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# 'We're like family and stuff like that': Relationships in After-School Programs

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## 'We're like family and stuff like that': Relationships in After-School Programs

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to briefly thank the staff and directors of the program studied, whose small size required their anonymity. They tirelessly and often thanklessly dedicate themselves to a program of which I have witnessed change lives. Like all of those that work with youth, however, they are often not present when the fruit of their efforts eventually reaches its full ripeness. Despite the demanding and often thankless job they take on, they went well above and beyond in assisting me in this project. I was continually blessed with an open door into their program, without which this project would have been impossible. They sacrificed their time and resources including but not limited to transporting participants. Additionally, they provided me with considerable history of the program, which added significant context to the study. At the risk of cliché, words cannot express the extent of my gratitude for the deeply meaningful work they do and their assistance they offered in helping me do mine.

# **‘We’re like family and stuff like that’: Relationships in After-School Programs**

*Alan English*

## **Introduction**

While after-school programs have long-existed, they have seen a recent surge in popularity in the last few decades (DuBois et al. 2011, 57). After-school programs have been demonstrated or theorized to be associated with a wide host of positive outcomes in youth including lower drug usage (Rhodes, Reddy, and Grossman 2005), higher math and reading scores (Leos-Urbel 2015; Sheldon et al. 2010), improved interpersonal relationships (Rhodes, Reddy, and Grossman 2005), higher English grades (Shernoff 2010), increased physical activity (Gortmaker et al. 2011), and lower rates of depression and social anxiety (DeWit et al. 2016). Based on these demonstrated benefits, after-school programs need to be taken seriously as an imperative aspect of the greater educational system. One of the most common mechanisms to be associated with the potential benefits of after-school programs is the development of positive relationships within the program. Because these relationships can manifest themselves in a wide range of ways, this paper will define after-school programs broadly as any program that primarily meets outside of school aimed at giving youth opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with non-family adults or peers, provide safe and productive recreation, develop skills useful to a productive adult life, or address specific issues facing youth today. Examples of programs studied in previous literature include: Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (Rhodes and DuBois 2008), Boys and Girls Clubs (Fredricks, Hackett, and Bregman 2010), and Twenty-first Century Community Learning Centers (Kremer et al. 2015). While recent literature has furthered understanding of this central aspect of after-school programs, there is still much to learn. For example, while much of the research on after-school program relationships has striven to determine the characteristics of an effective relationship, few studies have emphasized youth’s perception of those relationships. Furthermore, much more research is needed on the role of youth-youth relationships within after-school programs. Finally, there is a lack of practical, research-based practices for after-school program directors to mold their programs around in order to maximize the positive youth outcomes associated with positive relationships.

This study sought to gain greater understanding of how youth at a faith-based privately-funded after-school program perceive relationships within the program. As the existence of a strong personal relationship is widely theorized to be a precursor for positive outcomes within after-school programs, it is essential that greater understanding of their role, including how youth perceive them, is obtained. Because emphasis was placed on youth perception, participants were welcome to emphasize the role of any relationship within the program (youth-youth vs youth-mentor). The aim of the study is therefore to provide a degree of transferability regarding youth perceptions of relationships within after-school programs in a broader context. This study concluded that youth relationship positionalities (YRP) should be given careful consideration when after-school program directors are selecting youth for participation in their program, pairing youth and mentors together, and designing programing and activities.

## **Literature Review**

In order to understand the impact that youth-mentor relationships within after-school programs have on youth outcomes, researchers have required characteristics with which to measure or determine the existence of effective relationships. Deutsch and Spencer (2009) identified duration, frequency and consistency of contact, quality of connection, and the mentor's approach to the relationship as useful measures of mentor/mentee relationships. They noted that relationships which lasted longer durations of time, met more frequently, and the mentee reported a stronger connection with the mentor were more effective. Additionally, relationships that could be characterized as developmental, emphasizing acceptance and personal connection were more effective than prescriptive relationships which tended to place judgement and expectations (Deutsch and Spencer 2009).

Because clearly not all relationships can be identical and, in an effort to better understand such relationships, attempts have been made to develop categories of after-school program relationships. For example, Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborn (2004) developed relationship categories based on their level of activity and structure. These categories were: moderate, unconditionally supportive, active, and low-key. Their conclusion was that,

Participants who characterized their relationships in terms of 'moderate' levels of activity and structure reported the largest number of benefits, including decreased alienation from parents, decreased conflict and inequality with friends, and an improved sense of self-worth and school competence relative to the controls. (Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborn 2004, 303)

Brady, Bolan, and Canavan (2017) proposed that after-school program relationships could best be divided into the categories of concrete, companionship, emotional, esteem, and advice. Their work emphasized that while not all relationships develop intense and personal depth, they can all be useful. For example, relationships based on concrete and companionship support are comparatively shallow but can encourage the youth to develop more positive interpersonal relationships outside the mentor/mentee relationship and can thus lead to positive youth outcomes.

Through both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, researchers have attempted to identify best practices in establishing effective after-school program relationships. For example, Jones and Deutsch (2011) highlighted the usefulness of minimizing relational distance between mentors and mentees by hiring young mentors that come from similar backgrounds to the youth they are serving and building proximal relational ties by developing relationships with the friends and family members of the youth they serve. Based on a study involving 1,138 youth enrolled in Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborn (2004) recommended that effective mentors should be more like effective parents than friends. Specifically, this required mentors to be willing to give constructive feedback rather than unconditional support for all youth's action. Such unconditional support could lead to encouraging counterproductive decisions made by the youth and undermine feedback given from other adults such as parents or teachers. Deutsch and Jones (2008) emphasized the importance of bi-directional respect as being a crucial aspect of an effective relationship. This is particularly important among youth who may feel as though they lack respect elsewhere in their lives, such as youth of color. Based on

this foundation of bi-directional respect, Deutsch and Jones (2008) identified the essential characteristics of effective relationships as authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship.

Two conceptual frameworks have been most influential in developing our understanding of the role that relationships play in after-school programs. First, Rhodes (2005) developed a framework which placed relationships characterized by, “mutuality, trust, and empathy” as a precursor to all youth development within an after-school program. This youth development can be categorized into social-emotional, cognitive, and identity. Such development then leads to positive youth outcomes. One particularly promising and useful aspect of this model is the idea that social-emotional development can generalize, leading to improved relationships between the youth and people outside of the after-school program. With this model, Rhodes (2005) proposed that relationships be the center of all decisions made within after-school programs. See Figure One for a visualization of the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring.

