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### Adults Perspectives on Past Youth Program Experiences

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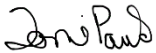
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Preparation time is never wasted time no matter how long it takes or how short the appointment. For those of us who get frustrated with preparing, look at Jesus Christ. He prepared 30 years for a 3.5-year ministry that will ring on in eternity.

## ABSTRACT

The study of youth development is a massive field that encompasses admirable literature and notable research. However, investigating past youth experiences through a work setting that promoted advancement in education, experience, and character through elevated youth roles and responsibilities provided a unique lens that could enlarge the field of youth development. This study, which focused on 12 former staff experiences in Thornton Township youth programs, addressed a literature gap. Although the literature on youth development, youth employment, mentoring, community, and positive youth development (PYD) was reviewed, the combined concepts of work and matriculation through adulthood could not be identified. A thorough analysis of qualitative data revealed three themes related to learning, training, and development; leadership; and culture. The conclusions drawn from participants' experiences related back to the literature. The strongest conclusion involved the impact of participants' experiences with meeting higher standards as adults in the programs. The novelty of this specific research led to several recommendations for further study.



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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Becoming an adult involves being responsible for many things, and although most parents likely do their best preparing their children, community assistance can tremendously impact lives. This study was an exploration of how matriculation through after-school and summer programs impacted youth. The problem statement is presented along with the purpose statement. The researcher reviewed the literature to explore the background of youth development, mentoring, community programs, and positive youth development. After the section on background information, the research question is clearly stated, followed by a description of the significance of the study and the methodology. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary and a description of one relevant term. Matriculation is used to explain the process of being promoted from one role to another.

#### Statement of the Problem

Many organizations and programs exist to help youth and young adults gather skills and training needed to shift seamlessly into adulthood. The U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration alone offers four large programs for this purpose (U.S. Department of Labor, 2021). In addition, organizations such as the Boys & Girls Club (2021) and Big Brothers & Big Sisters (Dewit et al., 2020) offer a plethora of programs, including mentoring services designed to help youth attain their goals. The Young Men's Christian Association (2021) also encourages camp attendees to continue in the program as leaders-in-training. However, at the start of this study, the researcher was unable to identify any formal work

programs with the goal of ambulating with youth and young adults as they develop beyond college. Helping youth and young adults develop, especially Black youth, is crucial for a transition to healthy adulthood (Pinckney, Outley, Brown, Stone, & Manzano-Sánchez, 2019). The researcher partnered with a community agency that works aggressively to develop youth and young adults.

Thornton Township was a local governmental organization that served residents in 17 municipalities in South Suburban Cook County ([www.thorntontownship.com](http://www.thorntontownship.com), 2020). Over 180,000 residents had access to a variety of services through this organization. These included:

- disability services for activities, outings, transportation;
- financial and resource assistance;
- food assistance;
- real estate taxes;
- recordkeeping and governmental liaisons;
- senior services for activities, exercises, lawn care, outings, and transportation; and
- youth and family services for mental health, social, and academic services.

Three programs of the youth and family services department were the focus of this study.

Although characteristics of the programs aligned with much of the literature and practices were evidence-informed, they were not necessarily evidence-based. This meant that practitioners had gathered research to develop programming (Pinckney & Outley, et al, 2019). Since 2004, this researcher has worked as the primary developer for the three programs involved in the study. This included staff experiences from the summer enrichment program (SEP), the after-school program (ASP), and the days in the park (DIP) program. The SEP was an 8-week character

development program focused on science, technology, engineering, and math for children and youth ages 7 to 13. The program creatively engaged youth in science, technology, engineering, and math projects 6 hr per day, Monday through Thursday. The ASP typically operated from October to May for third through eighth graders needing homework help, scholastic development, and social interaction. The DIP offered community events in local parks where Thornton Township residents received food, soft drinks, entertainment, and information about services.

The three programs were closely intertwined, and staff typically crossed over and worked within each of them, especially between SEP and ASP. The organization characterized all positions as seasonal, although several staff members worked continuously for years from one program to another. Approximately seven positions existed for staff with unique qualifications for each one. The positions were created to work best for the programs and to induce a sense of promotion upon meeting certain qualifications. Youth clients were 7–13-year-old children with Thornton Township residences. The seven positions were as follows:

- Volunteers (unpaid). Thornton Township residents aged 14–15 years who assisted in facilitating the program while being trained to hold a paid position upon turning 16 years old and maintaining a B semester average.
- Floaters (paid). Typically Thornton Township residents ages 16 to 21 who helped maintain the facilities and supplies needed for the programs.
- Assistants (paid). Typically Thornton Township high school and college students ages 16 to 21 who instructed participants of ASP and SEP or facilitated services for DIP.

- Assistant leader/coordinator (paid). Thornton Township high school or college students who were at least 16 years old (with previous experience in at least one program) who helped lead assistants.
- Instructors (paid). Typically, Thornton Township residents with a minimum of a bachelor's degree and 2 years of instructor experience who led a classroom of youth.
- Head instructor (paid). Thornton Township residents with a minimum of a bachelor's degree, instructor experience, and previous experience with programs who oversaw program curriculum.
- Site coordinators (paid). Typically, Thornton Township residents with a minimum of a bachelor's degree and supervisory experience who oversaw the program in some capacity.
- Office assistants (paid). Thornton Township high school and college students ages 16 and up with a B semester average who demonstrated a strong work ethic in a previous role and who helped with administrative tasks.
- Office coordinator (paid). Thornton Township residents with a minimum of a bachelor's degree and a strong work history with the programs who helped administrate the programs.

Each program year, site and office coordinators helped to plan the program and adapt to address the community's needs. These individuals made changes based on observations and surveys. Depending on the program set-up, extensive training occurred that involved learning the program manuals, intensive role-playing, practicing program facilitation, and a written test.

The administration focused heavily on developing and equipping youth and young adult staff to mature into viable adults. Life skills played an integral part in all nondegree positions. The organization offered a staff mentoring program focused on many areas such as communication, finances, career choices, living intentionally, emotion management, relationships, and work performance.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of adults who had matriculated through Thornton Township's Youth and Family Services (TTYFS) as youth and young adults. In this study, the process of individuals progressing through the youth and family department is referred to as matriculation.

### Background

Much of the support young adults receive stops at a vital time when significant changes are still occurring in the mind and body (Hochberg & Konner, 2020). The 4–6 years between adolescence and adulthood represent a vital period when maturation continues to occur. Erikson and Erickson (1998) termed this period prolonged adolescence. Providing support during this phase is a complex task involving several components that researchers have developed into theories and approaches (Jones, Feigenbaum, & Jones, 2021). In addition to youth development, this researcher reviewed mentoring, community programs, youth employment, and positive youth development (PYD) literature to gain an understanding in the field.

Youth development is a broad subject in which, outside of school, many tools, resources, and practices are used to help youth succeed (Youth development, 2013). However, studies that focused solely on youth development, such as those included in the Youth Development section of this literature review were more relevant than studies that simply involved youth and

development. Three studies, specifically (Jones et al., 2021; Pinckney & Outley et al., 2019; Weybright, Trauntvein, & Deen, 2017) exhibited solid data for practitioners to help them develop youth into self-sufficient adults. These studies demonstrated the value of having evidence-based or evidence-informed data to develop youth. Jones et al. (2021) particularly focused on the importance of youth employment.

Researchers view youth employment as beneficial because it offers opportunities for youth to develop acquired skills, behaviors, character, and life skills (Graves, Mackelprang, Barbosa-Leiker, Miller, & Li, 2016; Rauscher, Wegman, Wooding, Davis, & Junkin, 2012). Additionally, researchers have shown youth employment helps to the degree that a high quality of living is maintained while working and not hindering psychosocial development. The researcher was unable to locate relevant and recent peer-reviewed research on youth employment in the United States. The four studies included in the literature review, although older than desired, contributed to the knowledge of youth employment. However, research on mentoring was more readily available.

The presence of nonparental adults in the lives of youth can help deter risky behavior, emotional rollercoasters, and substance abuse (Raposa, Erickson, Hagler, & Rhodes, 2018). These relationships are not only vital for reducing undesired behavior and occurrences, but also for attracting positivity such as healthy identity development and sound future decision-making. From the research, the importance of nonparental youth–adult relationships became clearer. The most common form of nonparental youth–adult relationship is likely mentoring; however, although mentoring represents a notable endeavor, typical mentoring relationships also have drawbacks. Raposa and Erickson, et al. (2018) also mentioned the notion of natural mentoring.



Natural mentoring of youth consists of relationships that develop along a natural path (Dam et al., 2018). Although this form of mentoring lacks the structure of more formal mentoring, it conforms more to real-life relationships. Raposa et al. (2018) reasoned that natural mentoring is even more potent than formulated mentoring because both parties choose the relationship rather than being formally assigned to it. Raposa et al. also stated that these relationships last longer and are more resilient than those in arranged mentoring. The benefits extend in finances, car and homeownership, high school completion, higher education attendance, and gainful employment (Timpe & Lunkenheimer, 2015). Research included in this study revealed that formal and natural mentoring can be powerful tools for developing youth.

Community also plays an essential role in youth development (Buzinde, Foroughi, & Godwyll, 2018). For example, the U.S. government reported that community programs such as after-school programs had 10.2 million youth participants in 2014 (Youth.gov, 2021). Buzinde et al. asserted that youth development and community development are connected through principles, natural processes, and practices. The authors showed that pedagogical tools like image theater can be used to develop healthier communities and youth by engaging the critical thinking skills needed for social action and growth. Deeper submersion into the role of community has helped to annunciate why it should be included in the topic of youth development.

As briefly discussed, youth development involves multiple offshoots, all with the task of leading youth to viable adulthood. Having a solid approach to youth development can empower practitioners to utilize effective frameworks and models (Leman, Smith, & Petersen, 2017). Positive youth development is a theoretical and methodical framework that has been widely used

by well-known community programs such as 4-H. PYD has been used worldwide and in diverse settings with youth, including the United States, Columbia, South Africa, and Europe. Lerner, Eye, Lerner, Lewin-Bizan, and Bowers (2010) contributed significantly to understanding the application of PYD by showing youth and communities progress when PYD is used. Benefits include greater involvement in the community and youth's increased satisfaction with their lives and use of skills. Researchers have also associated PYD with what is termed the five Cs: competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring (Robinson, Esters, Dotterer, Mckee, & Tucker, 2012). Some have criticized the use of PYD with youth of color (Pinckney et al., 2019; Timpe, 2017). However, more studies displayed the benefits of PYD (Ciocanel, Power, Eriksen, & Gillings, 2016; Ersan & Rodriguez, 2021).

The literature review offers a deeper exploration of each area (i.e., youth development, youth employment, mentoring, the role of community, and PYD) to provide a broader understanding of youth development. All five areas of evaluation were thought to have played a role in staff experiences within TTYFS. However, the researcher surmised that posing a broad research question would allow participants to openly share without being led.

### Research Question

The central research question guiding this study was: What are the experiences of participants who worked in the youth programs in more than one role for more than one season?

### Significance of the Study

This study could expand the field of youth development and community sustainability overall. More specifically, learning about the experience of young adults who have matriculated through TTYFS' programs could increase understanding to help youth develop into viable

adults. Within their experiences, participants gave their perceptions of what did and did not work well, which represented invaluable information. The study of youth development through employment and educational and positional growth could also help researchers and practitioners understand how to better use employment to aid in youth development. This study may help enhance communities as other agencies use the program as a model to boost youth employment. It could also provide insight on engaging youth and increasing the likelihood of academic and social health into adulthood. Lastly, an ancillary significance of the study may be community sustainability. The concept of intentionally building positive, engaging relationships with youth and sustaining those relationships into adulthood could potentially change communities. These relationships can encourage social change within the community. This researcher chose to complete this study because of a firm belief in the need for more emphasis on intentionally developing healthy communities. This researcher desired to be a part of the work within communities and wanted research-based information on how to do so.

