifts not his ascribed poverty and he would talk to the multitudes about the goodness of God. His name is Jesus Christ. We must focus on children’s gifts and not their at-risk factors because it only limits their ability to maximize their talents. We have been good in finding athletes and entertainers but let us not forget the biochemist who has the potential cure for cancer, the mathematician, the engineer and the countless others because of our inability to look beyond ones risk factors and seek their gifts of intellect. Mentoring programs cannot see kids only through a deficit lens but must be keenly focused on unmasking and awakening the gifts that lie underneath the soot created by the confinement of labels. One of the unflinching and inarguable facts of this study is that for Jalen, Justin, Marion, Marshauna, Shaundrel, Marcus, Terrell, Cortez, Jason, and Destiny is that no one focused on their gifts. All we came to know were the immense
pressures their complex lives entailed. Most of the teen participants had no clue they were labeled at-risk and once learned displayed anger but the greater mystery lies in knowing if anyone has highlighted their gifts more than they have focused on their at-risk factors.

**Implications**

This study aims to offer some practical solutions to improve the mentor-mentee relationship. The need to provide one-on-one mentoring, close staffing gaps and rethink how we label youth as at-risk are at the forefront for feasible implications. Having sat down with 10 teens ranging from 13-18 years of age, observing their interactions and getting an in depth look in to their case file from the Program Coordinator has deeply informed how the mentor-mentee relationship is understood. All of these teens were lumped into a singular category, “at-risk” yet their risk factors ranged from extreme poverty to infractions with the law but where there was complete consensus is they all decided on a daily basis to participate in the Extend a Hand Program. They believed the Community Youth Center has the capacity to prevent them from being engaged in dangerous activities like violence and crime afterschool but they are seemingly unaware of the systemic issue of poverty which help to perpetuate crime and violence. As mentioned in the findings the Program Coordinator stated the teens need more individualized support and the center cannot truly account for those hours where the teens are not in their care. The Community Youth Center is in a definite need of a facility upgrade but even if they increased their square footage by 50,000 square feet it would not fill the gap of needing highly trained mentors to provide one-to-one mentoring. In order for mentoring programs to have success it is imperative they secure mentors who are
capable of providing frequent interaction in an effort to create a sustainable relationship with their mentees (Miller, J., Barnes, Miller, H., & McKinnon, 2012). It became apparent the participants of the Extend a Hand Program were largely attracted to playing basketball especially when the center decided to form a basketball team featuring the Extend a Hand Program participants but the allure of basketball does not negate the yearning need for a caring adult. The findings suggested the desire to spend more time with their mentors like going to lunch and taking trips outside the neighborhood were highly positive factors of their mentor-mentee experience. Not only is it important to have deep resources as it relates to quality mentors it is equally important to have a stable staff because far too often when students gain trust with a staff member they seem to leave the organization.

The Community Youth Center in recent years has experienced some extreme financial issues which almost caused the center to close but they have rebounded from their woes but staffing continues to be a hurdle in which they face. Like a majority of non-profit organizations pay for workers is not lucrative despite the work being intensely demanding and often extending beyond the weekly scheduled hours. However, the need for staff members to serve as a caring adult is critical as teachers lack the capacity to provide the critical care needed to assist some of their most vulnerable students due to constraints of the classroom. Although afterschool programs have various types of programming and mentoring staff can provide a consistent caring adult to the at-risk population however funding often impedes those opportunities (Rhodes, 2004). The Community Youth Center within the time frame of this study loss several volunteers and most recently a staff member who for two years developed a strong bond with members.
These types of losses create a level of mistrust and sometimes inhibits members from developing deep bonds from fear of believing staff members will abandon them as others have in the past. In addition, to having one-on-one mentor-mentee relationships and greater staff consistency, it has become evident the label of at-risk produces some level of anxiety for teens coupled with making them feel as if someone is watching them as one teen expressed in the study.