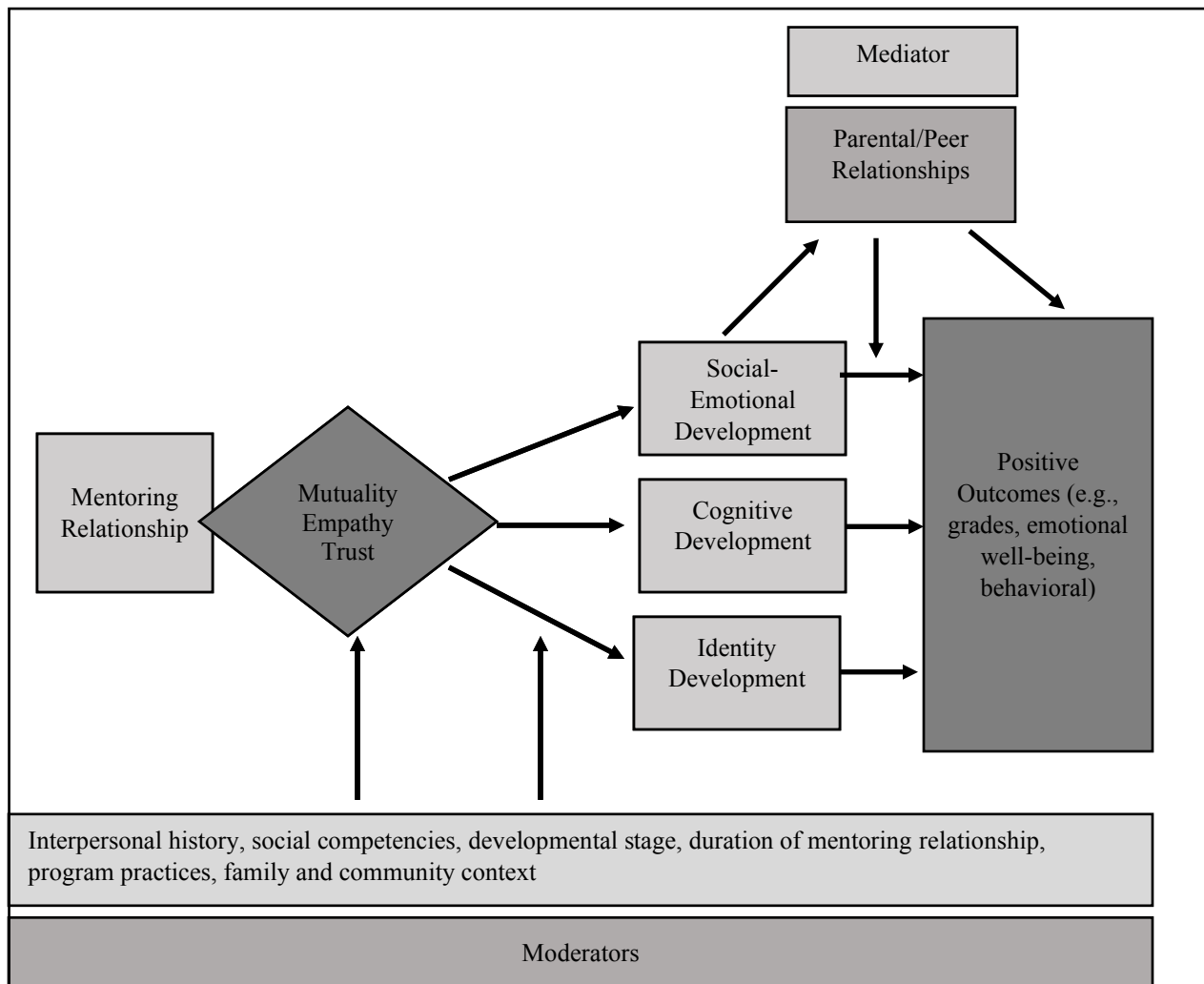


Figure 1. Rhodes model of youth mentoring

A second highly influential conceptual framework concerning after-school program relationships and their role within after-school programs is the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development developed by Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois (2011). Based on six case studies conducted with youth enrolled in inner city Boys and Girls Club programs, four aspects of an after-school program that influence its impact on youth were proposed: program, activity, relationship, and culture (PARC). The developed conceptual framework acknowledges that while individual youth's history can influence an after-school program's effectiveness, a well-developed PARC profile within an after-school program can overcome significant obstacles. One reason for this is the compounding effect that the individual factors of program, activity, relationship, and culture can have on each other (Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois, 2011). If, for example, an after-school program has a well-designed activity and a specific youth and mentor participating in that activity have a strong relationship, the youth outcomes that can potentially be seen are greater than the sum the readily apparent parts. Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois utilized the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development as a primary means of data collection within their study, as each observation included the completion of a PARC profile, which documented the complementary nature of these factors within the program. See Figure Two for a visualization of this model.

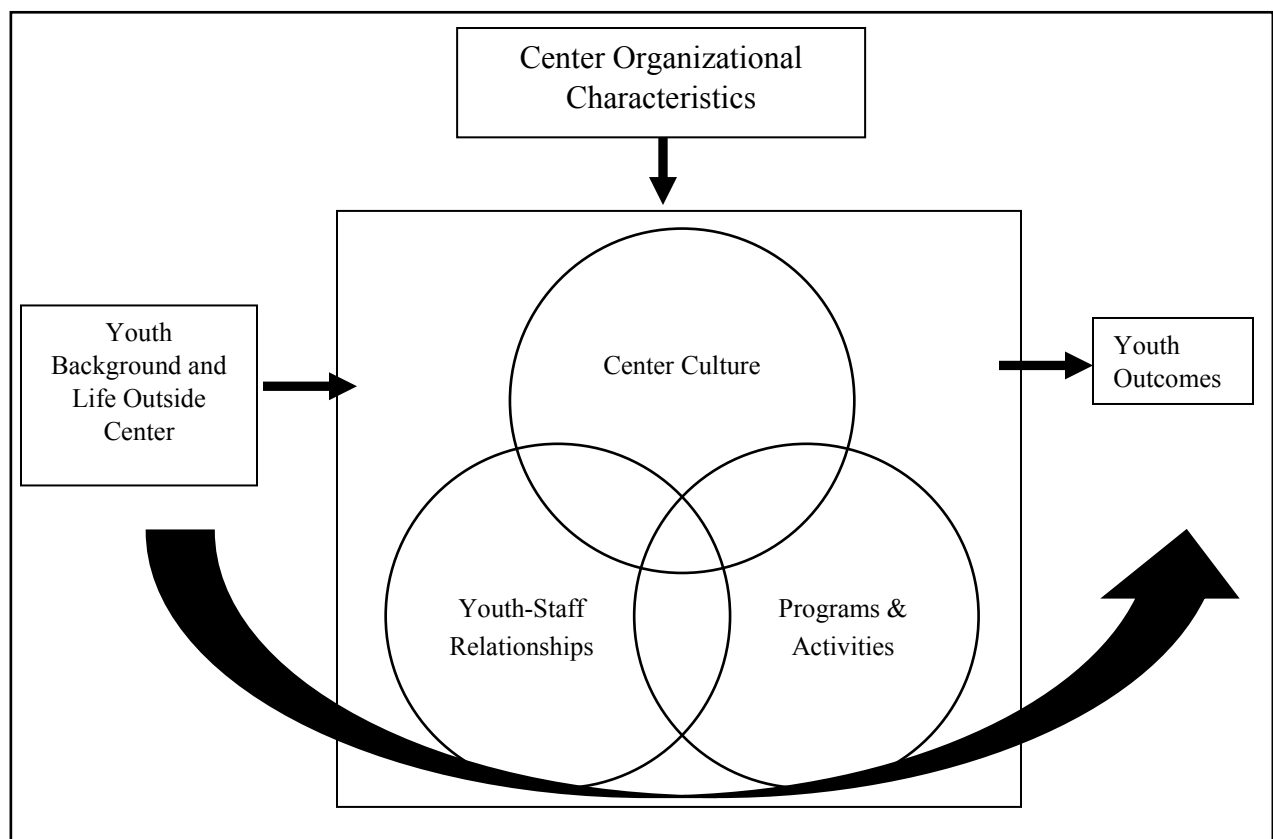


Figure 2. Conceptual framework for understanding the role of comprehensive after-school centers in youth development

While there has been considerably less work done on understanding the role of peer-peer relationships in after-school programs, there are indications of its importance as well. Bulanda and McCrea (2012) suggested that peer-peer relationships in after-school programs can lead in increased empathy, compassion, and the development of conflict resolution skills. Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois (2011) also demonstrated the importance of peer-peer relationships within after-school programs. Many of their cases' strongest developments were based around developing relationships with peers, and many PARC profiles collected indicated peer-peer relationships as central to a positive or negative experience.