A plethora of research existed on mentoring and community programs, but the unique advantage of this study was the matriculation component. Moshuus and Eide (2016) suggested that long-term studies aid in illuminating a larger picture. Although this study was not longitudinal, the adults being studied shared experiences from previous engagement with the programs. Their progression in roles resembled that of formal education. Though not applicable in all societies, American society has benefited significantly from its emphasis on formal education (Dudin, Bezbakh, Frolova, & Galkina, 2018).

## Overview of Methodology

The desire to know more about the participants' experiences made a phenomenological approach the best choice for this study. Thirty-nine individuals were identified using convenience sampling based on the following criterion: at least 18 years old and involved in the identified program in at least two capacities (i.e., participant and volunteer, volunteer and assistant, assistant and instructor). Convenience sampling was chosen to recruit participants as efficiently as possible. A more purposeful sampling could be performed with future research on this topic. Phenomenological studies can have as few as three participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and as many as needed to reach data saturation. Therefore, this researcher included the results of 12 participants who were recruited after securing permission from the organization to complete this study with former staff of three youth programs. After obtaining written permission, potential participants were contacted via email. The researcher sent email requests for participation three times over a period of approximately three weeks. Each participant completed informed consent forms before data collection began.

Interviews serve as the primary data collection tool used in phenomenological studies because of the wealth of data that can be gathered from open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Collecting data via individual and focus group interviews allowed the researcher to better examine the phenomenon in question. Due to the researcher's need to maintain active contact with 11 of the 12 participants, a professional was hired to complete all interviews. Permission to complete the study was granted by Olivet Nazarene University's Institutional Review Board.

After interested candidates responded to the initial phone call, the researcher sent an email with instructions along with an informed consent that required an electronic signature.

Upon receiving the signed informed consent forms, the researcher scheduled an appointment between the participant and the interviewer. An interview protocol was used resembling that suggested by Creswell (2009). Additionally, the sessions were video and audio recorded. A hired interviewer also facilitated four focus groups for a total of 16 interviews.

Several things occurred to ensure the validity and credibility of the results. An intercoder agreement was used between this researcher and the interviewer. Collaboration took place with the study participants. The researcher invited the participants to view the initial data analysis and make comments and suggestions, member checking the themes and the order of the themes. Data collection lasted for over 2 months. This study aligned with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation that phenomenological studies be extensive. Triangulation between researcher and interviewer also took place. All information deemed pertinent was reported, including that which may have been considered negative or disconfirming. Any field issues that arose were addressed professionally and promptly.

Phenomenological studies allow researchers to dive into the data on the current phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2021) in order to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (p. 75). Creswell and Poth explained that, unlike ethnographic research, participants in phenomenological studies are heterogeneous in that they do not come from one group but have experienced the same phenomenon at some point. They added that interviews serve as the primary source of data collection for phenomenological studies, and researchers can perform document analysis if it confirms participants' experiences.

Phenomenological research has strengths and limitations. Van Manen (2016) identified these strengths :

- It focuses on the original encounters of the participants with the phenomenon.
- It helps to adopt and strengthen an embodied ontology, epistemology, and axiology of thoughtful and tactile action” (p. 15).

Creswell and Poth (2018) also detailed the benefits of phenomenology:

- Researchers can choose which type best fits their study.
- It draws out the essence of the occurrence.

Conversely, Van Manen (2016) explained that one main challenge to phenomenological research involves the significant amount of reflection required to capture the phenomena adequately. The author also claimed that the very process of writing about a phenomenon diminishes it.

This researcher had significant bias on this topic because they developed the program under study. In 2003, this researcher perceived a need in the community for more youth skill development. As a result, this researcher developed opportunities for young people to acquire experience, skills, and mentoring. Hundreds of youths have worked with the three programs, and dozens have matriculated through them. Each year, several former staff return to share their success stories. Those encounters prompted this formal research on the topic. The researcher aimed for this preliminary study to lead to more research on program effectiveness. Due to the high risk of bias, the researcher added extra validation to ensure a high standard of ethics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This researcher hired a professional for the interviews and theme

checking and performed member checking with transcripts and themes. Finally, this researcher bracketed through journaling and mentorship.

There were no major risks to the participants nor any unintentional harm to the participants. A minimal risk involved the participants' awareness of one another's thoughts and emotions. This may have provoked a sense of embarrassment. However, during the focus group, participants were asked to be sensitive to one another, to keep the contents of the group confidential, and to sign a group confidentiality agreement. As mentioned above, electronic informed consent was obtained before involvement. The researcher protected the participants' identities by asking them to select aliases. Participants' feedback led to minor changes in the themes and analyses.

### Summary

The information presented for this phenomenological study of how matriculation through after-school and summer programs impacted youth has great potential to help the community. Much research had been completed on youth development, but little research had been completed on adults who had progressed from youth in roles in one organization. Communities could be strengthened and stabilized by the information uncovered in this study. The completion of a phenomenological study with 12 participants provided an opportunity for information on the topic to be saturated. The topic was explored in greater depth during the literature review, further validating the need for this study.

### Description of Terms

The term *matriculation* was used to refer to the process of participants moving up to the next role in any of the three programs. Matriculation is often associated with education, more specifically, medical school (Keith & Hollar, 2012).



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

This literature review was performed to describe and analyze the extant literature relevant to youth development, youth employment, youth mentorship, the role of community, and the PYD framework. The findings of this literature review supported the need for additional research on youth development programs, as previous research indicated that nonparental, youth–adult relationships benefited youth development (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2004). In youth–adult relationships, adults provide educational and career opportunities that youth need as they move into adulthood (Raposa, Ben-Eliyahu, Olsho, & Rhodes, 2018), and these relationships can be successfully developed within the community. However, Western culture and policy do not place significant emphasis on youth development, resulting in fewer opportunities for youth–adult relationships to develop within the community (Jarret et al., 2004). Therefore, a need existed to explore how formal youth development programs, such as skill development through on-the-job training, community involvement, and adult mentorship, impact youth transition into healthy adulthood. The literature review began with a description and analysis of literature relevant to youth development, including skill development. Next, the researcher presented previous studies and information on youth employment. Third, youth mentoring was explored to highlight the various types of youth mentorships. Next, the role of community produced a richer review because of the heavy focus in the last two decades on implementing strong evidence-based programs within communities (Massetti, Holland, & Gorman-Smith, 2016). The programs can vary significantly in scope. However, youth programs saturate many communities. Research focused on adults who matriculated from youth or young adulthood through one community

program may share common goals with other research topics. However, the exceptional idea here involved the study of youth programs that supported youth as they developed through work into adults. These programs aimed to fill the community with healthy, well-adjusted adults. Because the researcher failed to locate research on similar programs, the review of literature focused on youth development, youth employment, mentoring, the role of community, and the framework of PYD.

### **Youth Development**

Overall, this literature review occurred under the large umbrella of youth development. The transition from youth to adulthood represents a critical time for youth because behavior can be risky during this time; thus, young people need guidance to help them transition into healthy adulthood (Manuel et al., 2018). However, this section addressed research that focused keenly on youth development and not features of it. In addition to general information about youth development, this segment includes three analyses conducted by researchers who took different approaches to the same issue.

Often, people begin working in youth programs because of the compassion they have for youth and society. Although this is admirable, it may not be enough. In a study on incorporating evidence-based practices into faith-based programs, Terry et al. (2015) showed the impact of evidence-based programs. Youth need encouragement and confidence to help them meet their life goals (Manuel et al., 2018). Keeping youth hopeful about the future could help them remain focused on their dreams long enough to fulfill them. How youth view their own abilities impacts how they perform socially and scholastically (Deane, Harré, Moore, & Courtney, 2016). A look at the first 3 decades of life revealed that hope for the future wanes between the ages of 7 and 26 (Callina et al., 2017). Youth can get lost in between youth and adulthood.

Overlapping and distinct differences appeared in three youth development studies. In the first, Pinckney and Outley et al. (2019) performed a mixed-methods study to examine youth development through a social justice lens. The authors showed Black youth who had experienced racial inequity benefited from rites of passage (ROP) youth development programs that focused on “factors such as racism, helping youth heal through engagement in culturally appropriate programs and services, and assisting them in developing a critical consciousness for moving forward” (Ginwright as cited in Pinckney & Outley et al., p.174). Youth develop through ROP by intentionally acknowledging they are separating from a previous stage, enduring a period of change or metamorphosis, and reconnecting to another identity by means of a formal ceremony. Youth ages 8 to 18 from 10 ROP programs throughout the United States were found to share common characteristics. They each used a previously established perspective; they included the three phases; they used a formal curriculum, the adults were formally trained to work with youth; there was a ceremony for reconnecting to the new identity; youth were presented as a new adult after Phase 3, and the programs evaluated themselves. The main interpretation of the data was that significant benefit arose from going past PYD to preparation for a world where they may encounter inequalities and discrimination.

In the second analysis on youth development, Jones et al. (2021) examined the interconnectedness of motivation, achievement, and development. More specifically, the authors examined how meeting youth’s internal needs often changed their motivation from external to internal, which led to achievements that ended in PYD. Jones et al. focused on the organization Youth Enrichment Services (YES) and their four-component model for youth development. The program, geared primarily toward Black youth, helped youth establish trust and rapport by caring for basic needs such as food and belongingness. The second part of the model emphasized youth

gaining understanding of their competence through employment and career exploration. The third component of the model involved building autonomy in youth by helping them get involved in significant community projects. In the final phase, youth became mentors and advocates. The authors proposed that by the time youth entered the fourth phase, they had shifted from external to internal motivators. As a result, their development would much more likely lead to viable adulthood.

Weybright et al. (2017) performed the third and final study in this section. The authors performed a qualitative case study to learn about youth experiences from youth–adult partnerships. Healthy youth development is deemed impossible without strong adult support. These authors sought to learn about youth–adult partnerships from youths’ perspectives. In a joint project with 4-H Food Smart Families, youth and adults worked together as equals. Weybright et al. observed the partnerships and conducted interviews. The findings indicated the importance of youth feeling heard by adults. Youth acknowledged feeling equal when it seemed their opinion mattered to the adults in the partnership.

In each of the studies, the adults prioritized youth development. This was the most significant overlapping element among the three studies. Youth sought high involvement from adults to enhance their opportunities to become healthy adults, which represented another overlapping element. Despite having three different ways of approaching youth development, all of these researchers ultimately aimed to contribute to the field of youth development. Their different approaches were obvious; however, examining the outcomes highlighted different portions of healthy youth development. Pinckney and Outley et al. (2019) focused on the concept of youth needing awareness to navigate adulthood. Jones et al. (2021) centered on the importance of motivation in youth development. Lastly, Weybright et al. (2017) took the position that adults

are responsible for establishing a sense of worth in youth. The authors all suggested that the many findings of youth development can intertwine to lead to youth becoming mature, healthy adults.

## **Youth Employment**

A critical aspect of preparing youth for adulthood has involved delivering educational and training opportunities to prepare them to enter the workforce (Quinn, Lawy, & Diment, 2008). Large-scale efforts have been undertaken in various countries to identify and develop youth who lack the education, employment, and training necessary to succeed in the workforce. Soucie, Jia, Zhu, and Pratt (2018) conducted a large study by collecting data over a 15-year span, and they concluded that older adolescents and young adulthood are appropriate periods to acquire experiences that can be replicated in adulthood.

This section includes an analysis of four studies conducted in the United States, England, and Canada that revealed the role of employment in youth. The authors included here showed that work has often been used to develop youth skills, and such things as the quality, quantity, and skills acquired on the job play a role in whether youth employment has a positive or negative effect on development. Although the four studies differed in purpose, they also agreed in their outcomes on youth employment.