The term at-risk has come to mean a variety of risk factors ranging from a single-parent home, substance abuse, low-income, school delinquency to criminal infractions but while these labels allow researchers, schools legislators and countless others to neatly define and categorize youth it is truly a term not fully understood by the very population it hopes to protect. There is limited to no research on the term itself other than defining its meaning but it seems we all would be better served if we eliminated the term or perhaps explained what it means to those in which it labels. This study provided not only consensus from teen participants but the researcher and staff members all agreed they were unaware of their at-risk factors. Perhaps some believe knowing you are at-risk places you in greater danger because it can create paranoia and hopelessness but for all the teens featured in this study who seemed clueless of their at-risk status does not negate how coming to know its meaning made them feel. If systemic issues like poverty and discrimination were eliminated which increases the probability of crime, violence, high dropout rates, low income, substance abuse and single-parent homes then what would become of this readily used term at-risk?
Limitations of this Study

In all research no matter how meticulously presented and designed it will garner some inherent limitations. Hence, this study is no different and presented a few notable limitations. First, the age of the participants ranged from 13-18 years of age which made the depth of the responses to the interview questions varied despite presenting some common themes. Some of the interviewees had only had one experience of mentoring compared to some participants who had multiple experiences. Furthermore the lived experiences of some participants were grossly different than others of the same age group like that of Terrell who at 15 years of age has a 1 year old son. The Extend a Hand Program is 73% Male and 27% female and the participant pool had an 80% to 20% ratio for male and female respectively. The limitation is that both females featured in the study were 13 and 14 years of age and excluded females who were older as they were not suggested through the referral of the two participants. However, those not featured according to the Program Coordinator have had sporadic attendance and frequently go weeks at a time before returning to the center.

Secondly, the time allowed to complete the study proved to be a limitation as potential participants were frequently absent during the interviewing phase of the study. Even during the observation it became apparent that some members were absent for days at a time without staff members being aware of their status as they would simultaneously miss school. The staff would reach out to the parent or guardian to seek information about the participant’s whereabouts but they more often than not could not account for their disappearance. Thus, if more time was available those voices could have possibly been incorporated in the study.
Thirdly, the sampling method is a probable limitation as the prospective participants referred by the featured participants could be based on them believing they had similar backgrounds. However, seeing the study featured fraternal twins and siblings it became obvious that each participant had their own unique lived experience and appeared to be honest and sincere as they engaged the questions. To minimize this potential limitation participants were given some key expectations for a potential participant coupled with the Program Coordinator providing detailed information from the staff case management.

Lastly, as the researcher it was well documented of their previous experience with organizations like the Community Youth Center and programs like Extend a Hand which could unintentionally present some bias in the findings. However, the researcher took concrete steps to avoid bias and allowed the participants to fully disclose their responses without any hindrance. The researcher was cognizant of their tone, body language and other non-verbal cues to ensure complete transparency. The researcher contends while their previous experience of being a mentee and a mentor were positive it had little to no bearing on the findings of this study and their willingness to glean from the interviews what the participants intended was standard.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study explored the mentor-mentee relationship through the lens of teens participating in an afterschool program which intentionally veered away from the robust research which talks about the effectiveness of mentoring as an intervention for at-risk youth. However, more research needs to be done about how programs are designed, how success is measured and how that success helps to alleviate some of the precursors which
allow room for the intervention to be applied like poverty, crime, and high dropout rates. The study spoke directly to the primary benefactor of the intervention, the mentee but more research is needed to deeply understand the role of the parent or guardian. In this study we learned about siblings who experienced extreme abuse from their father and although their relationship with their father has improved and their mother attempts to chastise them for poor choices the scars of abuse are still present. Having a deeper understanding from the parent about their upbringing would bring some needed context as to why their children are deemed at-risk. It is equally important to understand who outside of the parent and mentor is an example of a caring adult because if we are talking about teachers, clergy, extended family and community organizations future research needs to unpack these relationships and see how they are defining at-risk teens. The staff at the Community Youth Center largely defined the youth by their risk factors but future research needs to explore how these categorizations effect those in which it aims to protect and serve. In fact, are caring adults consciously or subconsciously boxing children in by their labels or looking beyond the labels to provide a meaningful plan for the future? Such an analysis would provide a deeper understanding of what effects these labels are truly having on children and if they do more harm than good. The study revealed how the Extend a Hand Program serves as a last ditch effort to intervene in the lives of at-risk teens but more research needs to be conducted to discover how the mentor-mentee relationship can serve as a preventative measure for vulnerable populations. Lastly, it is imperative future research incorporates the tenants of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it would likely provide a deeper analysis and understanding of the labels assigned to at-risk African Americans which are more than likely heavily
correlated to the pervasiveness of racism in American society. The systemic nature of poverty is largely supported by power structures which perpetuates the discrimination, oppression and marginalization of African Americans. Thus, CRT would provide a critical lens as to why mentoring programs have become a readily used intervention for African Americans and perhaps provide context as to why the intervention alone cannot dismantle power structures which inevitably birth and support poverty.
Closing Remarks