### **Statement of Transparency**

The program in this study was chosen out of convenience and familiarity. For several years before the study, I worked part time for the program as a mentor. Before this study began, however, I resigned from my position in the program; not because of a concern of a conflict of interest but rather because of a logistical concern for adequate time to maintain a second job while conducting this research project. Rather than being a detriment to my objectivity, my familiarity with the program represents a strength of this study. Because I personally knew many of the youth, directors, mentors, and parents involved in this study, I was able to conduct myself as a cultural insider within the program. Cultural insider status brings with it a host of benefits including reduced cultural barriers, greater sensitivity within the research project, the ability to ask more meaningful questions and read non-verbal language, access to spaces off limits to outsiders, and increased trust with participants (Liamputtong 2010, 112-13). I regularly felt these benefits of cultural insider status. Program staff and youth became quickly accustomed to my presence during activities because I was often present at such activities with the same youth and mentors while previously working for the program. In fact, it was my perception that many youth not involved in the study (and therefore not directly observed) didn't realize that research was being conducted. This allowed for more authentic behavior from all present at the observation. My insider status provided additional benefits. Program directors welcomed me into any and all activities I wished to observe. Parents largely met the prospect of their youth's involvement in the study with excitement. Program directors invited me to present my findings during an executive session meeting with excitement and intrigue. I do not believe this would have been the experience of an outsider researcher approaching the program with the prospect of conducting research.

While my insider status with the program brought considerable opportunities to enhance my results, it also brought challenges with it. First, any research project with which one is familiar brings the risk of being too close. This project was no different, but I have attempted to address this concern both theoretically and methodologically. I continually used my phenomenological theoretical framework, which emphasizes a researcher's role as to continually question assumptions as a guard against prior experiences in the program excessively influencing results. Additionally, in an effort to bring about greater open-mindedness as to the possibilities within an after-school program setting, I conducted two observations of alternative after-school programs in other communities just before I began this study's research. While field notes were taken, they were a data set outside of this study. Still, I found that these observations gave me a point of comparison at times during my project that further helped me to understand my subjectivities. Throughout this paper, I have attempted to maintain transparency of my experiences and subjectivities regarding the after-school program. It is my hope that my readers will find my

closeness to the research a strength of the study and will use my transparency regarding it to determine the degree of transferability this study may offer.

## Methods

This paper synthesizes the findings from a larger, more comprehensive study which in part tried to understand the following research question:

How do youth in the after-school program perceive the value of the relationships created with mentors, youth, and other staff within the program?

Within this line of inquiry was an emphasis on youth perception. I sought to understand not only my participants' value of the relationships created within the program but to what extent they saw these relationships impacting the outcomes they experienced associated with the after-school program. This line of inquiry was first chosen to address an existing gap in literature, as youth perception in after-school programs has not been adequately researched. Such research, demonstrating the usefulness of youth's perception within after-school programs will legitimize the use of data collection methods such as interview and survey that rely on youth perception. Additionally, this research question was chosen because I believed that youth in after-school programs have a lot to teach researchers. While an emphasis in the existing body of research has been to understand what impact these programs have on youth, I believed that there was room in the body of literature for youth to explain what about such programs is valued and making an impact on their lives.

With these aims in mind, phenomenological case study methodology was chosen. Phenomenology was a natural fit as a theoretical framework for such purposes. This is because, "Phenomenology is concerned with the *relations* that exist between human beings and the world around them" (Marton 1986, 31). As such, phenomenology drove me not to understand my participants nor the after-school program but rather the relationships that they perceived within their experience of the program (in this case, the phenomenon).

Additionally, phenomenology provided a tool to approach this study, given my experience with the after-school program. Phenomenology calls researchers to continually doubt their prior experiences. In fact, Husserl (1960) went so far as to argue that, "the evidence of world-experience would, at all events, need to be criticized with regard to its validity and range, before it could be used for the purposes of a radical grounding of science" (17). The primary tool with which phenomenological researchers doubt their primary experiences is bracketing or disconnecting, those assumptions from one's frame of mind (Husserl 1931, 108). Such a technique allows phenomenological researchers to study topics they may be familiar with as though they were approaching it for the first time. This is why phenomenological researchers often speak of "discovering" the essence of their studied phenomenon (deMarrais 2004, 57). Therefore, phenomenology provided a proper framework to focus on the desired research topic and an avenue to properly research a topic I was personally familiar with.

My choice of case study methodology was first done because it was best suited to the research questions I was interested in asking. Because I was interested in studying youth's perception



after-school programs, qualitative research was necessary. This is because my interests were not in objective fact but rather subjective perception. Therefore, all data collected was subjective. This was not a weakness of the research conducted but rather a natural consequence of the questions that were inquired and studied. Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, and Pierre (2007) well-expressed qualitative research's embrace of subjectivity by saying,

In other words, qualitative data and information are always already interpretations made by participants as they answer questions or by researchers as they write up their observations. Neither research participants nor researchers can be neutral, because, as emphasized earlier, they are always positioned culturally, historically, and theoretically. (27)

This subjective nature of my line of inquiry necessitated qualitative research.

More specifically, the research questions chosen here were well-suited to case study methodology. Merriam (2001) says, "Thus a researcher selects a case study design because of the nature of the research program and the questions being asked. Case study is the best plan for answering the research questions; its strengths outweigh its limitations" (41). Case study methodology is best-suited to answer questions of "how" or "why" because such questions "deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence" (Yin 2014, 10). Furthermore, case studies best answer questions that involve multiple variables and complex social issues (Merriam 2001, 41). In this specific study, I sought to understand how four youth perceived the after-school program they were enrolled in. I found case study methodology to be best suited to explore such highly subjective and personal research interests.

Case study methodology was also useful in its ability to define limits to my research. Merriam (2001) describes case studies as focusing on "holistic description and explanation" (29). Because of the need to holistically describe, it is necessary to define limitations of the research case. This is often called bounding the case. Bounding is useful because only then is it possible to define data within the research and data outside of the research (Yin 2014, 33-34). I defined the case of this research project as the four participating youth and their perception of relationships gained in the after-school program. Because there are nearly an infinite number of directions that after-school program research could go (politically, economically, psychologically, ethically, educationally, etc.) case study methodology was useful in keeping a research focus.

Finally, case study methodology allowed me to define the aims of this study. Stake (1995) argues that the primary responsibility of a case study researcher is to understand the case (4). Still, that does not mean that the value of the research stops at the specific case. This study's aim is that the data gathered can provide insight into how youth more broadly perceive after-school programs. This is not the same as expecting generalization, which no sample of four can hope to achieve. Rather than generalization, it is the aim of case study research to provide deep, rich data sources which provide a degree of transferability outside of the case and drive further research in the field.

In addition to a phenomenological theoretical framework and case study methodology, another powerful influencer of this research was positive youth development (PYD). PYD aims to encourage youth to develop along a natural progression rather than stamp out negative behaviors. PYD believes that much of the capability for youth to progress is already within them rather than viewing youth as dependent on adults to “fix” them. Because of this, it is a view that empowers and values youth (Lerner et al. 2005). In recent years, researchers have seen numerous positive results when implementing PYD strategies (Catalano et al., 2004; Ciocanel et al. 2017; Larson 2000; Worker et al. 2019). PYD’s empowering message to youth along with these encouraging research findings make PYD a natural fit to be implemented into after-school programs. In fact, after-school program researchers often already speak in a language that seems to be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by PYD. For example, in a meta-analysis of literature on after-school groups, the Wyoming Department of Health (2012) said,

With the knowledge that young people are not yet adults, mentors should have respect for individual outlook and attitudes. Youth learn and grow in age-appropriate ways. Mentors should respect their mentee’s youthful perspectives and their need to have fun and engage in challenging activities; it is also important that each youth mentoring plan be designed based on goals and needs as defined by the mentee. (42)

While the study did not describe any connection or influence, its verbiage is clearly akin to PYD.