In a quantitative study on how working and nonworking youth perceived their quality of life (QOL), researchers took a different path related to the role of youth employment (Graves et al., 2016). Rather than examining how youth employment prepared youth for benefits later in adulthood, Graves et al. sought to understand how working versus nonworking youth perceived their quality of life. The authors gathered information from sixth through 12th graders from an annual survey facilitated by several stakeholders in Washington state. The results suggested that

working sixth to 11th graders' QOL was more likely to be negatively impacted over their nonworking peers. Findings also revealed a negative correlation between number of hours worked and QOL. As working hours increased, QOL decreased. The researchers surmised that “demanding work and school schedules may at times interfere with fundamental physiological needs, as well as other important age-appropriate activities, such as sports and recreation, family and community commitments, and relationships with friends” (p. 117).

Heller (2014) conducted a large trial in 13 high-violence high schools in the city of Chicago called One Summer Plus. The trial consisted of 1,634 students between eighth and 12th grade. Heller sought to determine if summer employment and social–emotional learning (SEL) impacted the crimes committed by high school students. The employment lasted 8 weeks during the summer. The three groups involved in the trial consisted of those who worked only, those who worked and received SEL, or those who did neither. In the SEL group, participants worked 15 hours per week and received 10 hr of social–emotional learning. The work-only group worked 25 hr per week. The follow-up 16 months after the study revealed that violent crimes decreased 43% with those in the treatment group. This study on youth summer jobs and SEL showed that youth not only benefit from legitimate jobs, but also that adding a social and emotional element to their work can significantly impact them. This social and emotional element can be achieved through mentoring.

In a mixed-method study, Rauscher et al. (2012) studied adolescents' work quality. The authors aimed to assess any connection between the quality of work and youths' psychosocial wellbeing. Using surveys and interviews, they pooled from three high schools, one in an urban area and two in the suburbs. Two hundred forty-two working high school students of various ethnicities participated in the study. The work characteristics that were examined included

helping, skill use, learning, supervisor and coworker support, work stress, and work–school conflict. This study on the quality of youth work revealed that it is imperative that specific conditions exist in youth jobs to impact youth in a positive manner. Rauscher et al. asserted: “Where adolescent jobs offer the greatest chance for encouraging positive outcomes is in the opportunities they present for youth to be helpful and to a lesser extent, to be around supportive others and learn new things” (p. 580). The authors linked the psychosocial benefits of working as a youth to the quality of work offered to them.

Quinn et al. (2008) published findings of a longitudinal, participatory, mixed-methods study of 182 participants (ages 16–21) on the perspectives of young people who were considered less skilled and often overlooked for employment in favor of more skilled workers. Quinn et al. claimed such individuals occupied jobs without training, which referred to a lack of recognized formal training before obtaining a job position. The authors focused on individuals who participated in the Connexions program for at least one year. The authors identified organizations within the Connexions program based on their work with young people to build their skills and place them in jobs. Quinn et al. conducted interviews and focus groups with participants within the Connexions program with the aim of identifying common characteristics and interests among youth enrolled in the program. The goals were to better define and reshape England policymakers’ perceptions of youth in jobs without training and to inform the development of future policy to better support these individuals. Overall, the authors found that young people felt better-equipped to succeed in their job roles if they learned while in the position as opposed to learning in a classroom. Most participants also expressed gratitude for the relationships and mentorship they received while on the job. The authors concluded that training on the job should not be discounted and that learning skills on the job could benefit youth as opposed to learning

solely from an accredited education. The authors also indicated the need for additional youth development programs to abandon deficit approaches and focus on the positive qualities of youth in jobs without training instead. Although skill development for entering the workforce represents an important part of youth skill development, so does community involvement.

The integration of the four studies on youth employment uncovered specific information about youth employment. Although “quality” was not directly mentioned in all four studies, each set of authors disclosed that specific features of employment are necessary to best impact youth. For example, youth showed significant interest in learning new things on the job (Graves et al., 2016; Heller, 2014; Quinn et al., 2008; Rauscher et al., 2012). Researchers in all four studies interpreted their results to mean that meeting youths’ developmental needs was vital in employment. Also, providing SEL opportunities on the job was an essential factor in Rauscher et al. (2012) and Heller (2014). Lastly, Heller and Quinn et al. described a sense of empowerment youth felt as they developed new skills and strengthened their character. Youth employment can advance youth development, as can mentoring youth.

## **Mentoring**

Peralta, Cinelli, and Bennie (2018) characterized youth mentorship as a “mutually beneficial, supportive, and nurturing relationship with a less experienced person” (p. 31). In providing mentoring, it was essential to structure the program adequately because all mentoring was not effective. However, with the appropriate components, researchers have shown mentoring helps youth (Trena, Rebecca, & Samantha, 2012). Youth desired mentors who helped them make decisions but did not attempt to force them to do things the adult’s way. Schuetz, Mendenhall, and Grube (2019) showed youth are more engaged when they have input about the direction of their lives. Youth appreciated relationships with adults that helped them build traits such as trust,



commitment, and honesty. They saw the value in such relationships (Boddy, Agllias, & Gray, 2012). Raposa and Ben-Eliyahu, et al. (2018) claimed mentoring lasted substantially longer when mentor and mentee race was matched, and Mortensen et al. (2014) claimed the influence of mentoring could have effects for generations.

Researchers have classified mentoring as being either formal or natural. Formal mentoring typically involves youth and adults being matched through an established program, and natural mentoring occurs more informally, emerging from a relationship rather than the structure of a formal program (Dam et al., 2018). Natural mentoring does not indicate a lack of organization, although these relationships stood apart from those found in mentoring programs. They consisted of positive role models who emerged naturally from the youth's daily interactions and activities (Timpe & Lunkenheimer, 2015).

Natural mentoring has been shown to have long-lasting effects into midlife. During midlife, adults who were mentored have greater civic engagement, closer relationships, and higher education attainment (Hagler & Rhodes, 2018). Within lower income communities such as that in which the study will be completed, youth were less likely to have natural mentors during their transition into adulthood (Raposa, Erickson, et al., 2018). Moreover, youth of color do better in the present and future when they have a natural mentor who shares their ethnicity (Wittrup et al., 2016). In their national study of natural mentoring with older adolescents and young adults, Dubois and Silverthorn (2005) showed that "mentoring relationships facilitate positive gains in the health and well-being of developing youth" (p. 522). Three studies on mentoring youth are presented and synthesized.

In a longitudinal quantitative study, youth, parents, and adult mentors participated in research of a Canadian Big Brothers Big Sisters program (De Wit, DuBois, Erdem, Larose, &

Lipman, 2020). The researchers aimed to identify predictors of mentoring relationship quality (MRQ) as perceived by participating youth and parents. After being matched by emotional or instrumental (i.e., task-oriented) engagement needs, participants spent 2–4 hr per week one-on-one with their mentor for “recreational, skill, or career-oriented activities” (p. 196). The mentoring lasted for 7 to 18 months. The researchers surveyed the students and parents twice for their perception of MRQ and once for the strength of the mentoring relationship. Strong relationships were indicated by high responses in “closeness, warmth/affection, trust, respect, and happiness” (p. 197). The study resulted in several predictors. Youth who were mentored longer and matched easier reported higher MRQ. Youth who were matched with mentors on emotional engagement reported higher MRQ. Lower MRQ was associated with those matched on instrumental engagement. Across the board, parents’ ratings aligned with youth ratings.

In a case study on mentoring Aboriginal youth, Peralta et al. (2018) studied group mentoring in a sports-based program to assess how the program was perceived by 55 mentees, mentors, community members and elders, and teachers from three separate communities in Australia. Group mentoring followed a structure where six male and six female volunteers within each community mentored youth who participated in school sports. Overall, participants perceived the mentorship program as positive and benefitting all parties. Beneficial outcomes reported by participants included building relationships, knowledge, and skills, as well as exposure to the “outside world” (p. 38). The authors also noted that mentees being encouraged to demonstrate excellence and hard work expanded beyond the sports arena. Further, mentees applied work ethics and integrity to career development, school performance, and other activities. Participants also perceived mentoring as building the “health and well-being of their

community” (p. 45). This sport-based mentoring program had benefits beyond the mentee, extending into schools and the wider community.

In 2013, Dang and Miller conducted a qualitative study on characteristics of natural mentoring relationships among homeless youth to identify strategies that might provide enhanced social support for homeless youth. Dang and Millier conducted interviews with 23 homeless youth, ages 14–21, who had natural mentors and were living in northern California. The authors asked youth about the function of their relationship with their mentor and how those relationships differed from other relationships in their life. Findings indicated that homeless youth perceived their natural mentor as a surrogate parent and their relationship helped them develop resilience through consistent social support (e.g., advice, praise, and encouragement). Similar results were reported in an earlier study of youth in foster care.

The distinct approaches of each mentoring study produced few parallel results. The greatest overlap involved the importance of youth perceptions in mentoring relationships (Dang & Miller, 2013; De Wit et al., 2020; Peralta et al., 2018). Each study showed the immediate benefits of mentoring strongly connected to how participants perceived the relationship and the mentor rather than how they perceived the tangible outcomes of mentoring. The youth in the studies cited trust and sincerity as important. Goal-oriented mentorships did not produce as significant results as emotionally engaged relationships. Natural mentors in the Dang and Miller study reported feelings of parental relational ties. The parental feel did not arise in either of the formal mentoring studies. These three studies identified mentoring as a tool that can be used to help youth and young adults mature. Community has also been determined to have a meaningful part in youth development (Callina et al., 2017; Soucie et al., 2018).

## **The Role of Community**

Community development and youth development closely intertwine (Buzinde et al., 2018). Soucie et al. (2018) showed that young adults in their early to mid-20s can be disconnected from the community, so more meaningful encounters within the community are needed to support older adolescents and younger adults. Adults who support youth and provide a safe environment can serve as a conduit to youth experiencing strong connections to the community (Zeldin, Krauss, Kim, Collura, & Abdullah, 2015).

Just as youth need communities, communities also need youth involvement to thrive (Buzinde et al., 2018), and those areas with large percentages of younger adults have the least amount of engagement (Wray-Lake, Schulenberg, Keyes, & Shubert, 2017). In efforts to increase community programming, Worker, Janeiro, and Lewis (2020) conducted a study on community programs in the Latino community. Previously, the program had been facilitated within European descendant social groups, but not in communities of color. The authors unveiled a necessity for the relevance of community programming to the dominant culture within the community. When a 4-H program was tailored to the community's specific cultural needs, involvement increased. Research has shown that specific populations (e.g., underrepresented youth) benefit from learning within a community setting (Solanki, Mcpartlan, Xu, & Sato, 2019).

Having other resources to help youth transition into adulthood benefits not only the individual, but also the families. Families with youth transitioning to adulthood reported feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to help them (Manuel et al., 2018). It benefits the community when program developers collaborate with others who can provide evidence-based practices (Heer, Heffern, Cheney, Secakuku, & Baldwin, 2020). Youth have reported being motivated to continue to attend school through high school graduation because of receiving services from a

community center (Henderson & Mcclinton, 2016). Youth working with adults within their community who help them transition into adulthood provide invaluable social capital (Jarrett et al., 2004). Greater levels of trust within a community are associated with greater social capital within that community (Guzhavina, 2018). Youth who partner with adults in servicing their community developed their own voice and place, which led to programs being more positively affected by youth (Price & Been, 2018). Although social services are helpful, most recipients would prefer not to need the services provided (Visser, 2018). A program that allows youth to contribute while receiving help could provide a potential answer to this issue. Characteristics of an effective program that retains older youth over the long term include providing ample opportunities for leadership, being housed at a nonschool location, and hosting regular staff meetings to discuss youth (Deschenes et al., 2010). In a study with youth ages 14–21, resiliency related to having strong community relationships (Breda, 2015). Volunteers are a vital part of community programs because they not only provide services but also strengthen a sense of community within the program (Worker, 2017). Proper relationships with volunteers are also important to having community programs (Peralta, 2017).