On the Run

As a kid, I had no worries or concern
As a kid, my only job was to learn

As a kid, I watched my mother work with no indication of struggle
As a kid, my life was in a protective and nurturing bubble

As a kid, I had no idea what my mom was protecting me from
As a kid, I had no clue I was a target and should be on the run

As a teen, I had to run even faster for the chase had become intense
As a teen, I started to realize the system for years had labeled me at-risk

At-risk for dropping out of school
At-risk because I did not follow all the rules
At-risk because of the violence in my community
At-risk because of my father’s absence and failure to take responsibility
At-risk because of gangs, drugs and high dropout rates
At-risk because like all people I made a few mistakes
At-risk because of my low-income and likelihood to go to prison
At-risk because having a child as a child, would likely be my decision
At-risk because I was told I had ADHD and quickly given an IEP
Now as an adult, I realize these systems have always been targeting me

As an adult, I still have to keep watch because even if I receive an advanced degree
The system will always try to challenge, delegitimize and target me
Not because I am deficient or less than
But because I have never followed their plan
A plan that puts poverty in your midst, where only a few make it out
So you see poverty is what truly makes failure come about

Labels are distracting and can box you in
Forcing you to run a race which some hope you never win

So run as fast as you can and make sure you simply have fun
I encourage you to be resilient even when you are on the run.

Eugene L. Moore
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APPENDIX A
LETTERS TO PARTICIPANTS
Dear Participant:

My name is Yoon Pak, and I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Policy, Organization, and Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Eugene L. Moore, my advisee, would like to include you along with your peers; in a project, he is conducting on the Extend a Hand Program at the Community Youth Center. We do not anticipate any risk greater than normal life and participants may benefit from having another adult who is interested in how they are participating in the program. You may benefit from having an opportunity to reflect on your experiences. If you take part in this project, your regular participation in the program will be observed once or twice a week for four months, Eugene Moore will take notes on how members are participating in the Extend a Hand Program; he may audiotape to aid in accurately recording participants talk in field notes.

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. Only those who want to participate will do so, and any participant may stop taking part at any time. The choice to participate or not will not affect your program status. The information obtained during this research project is strictly secure and does not become a part of your records. Any audiotapes will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be accessible only to project personnel. The field notes will be coded to remove members’ names; any audiotapes will be erased after the project is completed.

The results of this study are strictly for educational purposes. (If the student plans to develop a more extended study at this site after the project, the student and the student’s advisor will seek appropriate permissions, including from parents.)

In the space at the bottom of this letter, please indicate whether you do or do not want to participate in this study. The second copy is to keep for your records. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact us by either mail, e-mail, or telephone.

Sincerely,

Yoon Pak
Associate Professor
1310 South Sixth Street
330 Education Building
Champaign, IL 61820
yoonpak@uiuc.edu
217-300-2819

Eugene L. Moore
Graduate Student
1310 South Sixth Street
351 Education Building
Champaign, IL 61820
emoore@illinois.edu
217-300-5382

I do/do not (circle one) give permission ____________________________ (name) to participate in the research project described above.

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Date __________ Signature________________________________________

I do/do not (circle one) give permission ____________________________ (name) to be audiotaped in the research project described above.