PYD is not only a natural fit to after-school programs in general but to this study specifically. This study aimed to learn how youth perceive the relationships they develop within after-school programs. From a PYD perspective, youth are to be viewed as capable of naturally progressing in their development rather than in need of being “fixed” by adults. This position places value and worth upon youth. If youth are to be so valued, it only seems natural that their perception should be a useful tool in after-school program research.

PYD is a rapidly growing field. One of the most important recent developments in PYD was the Lerner Model of Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al. 2005). In this model, the “5 C’s” of Positive Youth Development are laid out (caring/compassion, confidence, character, connection, and competence) which provided a framework for positive youth development programs and a definition of PYD goals. The Lerner Model of Positive Youth Development was then used to construct Bridge-PYD, a reliable instrument to measure growth in these “5C’s” (Lopez et al. 2015). This instrument opens exciting opportunities for reliable PYD program evaluation and the continuation of theoretical frameworks.

**Research Site.** The program studied is a privately funded faith-based after-school program located in a Midwest urban environment. The program began its first year with a single class of 16 sixth-grade students recommended by the local schools’ fifth grade teachers. Each school year, the program continued serving the original class and added a new sixth grade class. Consequently, it is now a sixth through twelfth-grade after-school program with approximately 16 (eight boys and eight girls) students per class. In addition to fifth-grade teacher recommendations, a recruitment criterion that emerged as the program grew was to give preference to legacy students that have an older sibling in the program. Youth of color are also emphasized during the selection process but not exclusively served. Youth are recruited during

the summer going into their sixth-grade year and remain in the program (assuming a standard of good behavior) through their twelfth-grade graduation. Programing centers on academic, social-emotional, behavioral, and spiritual needs of the youth.

The after-school program is divided by gender and grade, with each group consisting of approximately eight students. Each group is assigned a primary mentor that typically moves with them from grade to grade. The group's primary mentor is a full-time paid staff member. Other, part-time mentors also work within the program and are typically not assigned to a specific group. While the program model is for a primary mentor to remain with a group of youth from sixth through twelfth grade, there is some turnover of staff. Additionally, there are occasionally extenuating circumstances which require the transfer of a mentor or youth from one group to another. Because of this continual relationship with a single mentor and the selective nature of the program, a family-like environment is seen within many of the groups.

A central aspect to the program is academic support. While middle school youth in the program receive academic support after school, such a model was deemed unsustainable at the high school level because of increased conflicts for the youth's time. Consequently, high school youth in the program meet for academic assistance during the local high school's study hall period. While the program meets on school grounds during the school day, they are able to maintain a degree of autonomy from the general school population. Furthermore, this academic time represents a small fraction of the time that youth meet with mentors and other program staff. Therefore, the program is well within the broad definition of an after-school program provided above.

Outside of the school day, the high-school version of the program offers three basic activities: Shout-Out, Future Hopes and Dreams, and Final Destination. All grade levels participate in all three activities, which each happen on a different day of the week. Shout-out is a largely informal opportunity for the development of both youth-youth and youth-mentor relationships. Various games, activities, and snacks are provided in a semi-structured environment. Future Hopes and Dreams focuses on developing skills and a vision toward improving youth's future after high school. Youth often participate in job shadowing, go on college visits, hone writing skills, and engage in ACT preparation. Final Destination is the optional faith-based aspect of the program where youth are given opportunities to explore a non-denominational Christian faith. Rather than a traditional Bible study, Final Destination is most commonly a discussion format, focusing on contemporary issues and problems youth face but explored through the lens of Christian faith and scripture. Youth which decide to opt-out of Final Destination are offered alternative, secular activities. During this study, however, no youth to my knowledge opted for these alternative activities. Another unique aspect of the program is trips that are offered for both reward and enrichment. Throughout middle school and high school, youth have opportunities to participate in group trips to locations such as Pikes Peak, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Washington D.C. as well as individualized trips based on personal interests and potential career paths. The entire program, including the trips, is offered at no cost to the youth.

After-school events occur at three different locations. First, the primary facility of the program is located in the downtown section of the community among various storefronts and restaurants. It features an industrial-style design and contains a small basketball court, a dance hall, a non-

alcoholic bar area, billiard room, video gaming area, computers built into restaurant-style booths, several meeting areas, and a small movie theater room that seats approximately fifteen in plush recliner chairs. The primary facility not only hosts the after-school program but is open to youth in the public on weekends as a safe, supportive environment. Additionally, the facility is often rented out for various events and celebrations within the community. As the program grew, it saw a need for additional facilities. Consequentially, it expanded to a secondary location which is a short walk from the primary building. The secondary location is on the main street of the community and features two meeting rooms which seat approximately fifteen each, two kitchen areas which are often used by youth in culinary-related activities, and a larger meeting room for whole-program meetings. Finally, as the program grew into the high school level, staff decided that high school students often felt too old for the program facilities they had been at since their sixth-grade year and needed an alternative location to feel ownership of. A primary donor of the program was able to offer an auxiliary building on his property toward this purpose. This building features a basketball and volleyball court, four classrooms, and a kitchen. This location was the site of most observations, although high school youth do occasionally use the primary and secondary facilities described earlier. Collectively, the program is well supported by private donors in the community and able to offer excellent facilities to its enrolled youth.

**Sample.** In selecting a sample for this study, an original selection pool of seven was created. This pool was based on preliminary observations and input from program directors. While developing the original recruiting pool, efforts were made to achieve typicality with the program. Factors such as academic achievement, social-emotional development, motivation to utilize the program, and strength of relationships within the program were considered. Ninth grade was chosen as a potentially useful grade to study after feedback from program directors who felt as though it was a common grade to “lose” their youth due to increased opportunities for independence and competition for youth’s time after school. Of the initial selection pool of seven, one youth declined participation. Despite repeated efforts through phone calls, text messages, and postal mail, two parents proved unresponsive. The remaining four participants and their parents gave consent for participation in the study. All four participants were allowed to choose a pseudonym, which will be exclusively used throughout this paper. They are: Sadie, John, Jackson, and Donna.

**Measures.** Data collection for this study took place during the spring semester of the 2017-2018 school year. A primary means of data collection was weekly observations. Observations were conducted during the school’s study hall period, when youth met within their program groups for academic support. Additionally, observations were conducted at the program’s various facilities for Shout Out, Future Hopes and Dreams, and Final Destination programming. Observations were conducted on a weekly basis for the sixteen-week duration of the study. The length of each observation was somewhat dependent upon the activity that was observed that week. The in-school study hall period lasted 93 minutes, which was observed for its duration. Observation of Shout Out, Future Hopes and Dreams, and Final Destination lasted approximately two hours. Observations between the various activities were on a rotating basis. All observations were conducted from a researcher as participant perspective. Although such a perspective brings with it a risk of becoming too close to one’s participants and therefore influencing observable behavior, there were important benefits relevant to this study. As I personally knew many of the youth present in any given observation, it would have seemed unnatural for me to distance

myself from the group and abstain from whatever activities or conversation were going on. During each observation, I took minimal notes. Immediately after each observation, however, detailed field notes were taken. In addition to traditional field notes, a PARC profile (see Figure Two) for each present participant was completed. Collectively throughout the sixteen observations, 58 pages of observation notes (including PARC profiles) were taken.

More generally, researcher as participant observations enhance data collection and analysis methodology because of the augmented understanding of the participants and the culture around them. “The fieldworker who does not attempt to experience the world of the observed through participant observation will find it much harder to critically examine research assumptions and beliefs, and themselves” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 20). My participation in the after-school program’s activities or discussions on each observation further embedded me into the program’s culture and enhanced my data collection and analysis efforts. Participant observations also provide greater opportunities for researchers to review and edit their research questions and themes by providing, “intuitive moments when a selection of notes about events, people, and conversations comes together to provide us with a deeper insight and understanding of behavior” (23). In this study, observations provided me not only with detailed field notes and PARC profiles but opportunities to refocus the research question and findings at a depth that I do not think would have been possible without participant observations.