When youth and their mentors share similar experiences, perspectives, and lifestyles, the relationship provides comfort that allows participants to relax and focus on developing the skills and experiences needed to become healthy adults (Colistra, Bixler, & Schmalz, 2018). Program leaders must remain aware of cultural differences within organized youth programs so that participants do not experience prejudice (Lin et al., 2016). Developing youth programs that cater to the specific cultural needs of the community will attract diverse populations to the program (Worker et al., 2020). The value-added approach is based upon teachers being evaluated from students' test scores. Although it is discouraged in many lower income schools, applying it a

community program may be beneficial (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014). Involving youth in planning and helping them understand the responsibilities that arise in adulthood increases the likelihood they will adapt better as adults. In a study about teenage pregnancy prevention, programs that involved teenagers in the process were more productive (Johnson & Numer, 2017).

Community centers can play a significant role in developing and sustaining long-term supportive relationships among adults and youth (Colistra, Schmalz, & Glover, 2017).

Community centers also provide an excellent place to build skills among youth and provide training (Fredriksson, Geidne, & Eriksson, 2018). Dawes and Larson (2011) studied how youth engaged in programs and showed the importance of their feeling connected to the program. Youth in the study began learning for the future; they developed a sense of competence, or they began pursuing purpose. The authors concluded that fostering youths' feelings of personal connectedness with a program represents the main ingredient for engaging them, which is necessary to attain program goals. Strong social ties impact communities. Communities with weak social ties are identified as having fewer resources (Greenbaum, 1982).

Youth who participate in structured after-school programs have shown benefits in their lives (Nelson, 2017). Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) showed that after-school programming that is sequenced, active, focused, and explicit can be very useful with youth. After-school programs with specific foci, such as science, can play a vital role in encouraging youth to maintain an interest in those areas and hope for their futures (Rahm, Martel-Reny, & Moore, 2005). The structure of after-school programs should include both a safe environment for diverse cultures and written policies on handling challenges (Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Ettetal, & Okamoto, 2016). Youth who experience toxic relationships and environments need positive

after-school programs to offset the negativity (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017). After-school programs that focus on developing leadership skills within youth have led to enhanced positive emotions in youth (Villegas & Raffaelli, 2018).

Reaching high school students with high-quality out-of-school programming has also helped scholastically (Odonnell & Kirkner, 2014). Research suggested that better training opportunities are needed in after-school programs (Smith & Bradshaw), and businesses have acknowledged the benefit of after-school programs by requesting that after-school programs help community residents increase job readiness (Deutsch, 2017a). The authors of “Why is it Important to Have a Quality After-School Recreation Program?” stated that after-school programs can help to build work habits within youth. By providing work experiences to youth, out-of-school-time programs can build decision-making skills and professional development to increase chances of success (Maletsky & Evans, 2016). Teen participation rates in after-school programs fall far short of rates for younger youth (Deutsch, 2017b), but it can be empowering to pair youth and adults together within recreational programs (e.g., summer or after-school programs). Weybright et al. (2017) showed that youth who have an opportunity to build a relationship with adults felt a sense of partnership with them. Workers within after-school programs expressed that the program impacted different components of participants, including their connection to others (Iachini, Bell, Lohman, Beets, & Reynolds, 2016).

In addition to after-school programming, other evidence-based programs exist that encourage youth development and healthy communities. Youth programs have been identified as important contexts for adolescents’ emotional development (Pittman, 2017). Federal and private registries such as Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development have created directories of evidence-based programs to help families find solid programs (Mihalic & Elliott, 2015). Holla

and Keith (2012) showed that attending an intense summer program helped disadvantaged future-bound medical students continue pursuing their goal to attend medical school. Though the study did not specifically focus on medical school, it provided a look at the effects of intense summer programs as well as matriculation. In a study with community gardens, Glover, Parry, and Shiness (2005) identified a sense of enjoyment for participants returning to the garden. Community activities should be enjoyable. Short-term youth enrichment programs that optimize and nurture youth, provide skilled staff, and use evidence-based programs, have been shown to have a significant impact in 6–8 weeks (Martin, 2005). Utilizing tools such as MPOWER can help program leaders be intentional about developing youth and preparing them for adulthood. MPOWER is a program that promotes the person, passion, propensity, and prosocial (Klein, Liang, Sepulveda, & White, 2019). In creating youth programs, leaders must take a multifaceted approach. Blue Ribbon Community has used a collaborative approach to address youth violence in their community (Bolton, Maume, Halls, & Smith, 2017).

Community involvement has been widely identified as a critical component of youth skill development. In a 2018 longitudinal, quantitative study in Canada, Soucie and colleagues examined the relationship between community involvement and generative concern. The authors defined generative concern as an individual's societal concern for future generations and their legacy. Soucie et al. asserted that community participation represents a core component of developing an individual's generativity, and they linked it to an individual's ability to pass on valuable skills and traditions to youth. The authors collected data over 15 years and defined community involvement as neighborhood volunteer experiences and involvement in political activities. Findings indicated that youth involved in their community before the age of 23 had higher rates of generative concern. Conversely, individuals who did not begin community



involvement until after the age of 26 had lower rates of generative concern. The authors concluded that older adolescents and young adults are at the appropriate age to acquire experiences that allow for replication in adulthood. These findings aligned with an earlier study by Callina et al. (2017), who studied youth and adults in the first three decades of life to better understand the developmental course of positive character development in youth (i.e., hopeful future expectations). In a notable finding, Callina et al. corroborated community involvement in youths' character development and found that hope for the future waned between the ages of 7 and 26.

Youth must learn developmental skills to transition into healthy adulthood, and allowing them to practice what they have learned in a safe environment can help them sustain those skills in adulthood (Williams & Chawla, 2015). Supportive services, such as participation in community programs, strengthen youths' stability in adulthood. In a study with older foster children, Lenz-Rashid (2018) showed youth who received transitional housing and other services developed other skills needed in adulthood. Some programs have failed to prepare youth for their futures. Garcia-Poole, Byrne, and Rodrigo (2018) revealed that the program "Building My Future" failed to meet its objective. For this reason, youth programs need to be strategic and follow evidence-based practices to ensure better success. In an examination of character development, Seider, Jayawickreme, and Lerner (2017) explained how youth who were open to new experiences experienced growth, even though they may have felt stressed. Additionally, continuing in a learning environment through the summer helps to address a concept known as "summer melt," in which nonwhite high school graduates are no longer motivated to attend college in the fall (Rall, 2016). In individual communities, particularly lower socioeconomic

communities, youth development programs are substituted for mental health programs (Beals-Erickson & Roberts, 2015), making the role of community critical in certain areas.

### **Positive Youth Development**

PYD is a notable youth theory that has been evaluated in the same light as social competence, socioemotional learning, and positive psychology (Tolan, 2016). PYD emerged from various theories, including ecological systems theory, attachment theory, and social and emotional approaches (Ciocanel et al., 2016; Leman et al., 2017). It is both a philosophy and an approach that involves a positive perspective of youth rather than a problem-focused approach. A problem-focused mindset can hinder youth from preparing for adulthood and developing into their optimal selves. Work and interactions in PYD programs center around proactivity instead of reactivity. PYD programs are intended to assist youth in building healthy relationships with their family, peers, self, and the community. Ciocanel et al. and Hinson et al. (2016) explained that PYD's emphasis on addressing youth's assets, agency, contribution, and environment helped youth transition into adulthood. Other research has shown that PYD lays a foundation for youth to have a positive and supportive environment (Saha & Shukla, 2017) with the five Cs (i.e., competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring) as its core (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012). The five constructs of PYD have been tested and shown to be embedded in its philosophical foundation (Lerner et al., 2010). Additionally, Gestsdottir, Geldhof, Lerner, and Lerner (2017) posited that self-control serves as a foundational principle of PYD. Positive youth development principles have been applied to many aspects of youth development, including prosocial norms and involvement and social competence (Shek, Sun, & Merrick, 2013).

Other recognized benefits of using PYD have been associated with better order, encouragement, connectedness, and involvement of diverse groups of middle school children in after-school programming (Smith, Witherspoon, & Osgood, 2017). Use of PYD has promoted healthy development in youth who needed a supportive and positive community in which to thrive (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003). In a study with high school students, 85% of participants reported high satisfaction in a program that used PYD as its framework (Shek, Leung, Law, & Chan, 2016). Bakhshae, Hejazi, Dortaj, and Farzad (2016) connected the use of PYD to academic buoyancy, meaning youth were likely to bounce back from setbacks when they had a positive view of self, others, and community as their foundation. PYD could also potentially promote law-abiding citizenship. To measure the perception of youth with tarnished legal records, Drinkard, Estevez, and Adams (2017) used PYD as their philosophy. examining “the relationship between social development assets and law-abidingness” (p.373). Though the results were not statistically significant in this regard, Drinkard et al. showed one promising tenet of PYD: positive communication among youth and their loved ones.

Because of PYD’s potential use and the monumental work of youth development, several large meta-analyses have been conducted on PYD dating back to 2002 (Bruner et al., 2021; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Ciocanel et al., 2016). The three meta-analyses consisted of 84 out-of-school-time programs that used PYD. The results varied, and researchers made recommendations for increasing the effectiveness of PYD. Catalano et al. (2002) suggested instruments be created to measure PYD. Valid and reliable instruments now exist that adequately measure the existence of PYD theory. Measures exist in extensive standard forms as well as short forms for ease of use (Geldhof et al., 2013).

PYD has been utilized by many youth-oriented programs and agencies worldwide. The concept of using PYD as a framework to develop healthy communities has been applied across the United States and in at least four continents (Leman et al., 2017; Nakkula, 2012). Programs such as Youth Outreach Centers in El Salvador implemented the model in youth centers designed to empower youth and discourage them from choosing the gang activity common to the area (Roth & Hartnett, 2018). Another PYD program revealed that young adult college students improved in psychological variables when the principles of PYD were applied (Whipple, Frein, & Kline, 2020). In another international study in Hong Kong, 90% of youth expressed satisfaction with programs that utilized PYD (Shek, Ma, Law, & Zhao, 2017). Sizable youth programs (e.g., 4-H) have confirmed a significant improvement in confidence, connection, character, and caring when PYD was practiced. Youth scored much higher in those four areas than those in the control group (Robinson et al., 2012).

Although widely used, limitations of PYD have been noted in faith-based and culturally diverse organizations and in programs for youth with suicidal ideations (King et al., 2018; Pinckney & Clanton et al., 2019; Timpe, 2017) King et al. (2018) noted the implementation of PYD did not result in a lower rate of suicide ideation in middle school youth, although the authors stated length of time using PYD could have played a role in this outcome. Pinckney and Clanton et al. and Timpe's studies disagreed with the use of PYD with disadvantaged youth, especially those of color and of marginalized cultures. They proposed that PYD presents an unrealistic framework that does not adequately prepare youth of color for the discrimination and racial challenges they face later in life. As an alternative, Pinckney and Clanton et al., suggested social justice youth development because it focuses on supporting youth recovering from traumatic racial encounters and bringing change. Critics of PYD surmised that although PYD

teaches youth how to be proactive, disadvantaged youth must know how to be proactive and how to properly be reactive. Several other studies, however, revealed the opposite. Using PYD as an intervention worked well with racially diverse youth by helping them learn about themselves and identify life goals (Anderson et al., 2018; Eichas, Montgomery, Meca, & Kurtines, 2017; Pinckney & Clanton, et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). African American neighborhoods that provided resources for youth reflected constructive use of PYD. Researchers have claimed PYD has a cultural component that is important when servicing certain ethnicities (e.g., African American youth). The disagreement over PYD's applicability can possibly be resolved by adapting programs to the population being served as the leaders of the Circle of Courage program did when working with American Indian and Alaska Native youth (Ersan & Rodriguez, 2021).