Date __________ Signature________________________________________
Dear Center Parent/Guardian:

My name is Yoon Pak, and I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Policy, Organization, and Leadership in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Eugene L. Moore, my advisee, would like to include your child along with their peers; in a project, he is conducting on the Extend a Hand Program at the Community Youth Center. We do not anticipate any risk greater than normal life and your child may benefit from having another adult who is interested in how they are participating in the program. Your child may benefit from having an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. If your child takes part in this project, their regular participation in the program will be observed once or twice a week for four months, Eugene Moore will take notes on how participants are participating in the Extend a Hand Program; he may audiotape to aid in accurately recording participants talk in field notes.

Your child’s participation in this project is completely voluntary. Only those participants who want to participate will do so, and any participant may stop taking part at any time. The choice to participate or not will not affect your child’s status. The information obtained during this research project is strictly secure and does not become a part of your child’s records. Any audiotapes will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be accessible only to project personnel. The field notes will be coded to remove members’ names; any audiotapes will be erased after the project is completed.

The results of this study are strictly for educational purposes. (If the student plans to develop a more extended study at this site after the project, the student and the student’s advisor will seek appropriate permissions, including from parents.)

In the space at the bottom of this letter, please indicate whether you do or do not want your child to participate in this project. The second copy is to keep for your records. If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact us by either mail, e-mail, or telephone. If you have any questions about your child’s rights as a participant in this study or any concerns or complaints, please contact the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board at 217-333-2670 (collect calls will be accepted if you identify yourself as a research participant) or via email at irb@illinois.edu.

Sincerely,

Yoon Pak
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217-300-5382
I do/do not (circle one) give permission for my child ____________________________ (name) to participate in the research project described above.

Date ___________ Signature________________________________________

I do/do not (circle one) give permission for my child ____________________________ (name) to be audiotaped in the research project described above.

Date ___________ Signature________________________________________
1) Tell me about yourself as it relates to your upbringing?

2) How do you see the community in which you currently live?

3) What is mentoring?

4) What has been your previous experience with mentoring programs?

5) Please share when you were first introduced to mentoring and how did you feel about having a mentor?

6) How long have you been coming to the Community Youth Center?

7) Why do you come to the Community Youth Center?

8) What programs or activities are you involved in at the Community Youth Center?

9) What do you consider to be a good mentor-mentee relationship?

10) What do you consider to be a bad mentor-mentee relationship?

11) Do you have a preference of whom you would like to be your mentor? For example do they have to be the same race, ethnicity or gender?

12) How do you like the Extend a Hand Program?

13) When you hear the term at-risk what immediately comes to your mind and how does it make you feel?

14) What are your short term goals and how do you plan to achieve them over the next year?

15) What are your long term goals and how do you plan to achieve them over the next 2-5 years?

16) How do you value mentor relationships?
17) How are mentor relationships different or similar to the relationships you have with family members like parents, siblings, cousins, etc.?

18) If you had a good relationship with your mentor how likely would you share some of your inner most thoughts and feelings?

19) How likely do you believe your mentor can relate to your upbringing and be effective in understanding your circumstances or what you are going through?

20) How safe is the neighborhood where the Community Youth Center is located?

21) Do you believe the Community Youth Center helps to reduce crime, violence and dangerous activity in the community?

22) How comfortable would you be to invite your mentor to your home and how comfortable would you be to visit their home?

23) What is the most positive experience you have had with your mentor and what has been the most disappointing?

24) Do you believe your mentor has the capacity to help you escape the realities of your circumstances?

25) What person has inspired you the most and why? (Your response can be family, friends, or people you have never formally met.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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APPENDIX D
STAFF PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1) What is your name, title and current role at the Community Youth Center?

2) What is your educational background?

3) What made you decide to join the Community Youth Center?

4) What are your goals for the members you serve?

5) What is your definition of mentoring?

6) What is your definition of at-risk?

7) What is the biggest challenge and greatest reward of working with members at the Community Youth Center?

8) What are the primary issues or circumstances members face and how do you help to address those issues?

9) Explain the Extend a Hand Program and its structure?

10) Explain how mentors are selected for the Extend a Hand Program and do they have any formal training prior to meeting with their mentees?

11) How do you develop and or oversee programs and how do you measure their success?

12) Have you been a mentor or mentee and if so explain your experience?