Another primary means of data collection was interview. First, a semi-structured group interview was scheduled. This was done in order to further clarify the goals of the study and secondly to familiarize youth with the interview process in a less intimidating environment. A small number of broad, less intimidating questions such as, “What do you think this after-school program is for?” were asked. While such questions were largely designed to make youth comfortable with the interview process, the interview was recorded, transcribed, coded, analyzed, and used along with individual interview data in the development of final conclusions for this paper.

In addition to the group interview, three individual interviews were conducted with each of the four participants. Because one youth was interviewed per week, each of the youth’s three interviews were spaced approximately four weeks apart. While four interviews per participant (one group and three individual interview) was a predetermined design of this study, an openness to do more or less interviews was always maintained. Participants were comfortable with a degree of flexibility in the study duration. Interviews were concluded when the participants and myself agreed that sufficient data was collected. Individual interviews were semi-structured in nature. While I went into the interview with topics interested in discussing, youth were allowed to take the conversation wherever they saw appropriate or important. This format was necessary because of my research interests. As I was researching youth perception of after-school programs, I needed to give youth the freedom to discuss their perception of relationships within the program in whatever context they found most important. The small number of questions I had prepared were largely broad, open-ended questions concerning what I had seen at recent observations. Follow-up comments such as, “Can you tell me more about that?” allowed participants to take the conversation in any way they saw most significant. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Throughout this study, 131 pages of interview transcriptions were transcribed.

The final individual interview was also used as a member check opportunity. Although I maintained a semi-structure format, allowing the participant to take the conversation any direction they saw fit, I used the time to also discuss the direction of my preliminary conclusions and seek input for corrections that needed to be made. The small number of prepared questions I prepared were largely follow-up questions to previous interviews or observations.

In order to promote productive interviews, two activities were planned to give youth material to discuss and instill confidence in the interview process. The first activity, which took place during the first individual interview was a social network web. Youth were simply asked to draw a web style graphic organizer of people they had personal relationships with. Afterwards, part of the interview focused on relationships that the youth saw as important, particularly those within the after-school program. The second activity was a photograph activity. During the group interview, youth were given a disposable camera and asked to spend the next week taking pictures of people, places, or things that were particularly important to them. While the resulting photographs were used as additional data, they were also used as a focal point of the second individual interview.

**Analysis.** Data collected in this study consisted of observation notes, interview data, PARC profiles, photographic data, journaling, and social network webs. Initial analysis of data often needed to be done on a short timeline. As interviews often focused on observation data, PARC profiles and observation notes needed to be coded and analyzed as part of preparation for the interview that week. All interview data was also recorded, transcribed, and preliminarily coded by the end of the week. As Saldaña (2009) suggested, all interviews were also coded after data collection (7). The first round of coding was used to see themes as they emerged while preparing for interviews. The second round of coding was used as an opportunity to see additional themes that were apparent with additional information or context gained throughout the study as well as to check for internal consistency by looking for disconfirming evidence or counter-examples. Throughout both rounds of coding, intense journaling was conducted, where thoughts, questions, and developing themes were recorded and later reviewed. In both first and second cycle coding, both descriptive coding, which Saldaña (2009) said, “summarizes the primary topic of the excerpt” and in vivo coding, which “is taken directly from what the participant himself says...” were utilized, with in vivo codes indicated with quotation marks (3). This was chosen so as to retain the participants’ natural vocabulary when possible but also retain the flexibility of using descriptive codes when participants were talking around an idea or lacked the vocabulary to fully express a thought in concise verbiage conducive to codes. Examples of descriptive codes commonly used include, “relationship building”, “personal growth”, “academic support”, and “socialization”. In vivo codes were short phrases or sentences taken directly from the interview transcript.

After both first and second cycle codes were completed, the themes which had emerged were analyzed and developed into “meta-themes” which demonstrated potential transferability. The process relied heavily on journaling, as many themes developed incrementally.

It is a commonly encouraged practice to conduct data analysis, particularly coding, collaboratively. This practice can push a group of researchers to further depth of analysis than

may have been possible alone and allows for researchers to act as a “reality check” throughout the data analysis process (Saldaña 2009, 27). As a solo research project, this collaboration was not available. There are, however, many steps solo researchers can take to ensure that the quality of data analysis is not compromised. First, Saldaña (2009) recommends that solo researchers discuss their data analysis progress with colleagues and mentors. This was a resource that was thankfully available to me. Throughout the research process, several colleagues and mentors were kept updated on the progress of my data collection and analysis, often providing suggestions and insight that proved useful. Ezzy (2002) recommends that solo researchers check their codes with the participants, conduct coding as interview data is transcribed, and continually journal regarding all steps of the research process (67-74). I used the final individual interview of this project as a member check, giving the participants an opportunity to provide feedback on my data analysis, including my coding. While some may scoff at the ability of high school students to provide useful feedback regarding professional research, I believe that this study, rooted in positive youth development and interested in youth perception, is committed to the belief that youth’s input has value. The member checks of this study provide valuable feedback, with one participant dramatically impacting the final themes developed within this study. As described earlier, two rounds of coding were conducted. The first round was conducted as soon as the interview data was transcribed. The second round took place after all interview data was collected and often acted as a check on myself, similar to what a collaborated coding effort might. Finally, throughout this research, detailed journaling took place. Often, emerging thoughts on developing codes or themes were the topic of journal entries before being fully realized in the study. See Figure Three for a visualization of this data analysis process.