### Conclusion

The key findings of the literature review pointed to the need to continually develop youth and find more effective ways to do so. In conclusion, this literature review presented studies on youth development and secondary components of youth development. Callina et al. (2017) made the crucial point that hope for the future diminishes in many youths and argued for increased support and encouragement during this time. An on-the-job training program in England was found to positively contribute to youth's skill development for entering the workforce. Two studies revealed how early involvement in the community positively influenced youths' character development and generative concern. Research on youth mentoring demonstrated how formal, group mentoring through a sports-based program in Australia helped youth develop knowledge and skills transferable to the outside world. Finally, a study was presented on natural mentoring with homeless youth. These studies reported similar benefits of natural mentoring

relationships, including resiliency through social and emotional support. Despite the limited qualitative research on natural mentorships in youth, it was believed that many of the benefits reported in homeless youth might transfer to other populations.

### Summary

Youth programs and employment, such as on-the-job training and community involvement, represent two promising strategies for developing youth and helping them transition from youth to healthy adulthood. The literature presented in this section highlighted how youth can inform their development and help improve job training programs. The studies supported the need for early community involvement and demonstrated the positive outcomes that result from this practice. The next section presented evidence on the role of mentoring in youth development.

The literature presented in this section included the benefits of mentorships with youth through sports-based programs and natural mentoring relationships with youth. These studies showed similar perceptions of natural mentoring relationships among youth. Researchers showed that group mentoring, as a formal mentorship strategy within a sports-based program, benefited the youth, school, and broader community (Peralta et al., 2018, p. 45). Studies also revealed that natural mentorships among foster and homeless youth led to various positive outcomes. In their study of homeless youth, Dang and Miller (2013) found that mentees engaged in natural mentorships experienced several social and emotional support outcomes, which led to resilience. Greeson, Weiler, Thompson, and Taussig (2016) had similar findings.

Matriculation refers to graduation and evokes a sense of victory. Programs that appear to stir a sense of accomplishment within youth and help them develop into adulthood are worth an in-depth exploration. The literature supported the use of mentoring and skill-building as valid

parts of youth development. Perhaps community centers can become stronger anchors to their patrons and provide solid programming that will benefit youth long into adulthood. The use of PYD as a framework set a standard for coding the data of this study, which involved data collection that may contribute to youth development, community building, and sustainability.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

In this phenomenological study, the commonalities of youth and young adult work experiences were explored in depth through the lenses of former staff. The literature review on youth development, youth employment, mentoring, community, and PYD provided readers with information about out-of-school-time programs. However, researchers in the existing literature did not explore the unique journey of staff matriculating through roles as they gained knowledge and skill. This study of matriculation was designed to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of participants who worked in youth programs in more than one role for more than one season? This chapter includes an overview of phenomenological research and information on this study's participants, data collection processes, analytical methods, and limitations. The chapter concludes with a summary.

#### Research Design Participants

Qualitative studies provide excellent opportunities for exploring new areas and gathering rich data that is often missed in quantitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For these purposes, a qualitative design was selected for this study. Existing research on the chosen topic could not be located by the novice researcher or three other expert researchers. Therefore, it was assumed that this topic represented a new field of study best suited for qualitative research. In choosing which qualitative method to select, the researcher concluded: "To document an experience from the perspective of the person who has lived the experience, to put into words



how an experience is lived and how it feels, the design of choice is phenomenology” (Brink & Wood, 1998, p. 311). Phenomenological studies allow researchers to dive into understanding the selected phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; People, 2021). The purpose of a phenomenological study is to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" (p. 75). Unlike ethnographic research, participants in phenomenological studies are heterogeneous—they do not come from one group—but they will have experienced the same phenomenon at some point in time (Creswell & Poth). Interviews provide the primary method of data collection for phenomenological studies, and other methods can be used if they confirm participants’ experiences (Creswell & Poth).

Experts have identified the strengths and limitations of phenomenology. Van Manen (2016) explained the strengths of phenomenology:

- It focuses on the original encounters of the participants with the phenomena
- “It serves to foster and strengthen an embodied ontology, epistemology, and axiology of thoughtful and tactile action” (p. 15).

Creswell and Poth (2018) also detailed the benefits of phenomenology:

- Researchers can choose which type of phenomenology best fits their study.
- The method draws out the essence of the occurrence.

Challenges to phenomenological research have also been noted. Van Manen (2016) explained one main challenge involves the significant amount of reflection required to adequately capture the phenomena. Van Manen also noted the diminishment of the phenomena through the process of writing about it.

The features of the population for this study on work experiences of youth and young adults in adulthood were specific. The participants must have been 18 years old and have served in two separate roles in the identified program during two separate time periods. Lastly, the participants needed to be comfortable articulating their thoughts about their involvement in the program. The available roles in the program required progressive levels of responsibility, education, and experience. They included youth client (ages 7 to 13), volunteer (ages 14 and 15), floater (ages 16 and older), assistant (student ages 16 and older), assistant leader/coordinator (ages 18 and older), instructor (bachelor's degree or higher), head instructor (bachelor's degree or higher), site coordinator (bachelor's degree or higher), office assistant (student ages 16 and older), office coordinator (bachelor's degree and higher). The 12 participants in the study had participated in these roles as identified in Table 1. The youngest participant was 12 when they began as a youth client in the programs; the oldest was 22, and the mode was 16.

Table 1

*Roles Experienced*

Role	Number of participants
Youth client	3
Volunteers	2
Floater	1
Assistants	11
Assistant leader/coordinators	2
Instructors	6
Head instructors	1
Site coordinators	5
Office assistants	4
Office coordinators	2

The researcher used convenience sampling to identify the participants for this study once the criteria had been met. The agency agreed for this researcher to access records to initiate contact with potential participants. Thirty-nine former staff met the qualifications to participate in the study. Initially, 39 potential participants were contacted from the numbers on file with the organization. Of the 39 potential participants, 15 provided their email addresses and permitted the researcher to send them more information. Appendix A provides a copy of the email sent to potential participants with an information form (see Appendix B) and informed consent (see Appendix C) attached. The email explained the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of the participants' involvement, the confidentiality of the study, the expected length of the interview, and a promise of a \$40 gift card for any length of participation. Fourteen of the 15 potential participants promised to participate, but only 12 returned a completed informed consent to the researcher's email. Based on recommendations by Janghorban, Roudsari, and Taghipour (2014), the researcher verified the participants' ability to complete an online interview. The participants confirmed access to a private area without distractions, reliable high-speed internet, and familiarity with using the chosen platform.

The research question focused on learning about adults' perceptions of their involvement in specific youth programs, so anyone who met the qualification was accepted as a participant. Due to the constructivist nature of the study, the researcher considered all perspectives valid and desirable. Proper ethical guidelines were followed with the participants, including obtaining an electronically signed copy of the informed consent before the interviews. The researcher asked participants to commit up to 4 hr of their time and promised them a \$40 electronic gift card for their participation. No harm or major risks were foreseen. Minimal potential for discomfort to the

participants' psyche was assessed as they discussed past emotional experiences and spoke freely within a group setting.

### Data Collection

Data were collected using two methods. One document per participant listed their work positions and dates. This information was verified through organizational records and analyzed by the researcher. Online interviews were conducted individually and in group format. Due to COVID-19 social distancing protocols, interview data were gathered electronically. The researcher obtained a subscription to a popular and reliable video conferencing service and used it to conduct and record the interviews. Cloud space was obtained through the researcher's subscription.

A licensed clinical professional counselor was selected to facilitate the interviews due to her training in asking open-ended questions and keeping interviewees on topic. The desired semistructured format of the interviews was ideal for a licensed clinical professional counselor. The researcher met with the interviewer three times before data collection to discuss the study. During these meetings, the researcher and the counselor engaged in role-play to ensure the counselor's abilities met the researcher's satisfaction; they also tested the recording capabilities. After these meetings, the researcher provided the hired interviewer with the video conferencing login and password information, the interview protocols, and a data form containing interview times, aliases, and verified roles. The researcher scheduled all participants in the video conferencing software, enabling the interviewer to easily access the platform and begin the interviews.

Before the scheduled time, the hired interviewer entered the video conference room to await the participants' entry. Any participants who were more than 5 min late were rescheduled

for a later date. Two participants needed to be rescheduled. All other participants entered at the appointment time and were greeted by the interviewer. To be respectful of the participants' time, the researcher immediately began the interview using the single interview and group interview protocols (see Appendices D and E). Once the participants agreed to the interview being recorded, the interviewer started recording. As noted in the interview protocol, the interviewer thanked the participants for participating, confirmed the interview's purpose, reassured them of the steps taken to ensure confidentiality and proper data handling, read the informed consent that was previously emailed to the participants, and obtained an alias from the participants for confidentiality purposes. Before beginning the interview questions, the interviewer encouraged the participants to recall their youth program experience. The interviewer shared from the interview protocol which included asking participants to elaborate on their answers. This process was used for each participant.

The researcher chose documents for analysis based on Bowen's (2009) explanation of document usage. Bowen explained five common areas for document selection. The documents chosen for this study on adults' experiences matriculating through youth programs fell into two of Bowen's stated functions for selecting documents. These were providing background information and adding "supplementary research data" (p. 30). For these purposes, the researcher selected the participants' roles and dates forms. The researcher received permission from the organization to obtain these documents, and the interviewer received permission from the participants to verify their records. The participants forwarded the documents to the interviewer via email without any delays or challenges. The only challenge involved deciding the best documents to use to help answer the research questions. The selected documents specifically added to the research by confirming the participants' experiences.

The researcher attended to ethical considerations before, during, and after the study. Before the study, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher obtained written permission from the organization to interview former staff and analyze approved organizational documents. According to recommendations by Creswell and Poth (2018), the interviewer reminded the participants during the interview of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their ability to withdraw at any time. The essential duty to protect the participants' privacy was prioritized by allowing them to choose their aliases at the onset of data collection. Intentional ethical behavior was upheld during data collection. Unfamiliarity with possible ethical issues surrounding the use of technology for data collection led the researcher to seek guidance. The researcher learned that ethical issues related to online interviewing resemble those of face-to-face interviewing (Janghorban et al., 2014). The researcher electronically stored both data sets (i.e., from the interview and the documents) on their personal computer. To ensure safekeeping, all information was backed up onto a password-protected paid cloud drive.

### Analytical Methods

Data analysis for phenomenology differs from other qualitative studies, according to Creswell and Poth (2018). In this section, the researcher thoroughly explains the analysis process following the advice of Giorgi, Giorgi, and Morley (2017), who stated: "Methodological criteria demand that every step of the analysis be presented as explicitly as possible so that a critical other can follow the analysis as closely as possible" (p. 187). Analysis of the data begins with a narrow focus and expands to general themes that explain the shared experiences. Van Manen (2016) has been recognized as a leading contributor to phenomenological research for analyzing and representing phenomenological studies. In his book *Phenomenology of Practice*, Van Manen explained the complex process of analyzing phenomena. Phenomenologists seek to share rather

than explain the participants' experiences to keep the study as genuine as possible (Creswell & Poth).

The data analysis spiral is a thorough process used to develop healthy, dense findings. The first step to data analysis involves managing and organizing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the researcher stored the data on a password-protected personal computer and drive. Only the researcher had the password. Immediately upon completion, the researcher watched each recorded interview and bracketed the strong thoughts and emotions associated with the participants' shared experiences. Next, the researcher used her paid subscription to an automated transcription software to initially transcribe the 16 interviews. The researcher spent considerable time with each transcript to ensure accuracy before reading it.

The next data analysis step was to read and write memos as data emerged (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This step included Lecompte's (1994) recommendation to sit down after collecting data and develop the story without reading any notes. Comparing the story to other forms of analysis allowed the researcher to highlight the study's essential parts. This process aligns with the reflective thinking outlined in this step of the data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analytic memos were also used in this study. Analytic memos resemble Saldana's (2016) recommendation to reflect on the choice of first-cycle codes, write about how the researcher personally related to the participants, and reflect about possible answers to the research question.