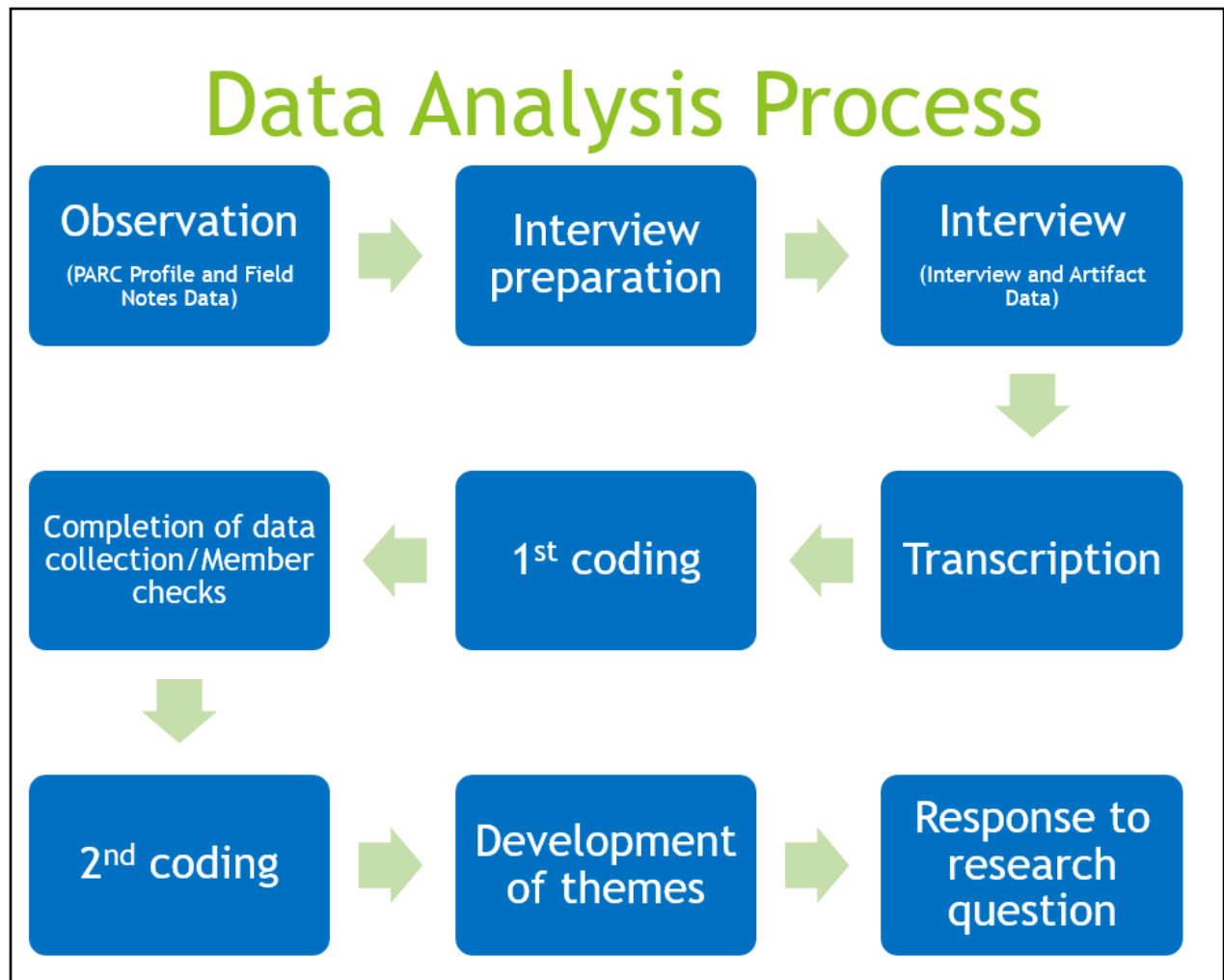


Figure 3. Visualization of data analysis

### Results

All four of the participants placed value on relationships within the program, but the youth relationship positionality (YRP), which can be thought of as the primary end to which youth seek relationships, differed widely. Sadie often spoke of seeking out the program for positive relationships and role models. John saw that the program was an opportunity for greater socialization and diversity of his personal relationships. For Jackson, the program was an opportunity to develop positive relationship and social skills. For Donna, the program was largely a source of entertainment and an opportunity to exercise relationships she already had (see Figure Four). Here I will provide data on each participant relevant to the research question:

How do youth in the after-school program perceive the value of the relationships created with mentors, youth, and other staff within the program?



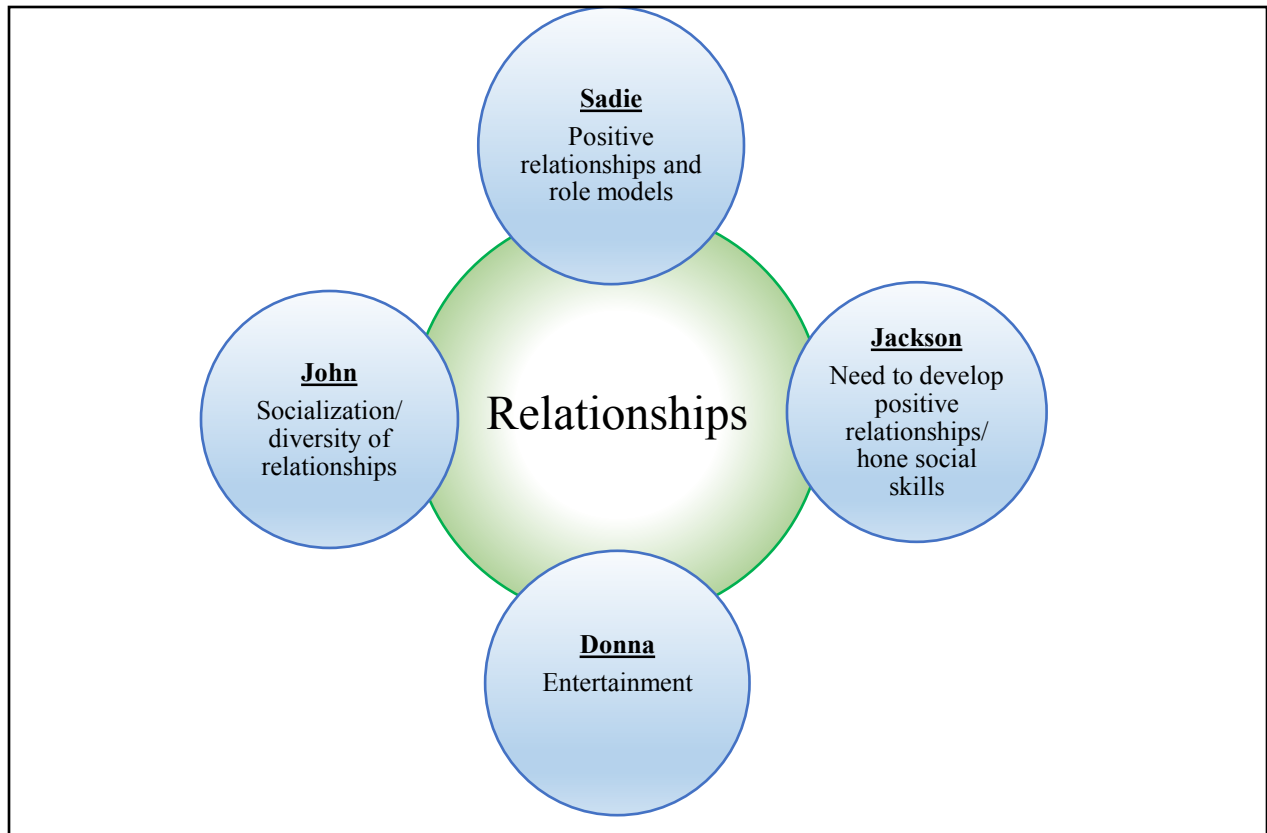


Figure 4. Four participant's perception and use of relationships in the after-school program.

**Sadie.** Sadie deeply valued the relationships she gained within the program largely as a consequence of her lack of personal relationships outside of the program. She reported that her father had not been, “in the picture a lot”. Of her mother she said, “I didn’t really have a connection with my mom” largely because she, “went away” much of her childhood. Consequently, her maternal grandparents largely raised her. Of her brothers, she reported a somewhat distant relationship. For example, while they were growing up, they often did not allow her to play with their neighborhood friends because she was a girl. Finally, she seemed to have a limited number of friendships outside of the program, as she indicated only two friends on her social network web that were neither family members nor in the after-school program. This lack of friendships was likely exacerbated by Sadie’s considerably shy personality. Sadie came to the after-school program to compensate for this lack of personal relationships. She said,

I feel like it’s mainly about creating another family, you know a family that you may not have outside like in your actual home, like you know, they give you people that you can talk to and if relationships with like your family aren’t really as good...

Sadie experienced this “family” environment with mentors and peers alike. She described her mentor as, “a great listener” that was always there for her. Additionally, she indicated on her social network web that several of her closest friendships were developed through the program.

Not only was Sadie aware of the after-school program’s ability to replace this deficit of relationships, she actively sought it out. The previous year, Sadie learned of an opening in the

program, a relatively rare occurrence. She then contacted the group's mentor and requested to be allowed into the program. This active pursuit of the program further emphasizes the importance of personal relationships within the program on Sadie's life. Not only did Sadie report success in developing relationships within the program, she also perceived that the positive relationships and socialization she experienced had encouraged her to improve her relationship with her mother.

**John.** Like Sadie, John approached relationships within the program as an opportunity to compensate for lack of relationships outside the program. John's lack of relationships, however, were due to an introverted nature that was more conscious and voluntary than Sadie's shyness and otherwise lack of relationships. John spoke of a major attribute of the program that it, "kind of forces me to be around people" as though he knew doing so was good for him but that he preferred not to. Additionally, John said, "Again, I was pretty quiet before joining and became closer to other people in it and I've started talking more and I'm not just the quiet guy I once was, although I'm still pretty quiet, just not as bad." Perhaps most significantly in this quote was the phrase, "just not as bad", indicating a value placed on socialization and a development of relationships through being less "quiet".