Next, the data analysis required characterizing codes and labeling them before developing themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) Miner Lite software was used to help organize, code, and assign themes to the data. The codes selected for the study on adults' experiences in a youth program were based on Saldana's (2016) descriptions of first-cycle coding. The researcher selected initial coding due to its ease and flexibility. While using initial

coding, the need for more specific coding techniques emerged, including in vivo, concept, and evaluation coding. Using initial coding for each interview, a “line-by-line coding – a microanalysis of the corpus” (Saldana, p. 117) approach was taken. However, the researcher coded the data a second time before developing initial themes. Doing this helped to saturate the data analysis. Analytic memos also emerged during the coding process.

The researcher used code mapping and code landscaping to transition from codes to categories. Initially, 81 categories emerged from the 347 codes in the first cycle. The second cycle of coding yielded 30 categories that developed into six themes. After further analysis, the researcher realized that the themes did not adequately capture the experiences. Therefore, the researcher reassessed the data and rechunked it into categories, and three extensive themes emerged.

Both the interview and documents were themed using Ryan and Bernard’s (2003) technique. The researcher recognized themes by answering the authors’ question, “What is this expression an example of?” (p. 87). The final set of themes was winnowed down to what can be seen in the Findings section. However, before writing the findings, the researcher engaged with the two final stages of the data analysis spiral. First, the researcher made careful judgments to develop and assess interpretations. Then, relevant studies were used to aid in extracting the final themes and report ethical findings based on the literature. In this final stage of data analysis, the researcher made generalizations. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the data analysis on adults’ reflections on their experiences in a youth program. The participants’ names and identities were concealed using aliases.

Several things occurred to ensure the validity and credibility of the research results. An intercoder agreement was used between this researcher and the interviewer. Before giving the



data to the interviewer to verify codes, the researcher asked participants to verify their transcriptions for accuracy and order the themes based on perceived level of importance. Member checking also occurred by asking participants to make comments and suggestions from the initial data analysis. Data triangulation took place between the interviews and the document analysis. All information deemed pertinent was reported, including anything that could be considered unfavorable. A minor issue arose at the start of two group interviews. Two different participants attempted to enter the group interviews after the five-minute grace period. The interviewer contacted the researcher, and the researcher sent an email reminding the participants of other group interview times. Lastly, to ensure validity and credibility, the researcher managed bias very carefully through journaling and processing with a professional.

#### Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study was the size of the available population. At the time of the study, the pool of potential participants amounted to fewer than 50 participants. Beginning with a selection choice, this small pool could have resulted in too few participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that a minimum of three and a maximum of 15 participants should participate in phenomenological studies. Data saturation occurred at 12. However, having only 50 possible choices diminished the chances of having enough participants for data saturation.

Another limitation involved the COVID-19 social distancing mandates in place at the time of the study. The interviews were conducted online to adhere to these mandates. A phenomenological study involves the capture of a given experience. The inability to meet face-to-face may have hindered the interviewer's ability to capture body language and nonverbal communication sometimes lost in virtual tools.

Another limitation of the study involved the lack of literature on the topic. This study of work experiences of youth and young adults in adulthood appeared to be the first in the field. The literature included in the review focused on topics related to youth development but not closely related to the concept of matriculation.

The final limitation involved the researcher's closeness to the topic. The researcher served as the primary developer of the programs under scrutiny. Although an outsider was hired to complete the interviews, and intercoder agreements occurred, the participants understood the researcher's connection to the programs and knew her as their former supervisor. Consequently, the participants may have provided biased responses based on their prior relationships with the researcher.

### Summary

The methodology for this study on staff matriculation was best explored using the phenomenological design. Participants who met the study criteria were offered the opportunity to participate. A thorough interview with each participant was analyzed along with relevant documents that expounded on their experiences. Careful analysis of the data followed data collection. The study had limitations, but the researcher addresses each one in Chapter V. The findings are presented in Chapter IV.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

This chapter presents the study purpose and research question and introduces the participants. The methods for data collection and analysis were discussed in Chapter III. Before introducing the participants, a brief review of the study's setting is presented. In the data analysis and collection section, the themes are developed, and the responses to the research question are provided.

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of adults who had matriculated from their youth to adulthood through Thornton Township's Youth and Family Services after-school and summer programs. The central research question was: What are the experiences of participants who worked in the youth programs in more than one role for more than one season?

#### *Settings Review*

This study took place in Thornton Township, a local government in the southern suburbs of Chicago, Illinois, in the United States. The programs of interest in this study were SEP, DIP, and ASP. The roles and responsibilities represented in the study are outlined in detail in Chapter I. A volunteer referred to a nonpaid 14- or 15-year-old. An assistant referred to a 16-year-old-and-up high school or college student. An instructor was an adult with a minimum of a

bachelor's degree. A site coordinator was an adult with a minimum of a bachelor's degree and previous experience with any of the three programs (i.e., SEP, DIP, and ASP).

### *Participants*

Of the approximately 39 former staff who qualified to take part in the study, 12 participated. Six of the participants were male, and six were female. Fifteen individuals initially responded to the first inquiry, but two of the former staff neglected to submit their signed written consent and one never followed up. Both later apologized for not following through or communicating in a timely fashion. To participate in the study, former staff needed to be at least 18 years old and have served in a minimum of two roles within the youth programs. The 12 participants ranged in age from 19 to 32, with the average age being 27. All 12 participants identified as Black. Ten of the participants earned a bachelor's degree, and four earned graduate degrees. The two participants without a bachelor's degree were attending college at the time of this study. The vocation of the participants varied. For example, one participant worked as a pastor and another one as a rap artist. Three of the participants owned viable businesses, and all but two had a sustainable income. Four of the participants had children, one was married, and one was divorced. Four of the participants indicated they were currently mentoring or had been mentoring before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Six of the remaining participants expressed a desire or plan to volunteer or mentor in their community.

The 12 participants resulted in 16 interviews, with each interview averaging 40 min. Four of the interviews were group interviews (i.e., two for summer staff, one for after-school staff, and one group for all staff). Two after-school program group interviews were facilitated due to the longer nature of the program compared to summer enrichment (8 months versus 8 weeks). Seven of the 12 participants had worked in after-school and summer enrichment programs. The other

five participants worked for the summer program only. Ten of the participants had been affiliated with the youth programs since they were youths themselves.

### Findings

The results of analyzing the 16 interviews are included in this section. The researcher used the aliases participants gave themselves. The first section of this chapter provides an explanation of the extensive process of developing themes from codes. The research question follows the explanation of the theme development. The participants suggested the order of the themes during member checking. Each theme title is followed by a brief explanation, including any subthemes that emerged. This section ends with a conclusion of the data analysis.

#### *Theme Development*

In the first round of coding, the researcher started with a massive 347 codes dispersed into 81 categories using the QDA Miner Lite program. During the coding of the first interview, an expert coder pointed out that the novice researcher's coded segments were too small. Therefore, larger segments were captured from the second interview moving forward. In the second round of coding, the researcher grouped codes into 30 categories. Initially, the 30 categories were merged into six themes. However, the themes did not provide an accurate description of the categories. Therefore, the researcher recoded the chunks of data into seven categories using Microsoft Excel. Finally, the researcher narrowed the seven categories into three extensive themes: learning, training and development; leadership; and culture. The researcher presents the themes according to the research question that guided this study. After the themes are presented, the researcher provides a narrative of the answers to the research question based on the thematic data. After the research question is answered, the researcher discusses other codes that emerged during the interviews that were unrelated to the research question.

The research question was: What are the experiences of participants who worked in the youth programs in more than one role for more than one season? The experiences of participants manifested into three broad themes: learning, training and development; leadership; and culture. These emerged after a thorough analysis of the data. Due to the sizeable amount of information that fell within each theme, data was further broken down into subthemes. Although each theme had distinct features, they overlapped due to participants' experiences sometimes involving two or more of the themes. However, chunks of data were included with the most prominent theme. Table 2 shows the occurrence of themes and subthemes according to participant.

Table 2

*Occurrence of Themes*

Theme Subtheme	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12
Learning, training, & development												
Professional training & development	X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	
Program development	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Deficits in proper teaching, training, & development	X			X	X				X			X
Personal development	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Leadership												
Immediate supervisors		X			X				X			X
Administrators	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Participants as leaders		X			X	X				X		
Culture												
Family culture	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	
Adaptive culture	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Youth culture	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

**Learning, Training, and Development**

Under the theme learning, training, and development (LTD), each participant shared experiences that were encompassed within the theme. There were several components of LTD that included professional training and development; program development; deficits in proper teaching, training, and development; and experiences of personal development. The experience

was included in the subarea that most related. Each of the subareas of LTD is explained, and the information is synthesized with a brief quote to substantiate the synthesis.

### **Professional Training and Development.**

Professional training and development within LTD appeared in several ways as participants shared their stories. More than half of the participants mentioned their experiences with weekly life skills before they obtained at least a 4-year degree. When participants discussed life skills training, they explained they appreciated it at the time but added their appreciation grew later in life.

All but three of the participants mentioned experiences with professional training and development. These nine participants agreed they felt adequately trained to complete most of their job responsibilities. Many of them explained that the nature and set-up of life skills training prepared them for their position and thereafter. For example, Shay stated: “We had these life skill meetings too as an assistant. . . . We will talk about budgeting and savings and different things like that. They definitely were trying to give you tools and move you forward in life.” Nine of the subjects felt life skills conversations helped them to develop occupationally, relationally, and in their character.

In addition to professional training and development related to life skills, six of the participants discussed the initial staff training. Their training included learning the program manual, taking an exam on the manual, role-playing, and participating in in-depth discussions. Participants exhibited strong feelings about this training. Diamond’s comment about training captured the sentiments of those who mentioned it:



The reading, the training, the scenarios, the role-playing . . . They prepare for 95% of the situations you're going to see. And for those five that you're not prepared for . . . you got a support system behind.

Subjects conveyed the intensity of the formal training required before stepping into their roles.

Staff occasionally experienced continued professional development until 2018. At that time, continual professional development became an integral part of participants' experience, and four participants discussed this in detail. Although other participants were unfamiliar with the practice, four deliberated on the effectiveness of the professional development. Three concluded that the professional development positively impacted the program and the staff. They discussed how the program's initial facilitation by a partnering community organization was somewhat arduous but helpful. The topic initially arose during individual interviews, but it was thoroughly reviewed by the participants during a focus group. Agent Green commented on how the program blossomed after a year of professional development:

But I think that year opened. Even though it was some very long sessions, I think we can honestly say, as far as professional development, that it was one of the key things we had in our program. They went long, but they were informative, and I kind of use some of the stuff that I do working with youth now.

The two participants who remained in the following year agreed with Agent Green that the inclusion of professional development significantly improved the program. However, one participant added that before this engaged conversation, she had not seen the value of the professional development sessions. Between life skills, initial training, and continuing professional development, every participant experienced professional training and development, and more than half spoke of it during their interviews.

### **Program Development.**

Nine of the 12 participants discussed improvements and developments in the program. More specifically, they discussed ways in which the program developed from 2007 through 2020. Three of them predicted that if COVID-19 had not impeded progress in 2020, the continued growth of the program would have exceeded previous years. Cliff said: “By the time we came back for after school program before COVID happened, we eliminated our disciplinary system, because we were just so emotionally intelligent now.” Several participants pointed out that the program became more focused on socioemotional development. They noted the sophistication of formally incorporating ways to address the socioemotional needs of youth in the community, which led to fewer disciplinary programs.

Participants distinguished other developments in the youth programs, such as adding a volunteer training program, incorporating restorative justice, and acquiring community partners to administer a program. Three of the participants took part in the volunteer program, and one of them was instrumental in the start of the summer enrichment program. As John made the transition out of the youth client role, he expressed concern that he would have to wait 2 years before taking part in the programs again. As a youth client, he recommended youth volunteers be accepted. From his comment, a full volunteer training program was created in 2012 that has trained over 60 volunteers, many of whom later matriculated into the assistant role.