Interview, observation, and artifact data all indicated John's development of relationships within the program. One of the most consistent was that with Jackson, whom John took on a tutor role for during academic time. Of his relationship with Jackson, John said,

We talked a little bit before [his enrollment in the after-school program]. And then, he, we kind bonded more and he's been a pretty good friend. And we don't just talk in [the after-school program] anymore now. We actually talk outside of it. And that's pretty nice, you know? Like at school, you have those friends you just talk to at school, like, they're really just there so you're not bored. But, like, [Jackson], he's been a good friend over the past year or two, give or take.

While John had successfully developed relationships with his peers in the program and perceived them to be of value, John said, "...honestly, I like most of the mentors more than most of the kids". This was particularly true of the mentor of his group, whom John reported valuing his commitment to the group and ability to be a positive role model for him.

As an additional benefit, John valued the program's ability to build diversity in the relationships that he had. While he did have friendships outside of the program, he remarked, "I've made a couple more friends of people I wouldn't expect to be with if it wasn't for this". He also noted that he thought it was good for him to add diversity to the types of people he had personal relationships with.

**Jackson.** Understanding Jackson's perception of the relationships gained through the after-school program proved to be the most difficult of the four participants in this study. Clearly Jackson came to the after-school program in need of personal relationships. Indeed, the only non-family members that Jackson decided to draw a direct link to on his social network web were those he had met at the after-school program. Of his peers in the program, he explained, "We were like family and stuff like that", and he said that he had a, "close relationship" with his

mentor. Furthermore, Jackson perceived that these relationships developed within the program led to development and positive outcomes. Most notably was his relationship with John, which largely began based on John's willingness to provide academic support to Jackson. Not only did a friendship ensue, but Jackson credited John's support with much of his academic success.

Much of my observation data, however, revealed a secondary benefit aside from filling a void of lack of personal relationships, such as what Sadie experienced. The after-school program seemed to provide Jackson an opportunity to practice social interactions and hone social skills. At times, Jackson seemed to misread personal relationships. For example, my observation data never indicated a positive interaction between Jackson and the youth which he described multiple times as his best friend. During multiple observations, Jackson's peers would casually interact in an age appropriate manner, and Jackson would retreat to his phone. Finally, while Jackson claimed to have a close relationship with his mentor as well as a former mentor he had developed a relationship with, he was unable to distinguish personal characteristics between the two that he specifically appreciated.

While my observation data indicated that Jackson benefited from opportunities to practice social interactions, he proved able to only indirectly express this benefit. The most telling example was on our final interview. As I did with all participants, I presented Jackson with two identical stick figures and explained that the first represented him five years from now having gone through the after-school program. The second represented him five years from now having not experienced the after-school program. I asked him how the two figures were different. He responded that the first figure was more willing to accept help from others because he had grown accustomed to doing so, particularly during the program's academic time. While perhaps not a perfect marker of improved social skills as a result of the after-school program, the ability to accept help from others at least shows a partial perception of the social benefit that the program provided Jackson.

**Donna.** Donna's perception of her relationships in the after-school program was the most unique of the four participants. This was largely because more so than any of the other three participants, Donna had alternative sources for relationships outside of the program. She was a successful athlete at her school, had a boyfriend during the time of this study, and was generally seen as popular among her peers. While Donna reported a robust social network outside of the program, she also reported the smallest number of personal relationships within the program on her social network web. These relationships, however, were intense. She described two of the three peers that were involved in the after-school program and she included on her social network web as her "best friend". She was rarely seen at program activities without at least one of these friends. It's telling that these two "best friends" were both friends with Donna before she started the after-school program. While Donna appreciated the relationships she had within the program, her first thoughts when asked about personal relationships were usually to those outside of it. For example, when asked why she rarely attended the after-school program in sixth grade, she responded, "Because I would rather be out with my friends". Her reference to "my friends" was telling because it referred to those outside of the program.

In addition to her peers, Donna also did not experience an especially close relationship with her mentor within the program. While she did appreciate her mentor's younger age in comparison to a previous mentor, she failed to connect with her in a meaningful way. Donna said of her

mentor, “she kind of annoys me” and described her mentor’s periodic academic checks as “ambushes”. That coupled with her occasional conflicts with her mentor, one of which happened during the time of this study over Donna’s unwillingness to put her cellphone away during a Shout Out activity, demonstrated that Donna maintained a distant relationship with most youth and mentors alike.

Rather than the development of a large number of meaningful relationships, Donna perceived the after-school program more as an opportunity to exercise relationships she had developed outside of the program than an opportunity to develop new relationships. While she valued those relationships, this made the after-school program a source of entertainment for Donna rather than an opportunity to develop relationships that she wouldn’t have otherwise had access to. This is why she described the program as, “something to do I guess. At least I’m not bored at home”. Her relationships (and the program more generally) were largely a means of recreation.

## **Discussion**

The findings here fit well into existing literature on relationships within after-school programs. It is largely supportive of the Rhodes Model of Youth Mentoring. Three of the four participating youth (Sadie, John, and Jackson) developed relationships with their mentors which could be characterized by, “mutuality, empathy, and trust” (Rhodes, 2005). As the Rhodes Model would predict, those three youth each saw social/emotional, cognitive, and identity development based on those relationships. Perhaps most encouragingly, Sadie demonstrated not only that social/emotional development is capable of generalizing into improved relationships outside the program (as the Rhodes Model suggest) but that youth can be cognizant of this process. She specifically credited relationships gained within the after-school program as being the foundation of an improved relationship with her mother. Also, in support of the Rhodes Model, Donna, the one student which observation, interview, and artifact data suggested had failed to develop strong relationships in the program, perceived to experience little development in the program and little impact by relationships within the program. These results in totality not only support the Rhodes Model but suggest that youth are often highly perceptive of their development within the program.

These results are also supportive of the Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Role of Comprehensive After-school Centers in Youth Development (PARC Profile). Interview, observation, and artifact data were able to demonstrate not only the important role that relationships can play in youth’s development but the complementary nature of a program, activity, relationship, and culture within a specific after-school context.

Beyond the existing PARC Profile, data collected here suggested that youth can approach relationships within after-school programs from vastly different positionalities. These respective positionalities can have a strong impact on their eventual outcomes within the program. Sadie approached relationships in the after-school program as a way to compensate for a lack of personal relationships and role models. Jackson utilized relationships in the after-school program as a way to further develop social skills. John saw the after-school program primarily as a means of achieving socialization and overcoming his introverted nature. Donna saw the after-school program as an opportunity to engage in relationships that she largely had outside of

the program. These four positionalities which the youth approached relationships in the program through dramatically impacted the types of relationships youth were seeking and the development which they perceived to be realizing through the program. For example, Donna, seeking recreation through relationships in the program, was considerably less likely to develop a meaningful relationship with a mentor or new youth-youth relationships. Given this, it is not surprising that she also perceived to be realizing the least positive outcomes associated with relationships within the after-school program. In fact, at times Donna spoke negatively of her relationships with both her peers and mentor within the program. Conversely, Sadie, who very consciously sought out the program in order to compensate for a lack of personal relationships and role models outside the program, was prone to viewing her mentor as a role model. Not surprisingly, Sadie was able to develop a strong relationship with her mentor, which she credited toward helping her also improve her relationship with her mother. The vast difference in these outcomes are primary due to the relationship positionalities with which the youth approached the after-school program.