Two-thirds of the participants vividly discussed the continual developments in the program related to outcomes, suggestions, and trends. Diamond offered another example, describing a detailed incident in 2017 in which a youth was expelled for unacceptable behavior. However, Diamond’s protest resulted in a change in the program policy and the youth being accepted back into the program. Diamond explained: “And so when we had that conversation,

everybody understood it. And the kid went back to camp. Mama was happy; Mr. H and India [the administrators] were happy, and the girl that wrote him up was happy.” This incident marked the official beginning of integrating restorative justice into the program. Rather than only disciplining participants for poor behavior, they were counseled and given tools to handle their choices. Agent Green commented about LTD: “We had restorative justice and circles where kids would bring problems or understanding issues that’s going on.”

### **Deficits in Proper Teaching, Training, and Development.**

Several participants mentioned a failure to sustain proper LTD as they discussed past frustrations in their roles. Diamond, Cliff, Marie, and Wayne expressed the individual and collective impacts of lacking LTD. Everyone but Wayne asserted that deficits were an issue earlier in the program. Wayne, however, described an incident as recent as 2017 in which he lacked the training to fulfill his duties.

Wayne shared the inadequacy he felt when he became head assistant over the entire class when the instructor was terminated. Although he was an adult, there were other assistants in the class with him and other experienced instructors on the premises. He reported feeling ill-equipped to handle teaching and classroom management. He shared that the support he received from the instructors helped him navigate, but the deficit in training produced unnecessary stress.

The other three participants who mentioned a lack of proper teaching, training, and development referred to incidents dating back to 2007 and 2009. They described how the novelty of certain aspects of the program resulted in their having to meet unrealistic expectations. Cliff stated: “When I first started, I was 16 going on 17. So, I didn’t know how to correct a lot of behavioral issues. . . . I was supposed to be the authority figure, but I’m 16, 17 years old.” These

three participants commented about deficits in their training and development as they reminisced on changes within the program.

### **Personal Development.**

The subtheme of personal development was the largest within LTD. Just over half of the participants commented on the previous LTD areas. However, all of the participants but Wayne explicitly mentioned personal development, and Wayne made implications about his personal development. Throughout their discussions on other experiences, the participants regularly interjected comments about their personal development either during their work term or afterward. They also often shared personal development experiences as they discussed their matriculation to the next role.

Some participants reported that the program's standards and requirements "forced" them to develop. Six shared such experiences. Von John stated: "In the beginning, I was missing all kinds of deadlines. . . . They always held me accountable, but they held me even more accountable . . . as an instructor." The others discussed similar incidents that led to personal development, such as issues with punctuality and poor communication. The participants cited weekly life skills training as a resource for personal development. Ashley discussed instances where she displayed a poor demeanor and explained that her attendance at the life skill meetings led to personal development:

I would be catching attitudes trying to be loud and just doing stuff that I wasn't supposed to do, but going through Thornton Township has made me become accountable, take initiative and just be a good person because I was heading down the wrong path.

Interactions with peers, leaders, and community members also led to personal development within participants. Six of the participants experienced personal development

through interaction with others that prompted them to develop primarily in a positive manner.

John discussed an instance with Mr. H that led to personal development. John said Mr. H showed him mercy and allowed him to continue in the program despite fighting:

I used to be quick-tempered, and I got into a fight in the summer camp. He was like, you know, I have every right to kick you out, but I see something in you that you don't see in yourself. . . . He taught me you have two ears and one mouth for a reason.

Several other participants mentioned how personal development occurred through interactions that involved leadership, which also represented a significant theme in the data.

## **Leadership**

The theme of leadership appeared in three dimensions. Participants shared experiences that involved their direct supervisors. They also shared many experiences with the two leaders of the programs (i.e., this researcher and Mr. H). The final leadership element that surfaced involved participants' own experiences with leadership. Each subtheme is listed and briefly described.

### **Direct supervisors.**

Due to the design of the youth programs in the study, every role but the site coordinator position had an immediate supervisor. Half of the participants shared encounters with their direct supervisors that significantly contributed to their experiences. Three of the six participants remarked that their experiences with their direct supervisors were positive and impacted them later in life. The direct supervisors provided feedback in real-time, allowing for immediate affirmation or correction.

Wayne provided a strong example of direct supervisor influence when he discussed pleasurable and boring experiences with his direct supervisors. In his first year working with the

program, he held the floater position. As a floater, he was responsible for supporting the coordinator, instructors, and assistants to ensure the program's successful implementation. Wayne expressed with a smile how much he enjoyed his interactions with his direct supervisor, the site coordinator. He went on to describe a laissez-faire type of leadership in which his direct supervisor was hands-off: "He just made sure as long as we got our work done throughout the day, and do what we had to do, he was pretty cool about it." However, Wayne described his assistant role as "a more strict work environment" that was not conducive to his work style. In each of the scenarios where participants were frustrated with their direct supervisors, they described more involved leadership that dictated how and when to complete their tasks.

### ***Administrators.***

Interactions with the administrators was the largest subtheme within the leadership theme. This researcher (i.e., India) and her counterpart, Mr. H, served as the two administrators being discussed. All 12 participants mentioned experiences with one or both administrators, with 11 of them consistently referring to their influence. There was significant overlap in the reported experiences with administration. First, the administrators were discussed individually and then collectively.

There were integrated experiences that most participants shared about India. As the program developer, she created and implemented each aspect of the program, including the matriculation of the staff roles. They stated that she maintained high expectations of their work and encouraged them to use their creativity and skills to get the job done. Von John said: "India was the type that would tell you what needs to be done, and then that's it. However, it gets done, it gets done, but just get it done." However, several of the participants mentioned that during the earlier years in the program, India was more controlling and stern. Many of the participants

mentioned that later, when they brought an idea to India, she would encourage them to do it themselves rather than attempting to do it herself. Several of the participants shared instances of feeling overwhelmed by India's expectations and minimal explicit guidance.

At least five of the participants shared information about India's expression of her faith in Christ. According to the participants, she demonstrated it in her interactions with them and invitations to Bible studies. They commented that she influenced their own faith in a positive manner. Von John commented that despite not liking India for some time, "we knew she loved us." His sentiments were expressed by most of the participants. In discussing India's faith, Shay stated: "She really shared that with me and coached me through a lot of different things and helped me to build my relationship with God even more."

Another overall opinion about India was her expectation of high performance. The four office assistants worked closest with India, and their shared accounts were more detailed and expressive. However, other participants were also emphatic about their experiences with India. Renee commented: "She meant what she said, and she said what she meant. She says something then she would stand on it." Each of the eight participants who talked about detailed experiences with India shared how she consistently expected a lot from them and believed they could do more than they thought they could. Diamond commented that it was India's belief in them that led them to grow personally and professionally. He shared that she encouraged and challenged each of them according to their abilities.

Participants also discussed leadership experiences with Mr. H. As the program manager, he answered to the department director about program matters. The participants' interactions with Mr. H occurred more often during the DIP events because he served as the primary leader for this event from approximately 2015 to 2019. Seven of the participants worked directly with

Mr. H, although not solely. The participants described experiences with Mr. H that were humorous, honest, and hands-off. They commented that his intriguing personality kept people engaged. Renee commented:

It was always a different conversation. It was always a different activity. It was always a different joke he would say about you. It was just so much fun, but at the end of the day, he was also no-nonsense.

Most of the participants' experiences with leadership involved both administrators. A strong subtheme within leadership included how both administrators worked together to facilitate the programs and lead staff. Cliff commented that as a leadership team, India and Mr. H practiced "the growth mindset, not fixed mindset." Although only Cliff used this term, the concept was shared by six other participants. In their own ways, they each explained that they experienced an encouraging, demanding, and flexible environment that inspired them to grow as individuals and work as a team. Marie commented: "They learned each person on an individual basis. It wasn't a blanket style management." The camaraderie, balance, and respect between India and Mr. H were strongly noted by participants. Diamond's comment captured it powerfully:

And then their dynamic, how they work together, they're like Scottie Pippen and Michael Jordan, Shaq, and Kobe. Any type of powerful dynamic duo. . . . Every moment that they ever shared wasn't pretty. So even Shaq and Kobe, their careers wasn't just lined up to be perfect, but they worked well together. Yes, they communicated well. They talked. They problem-solved, and they're patient with each other to the point where it rubs off.

Three other participants made similar comments about the cohesiveness of the administrative team.



### *Participants as leaders.*

Each participant served in a leadership role to children, volunteers, or staff in lower positions. However, eight of the 12 participants served in leadership roles over other adults in the program. Five participants shared their frustrations in the role. Many of the frustrations related to the older staff members they led having an issue with them being significantly younger. In discussing her older staff members' responses to her role, Marie explained: "They felt like they had more knowledge or experience. . . . It wasn't all the teachers . . . but that definitely was an obstacle when I was in that site coordinator position." In addition to Marie, Shay and Renee communicated similar experiences.

Other leadership frustrations related to feeling the pressure of more responsibility. Those who remained in the leadership positions began to adapt to the larger loads. However, others, such as Renee, who only remained in the new leadership role for one season, did not adjust. Cliff shared his frustration with someone he was supervising in SEP 2019. It was Cliff's first time in a leadership role over an adult staffer who went to administration about something insignificant instead of talking with him. Cliff said: "I was like, 'You could have just come to me, but you're trying to make me feel like I don't know a child because I am younger than you.' I was 27, and she was in her 40s." He shared two other accounts of conflict during his time as a leader. His ended by saying, "So, I think I learned how to deal with a lot of conflict that year."

Another area within the theme of participants as leaders related to how quickly participants needed to mature to be accepted as authority figures. Especially as assistants and even instructors, their roles involved interacting with participants in an appropriate playful manner. They shared the challenges of reformulating their thinking as they became leaders of other staff. Five participants passionately explained that when they stepped into roles leading the

staff, they knew they could not interact with staff as they did with youth. Von John shared encounters as a leader with his new team:

I was playing too much with them because that's what I was doing with the kids—[I] was playing on our level with them; it's a little different. Because [staff] would take that as a sign of weakness. And so that was something that I had to adjust, and it was easy for me once they told me what's going on.

Von John and others also discussed how their experiences as a leader helped them to transition into positions after their term with the youth programs. They expressed how the opportunity to guide others, despite not being confident in the position, helped them to gain confidence. Renee, for example, reported that she succeeded in her current managerial role because she had the opportunity to lead staff in DIP.

Each of the three subthemes within leadership highlighted specific facets of the participants' experiences. Leadership with their direct supervisors was the least common theme, and leadership experiences with administrators were the most common. Although participants' leadership experiences often related to culture, they described distinct experiences outside of the two themes that warranted culture having its own theme.

## **Culture**

Culture is a subtle factor that can be difficult to extract from behaviors and actions. However, in this study, culture emerged conspicuously and was the largest of the three themes. Participants described experiences related to norms, values, and customs during their work with the youth programs. The topic of culture is broad, so the participants' experiences were broken into four subthemes, with each pertaining to an aspect of the culture participants shared about their encounters. Although participants mentioned aspects of work culture, it was not the sole

focus of a subtheme. The subthemes were family culture, adaptive culture, community culture, and challenging culture.

### **Family culture.**

Nine of the 12 participants shared information about family experiences, describing familial culture in relationships and activities. Regarding relationships, they talked about the close-knit feel they experienced with peers and administration. They continued to fulfill their responsibilities without any issues, and the bonds were strong, especially with peers. Cliff and Von John focused on one program year during which only three male instructors worked. The “brotherhood,” as they called it, was robust, and participants and parents noticed it. Their experiences were shared by the others in this subtheme. For example, Agent Green commented: “The township is literally the only employer that I’ve had that has had that relationship building. So, it’s been dope.” Cym and Lisa also noted that relationships were a high priority. They explained how India would emphasize that relationships were the key to the success of their programs.

Activities also played a prominent role in their family cultural experiences. Several participants spoke about the staff outings and gatherings that occurred. India and Mr. H would take staff to restaurants for food, fellowship, and fun. Von John enthusiastically explained:

They took us to quite a few spots. I remember when I was assistant, we went to the Cheesecake Factory. . . . It was phenomenal. It was very, very, very family-oriented. Even around Christmas we did grab bags, or whatever. And wherever you picked out, you will get them a gift. . . . After we’d have prayer. We have prayer and pray for each other and all that good stuff.