This data suggests that greater specificity within the PARC profile through subcategories of relationship positionalities is needed. This will allow for more detailed consideration of the relationship positionalities which youth approach after-school programs with and therefore the specific outcomes they are most likely to realize. Given the existing literature which suggests the prominent role which relationships play in youth outcomes in after-school programs, refinement of program practices based on the specific youth relationship positionalities (YRP) would be prudent. Based on each of my four participants' YRP demonstrated in Figure Four, I have added subcategories to the PARC profile (Figure Two). See Figure Five for a specified PARC profile of after-school programs.

These findings have practical, as well as theoretical implications. Relationships have widely been demonstrated to be key to realizing positive youth outcomes in after-school programs (Brady, Dolan, and Canavan 2017; Deutsch and Jones 2008; Deutsch and Spencer 2009; Hirsch, Deutsch, and DuBois 2011; Rhodes 2005). What has been thus far given less attention is the positionalities which youth approach after-school program relationships with. Youth relationship positionalities (YRP) should be given careful consideration when selecting youth into after-school programs, pairing youth with mentors, and designing youth-mentor programming because of YRP's ability to maximize or negate the potential benefits that a mentor-mentee relationship can provide. If, for example, an after-school program was trying to pair a youth like Sadie, who was deeply seeking a positive role model, with a mentor, they would be well advised to find someone who had the time, ability, and resources to commit to a deep, meaningful relationship. Additionally, programming which emphasizes one on one time with mentors might be ideal. Youth with a YRP similar to Jackson, on the other hand, may thrive in larger group activities that allow them to practice and observe social skills. When pairing a youth with a similar YRP to John with a mentor, more emphasis might be placed on finding a mentor that is capable of sustaining the relationship until the youth grows comfortable with him or her and designing programming that encourages socialization and personal interaction. Finally, program directors would likely need to be realistic about the potential for positive youth development when taking on a youth with a YRP similar to Donna. Difficult decisions about maximizing the effectiveness of finite program resources would likely need to take place. Youth with a YRP

similar to Donna might well thrive, however, if given opportunity to bridge their existing social group to new ones within the program.

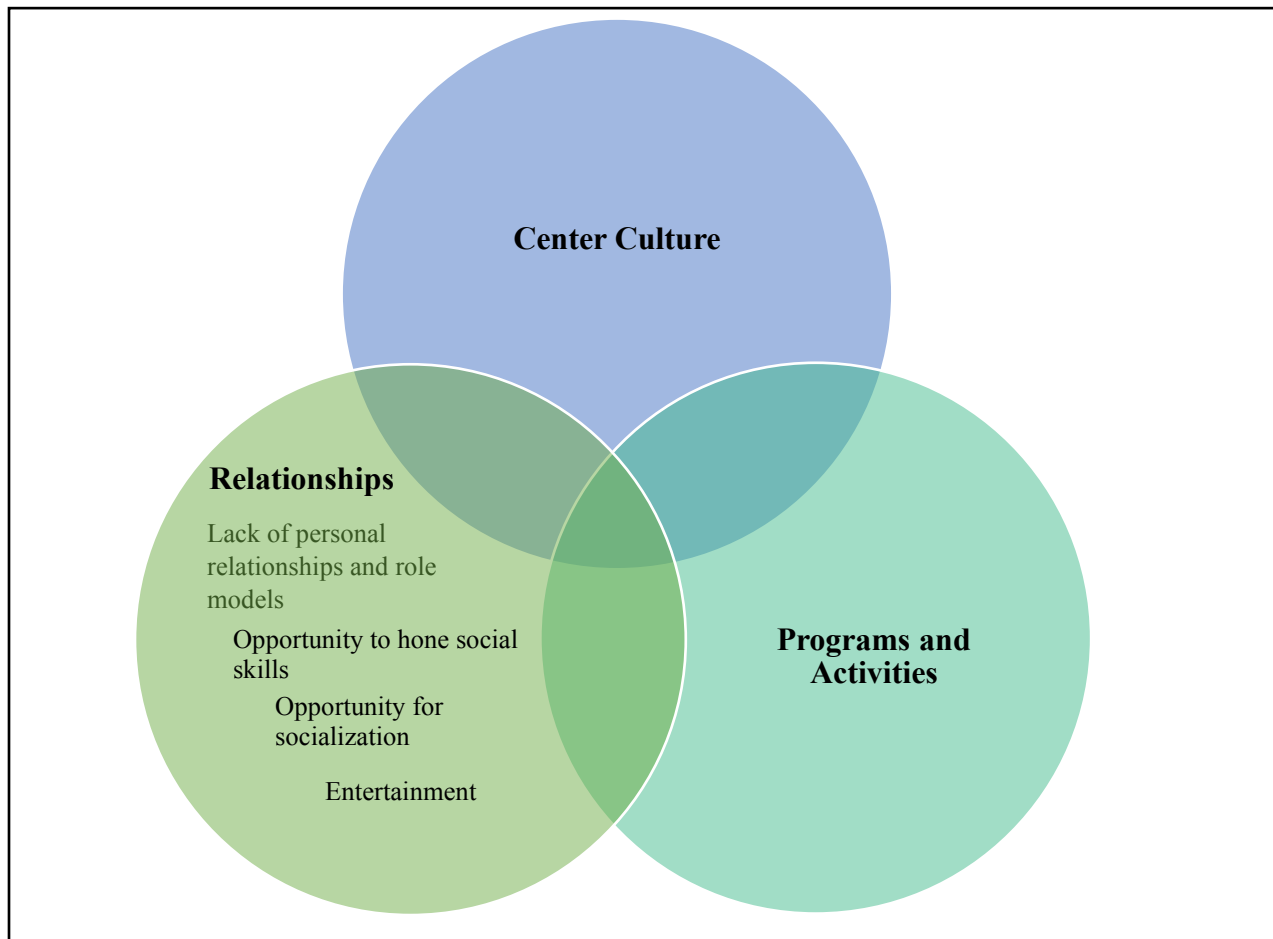


Figure 5. Specified PARC profile of after-school programs

It is also noteworthy that data collected here suggest that youth often perceive peer-peer relationships to be equally important toward their development and positive outcomes as a result of the program as those with mentors. For example, Jackson credited his relationship with John as an important factor in his cognitive development (and therefore positive outcome of improve academic performance). Therefore, these results warrant greater representation of peer-peer relationships in my specified conceptual framework.

This study was not without limitations. First, the research focus of this study was on youth perception of after-school program relationships. It is entirely possible that the participating youth lacked maturity, context, or insight to sufficiently discuss the impact that relationships within the program were having on them. Triangulation of methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods) is needed into order to support the use of youth perceptions. Secondly, the study was conducted over an academic semester. It is possible that a longer study might have been able to see relationships develop in a way that might have provided greater insight relevant to the study. Next, this study was equally interested in youth-mentor

relationships as it was youth-youth relationships. More data is needed to determine if the development of these two types of relationships are equally significant in an after-school context. While data collected here suggested the important role youth-youth relationships can play in youth development, more research is needed to fully understand their role in particular. Finally, I have provided four subcategories to the PARC profile based on the four participants here. Further research is needed, perhaps based on grounded theory, to determine if these four subcategories are sufficient.

## Conclusions and Recommendations for Future Research

Greater understanding concerning relationships within after-school programs, how youth perceive them, and their implications on outcomes associated with after-school programs are needed. Interview, observation, and artifact data collected here have demonstrated not only the central role that relationships play in after-school programs but that youth are often perceptive of these developments. Additionally, based on the four distinct positionalities that youth approach after-school program relationships from, greater specificity to current conceptual frameworks are needed. For this reason, I have suggested the Specified PARC Profile of After-school Programs (Figure Five).

The stakes are high here. Much of the existing empirical evidence and theoretical models place relationships as a central determining factor in youth development within after-school programs. As after-school programs continue to expand, more research is needed to understand the role of relationships within programs in order to determine best practices and optimize the potential benefits of after-school programs.

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