Participants reminisced about birthday parties, prayer, Bible studies, impromptu celebrations, and field trips that all established a family culture.

Lastly, participants described a family culture that made them feel safe to express themselves with administration and peers. Even when they strongly disagreed with administration, they expressed feeling safe to share their feelings. They also felt safe with each other, as can be seen in Lisa's comment about her adult peer: "I feel like I can express myself more to that person. I still talk to this person to this day." The continued relationship for 11 of the 12 participants was likely the greatest indicator of the family culture. They shared how they called, texted, and emailed peers and administration, some several years after their employment.

### **Adaptive culture.**

Participants thoroughly discussed how the program, roles, and activities were regularly modified. The subtheme of adaptive culture indicated the continual changes and adjustments participants shared about their experiences. Every participant shared experiences to support adaptive culture, including Ashley and Wayne, who shared significantly less than the other participants. Some participants embraced the adaptive culture, and some struggled with it. Through their testimonies, they revealed elements of expected change, excitement, and frustrations.

More than half of the participants took part in much of the planning for the programs. Data was collected regularly, and changes were often implemented within the next program session, leading to continuous change. However, in many instances, changes occurred immediately without warning, requiring staff's swift adaptation. Wayne's experience provided an example of how quickly the atmosphere changed, and the need to adapt arose. After an instructor was terminated for poor performance, administration asked Wayne to serve as the head

assistant of the group for the remaining few weeks because the other instructors at his location had their own group. Wayne explained:

I do remember her [an instructor] getting in trouble with the management. And then I ended up having to be the teacher. The teacher got in trouble with management. And then I had to take over the class for like the remaining 2 weeks at a program. . . . I ended up having to take over the class with help from other teachers, of course. But that was basically a different role in itself, because then I was in charge of watching all the other participants in that particular group and doing all the activities and lesson plans. . . . It was overwhelming at first. But then the fact that the teachers, they helped me a lot as long the other assistance and floaters that we had at the site.

Four other participants shared how they remained flexible because sometimes the vision of the program was greater than the resources. Staff would sometimes fill several roles. For example, Cym described working as the office coordinator and the bus driver for regular field trips. Although she adapted and functioned well in her role, she laughed then stated in a serious tone: “I’m a little traumatized from field trips when I think about it.” Participants directly and indirectly shared about the adaptive culture as they voiced their experiences.

### ***Youth culture.***

Experiences shared that fit into the subtheme of youth culture refer to the participants’ involvement with the youth and participants’ personas. Each of the programs represented in this study involved staff serving children. The participants discussed youth in every interview. Although youth were not the focus of the interviews, the passion they shared for youth was evident in their narratives and conversations. Even when they talked about difficulties with

youth, hope and victory echoed. Cym's story about one of the youths who consistently exhibited negative behavior in the after school program served as a prime example:

I think one participant in particular, really, I call it "test my gangsta" to see how much I can really do and if I really knew my job. That participant ran amuck—one of the sweetest kids . . . I'm like, it gotta be a solution to this. . . . We were trying to figure out well what do we do with this participant because we don't want to kick them out the program. But he should definitely be excused at this point. But he needs the program. . . . So, it took a lot of advocating that year.

Similarly, all participants except Ashley spoke passionately about working with youth and impacting their lives. Youth culture was not only a part of the content of the interviews but also the process. As participants shared their experiences as adults, most of them exuded youthful excitement and used youthful lingo. This dynamic is discussed further in Chapter V.

### **Other Codes**

Other codes that arose included participant experiences since leaving the program and information about how they felt prepared for different facets of working at Thornton Township. Another code that emerged involved detailed discussion of program designs and operation. Participants expressed high regard for the quality of the youth programs offered in the community. As older adults, they expressed remarkable appreciation for their experiences. Many believed the programs were unmatched in the level of quality. Lastly, a code arose about major concerns about the quality of education provided for children in the township.

### **Summary**

The three themes that emerged in this research on experiences of former staff who matriculated through youth programs were explored. The research question: "What are the

experiences of participants who worked in the youth programs in more than one role for more than one season?” was answered using the participants’ narratives. Although learning, training, and development; leadership; and culture are each broad themes, the subthemes within each one helped to distinguish the specifics within each theme. Chapter V provides the interpretation of the data analysis.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of adults who matriculated through TTYFS as youth and young adults. This topic was chosen with the aim of contributing to the vast field of youth development by addressing the lack of literature on the matter. The dozens of participants had experienced this phenomenon, and the data gathered affirmed the study's significance. The researcher, who had also been a youth practitioner in the program under study, sought to bring attention to the programs with the hope of promoting further development and improvements.

No literature existed on the topic, so related topics were addressed in the literature review. The areas of youth development, youth employment, mentoring, and the role of community were identified as related factors significant to the participants' experiences. Also, due to its popularity and wide usage, the theoretical framework of PYD was explored in the literature review to acknowledge the extant knowledge in the field of youth development. Researchers widely regard PYD as a philosophy and approach through which adults are encouraged to interact and communicate affirmatively with youth (Ciocanel et al., 2016; Leman et al., 2017). The five Cs of PYD (i.e., competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring) are also universally noted and practiced (Saha & Shukla, 2017). A thorough review of the literature confirmed the topic's uniqueness and led the researcher to one open-ended research



question to understand lived experiences of the former staff. The central research question was: What are the experiences of participants who worked in the youth programs in more than one role for more than one season? Conclusions from the research question as well as recommendations and a summary follow this introduction.

### Conclusion

Three themes emerged during data analysis. The 12 participants took part in a total of 16 interviews (i.e., 12 individual interviews and four group interviews). Participants varied in employment positions, length of employment, time periods, and ages. All participants were Black, with six being male and six female. The researcher drew three conclusions from participants' responses to the interview questions. The conclusions are presented in order of strength, from strongest to weakest.

#### **Higher Standards Affecting Adulthood**

The strongest conclusion drawn from participants' experiences pertained to the influence of a more elevated standard than they were accustomed to following. More specifically, the lasting exposure to elevated expectations in work performance and character seemed to have an enduring effect on the participants as adults. Participants distinctly mentioned how they were not initially comfortable with the demands put on them, and yet everyone chose to continue working with the programs despite their personal discomfort. The idea that greater expectations in youth influence individuals in adulthood showed up in the themes of learning, training, and development; leadership; and culture. For example, all but one participant discussed the tools and training they received during each of their work terms and the impact of these factors on their future work and choices. Eleven participants shared thoughts about the consistency of leadership, having to meet higher standards, and recalling those experiences as adults. Based on

their shared experiences, the researcher concluded that establishing and maintaining a high standard for youth and young adults may feel onerous to the individual at the time, but the experience can produce lasting effects, influencing adulthood in a positive manner.

This idea that the imposition of higher standards in youth can influence an individual later in adulthood connected with a number of studies from the literature review. Following are the most applicable studies to this conclusion. A study by Jones et al. (2021) on Youth Enrichment Services represented the clearest link to this study on matriculation experiences. In their research on youths' internal and external motivations, the authors concluded that journeying with youth through four essential phases would lead to a shift from external to internal motivations. The researchers surmised that this shift would translate to increased opportunities in adulthood. This current study on matriculation did not include all four essential phases of the Youth Enrichment Services program in the Jones et al. (2021) research. Only the second phase of their model, employment and exploration, was included. Still, the participants of this study on matriculation affirmed that including employment and career exploration in youth development produced positive effects in adulthood. It is likely that the other three components of the model were already being addressed in the participants' lives. They were already receiving care for their basic needs, their daily work centered around involvement in the community, and their task of working with younger youth required them to be mentors and advocates.

In addition to the research by Jones et al. (2021), partial conclusions from several other studies related to this conclusion about high standards in the matriculation experience (Callina et al., 2017; Johnson & Numer, 2017; Soucie et al., 2018; Williams & Chawla, 2015). In the longitudinal study completed by Soucie et al., the authors identified older adolescent and younger adulthood—the same ages as the matriculating youth in this study—as the ideal time to

learn skills needed in adulthood. As participants in this study on matriculation explained how their experiences carried over into adulthood, they were adamant about leadership requiring them to take responsibility not only for themselves, but challenges that arose in the program. Johnson and Numer (2017) stated that the chances increase for better adaptation in adulthood when youth are required to take responsibility for issues that may arise in adulthood. The participants in the current study were given opportunities to practice skills for self-sufficiency in adulthood. In their study on environmental education programs, Williams and Chawla (2015) confirmed the importance of allowing youth to practice developing in a safe space for sustenance in adulthood.

### **Leadership Character and Style Makes a Difference**

The second conclusion drawn from participants' experiences matriculating through youth programs was that leadership character and style represent an important part of youth development. For maximum impact, leadership character and style should be fine-tuned to encourage youth to pursue growth. Every participant shared detailed accounts about their leaders during the program. Although most experiences had a positive impact, the participants found a few distasteful. Their negative encounters with leadership steered them away from certain styles that may become necessary in leadership roles. For example, Wayne discussed a propensity for laissez-faire leadership as he described his disapproval of the leader who required "a more strict work environment." Despite Wayne's few words during his one interview, he spent considerable time discussing the style of his leaders. The experiences of the other participants, such as Von John and Diamond, contrasted with Wayne's. They initially disliked India's leadership style, stating that "we did not like her." Their assertion represented a general feeling of disapproval towards India's leadership style that was shared by the other participants. Von John and Diamond added that her character reached them, and Von John added: "We knew she loved us"

as he discussed her dedication to them. Their experiences provided examples of how leadership style and character influenced them, although how they interact exactly is unknown. It should be noted that there were more former staff members who did not matriculate than did. Many staff may not remain long enough to learn leadership character, and style is more obvious and therefore recognized sooner.

Despite the omission of leadership character and style from the literature view, findings from four of the included studies related to the conclusion on the value of leadership character and style in youth development. In their study on youth–adult partnerships, Weybright et al. (2017) asserted the importance of youth feeling acknowledged as part of their development. Although their study did not address adult leadership, the value of the youth–adult relationships can be applied to this study on matriculation. Youth in their study commented that they enjoyed feeling equal to and respected by adults. This second conclusion revealed that youth placed a high value on feeling respected by their adult leaders. They reported that leaders demonstrated respect through the leaders’ character and style.

Results from Manuel et al. (2018), De Wit et al. (2020), and Dang and Miller (2013) were also associated with this conclusion on participants’ work experiences with matriculation. Despite studying marginalized youth transitioning to adulthood, the outcomes of the Manuel et al. study can be connected to this researcher’s study. The authors implied that adults should know what youth perceive as important to them in order to encourage their full engagement. Based on the participants’ thorough discussion of their leaders’ character and style, a solid assumption can be made that their leaders’ actions were essential to their experiences. Although all but one participant reported an advantageous ending to their experiences, none of them expounded on leaders caring about the participants’ perceptions of what is important. Several of

the participants expressed not being fully engaged at times and not appreciating the actions and style of their leaders.

### **Lasting Relationships**

The final conclusion drawn from the participants' work experiences matriculating through youth programs related to long-term relationships. Although some of them expressed having more consistent relationships than others, 11 of the 12 participants discussed their continued relationships in one or more of the following categories: peers, administrators (i.e., India and Mr. H), and youth. During the interviews, at least nine of the participants mentioned a social or mentor-like relationship with the administrators. Seven of them referred to uninterrupted friendships with peers they met years ago while working in the programs. Three stated they had maintained contact with youth clients and their families. Their experiences of matriculating through the program also resulted in established relationships in the community. Although a significant number did not continue to live in Thornton Township, their continued relationships brought them back to the Thornton Township community. It was concluded that participants' experiences matriculating through Thornton Township's youth programs led to maintained community connections that have impacted their lives. The findings of several mentoring and community studies mentioned in the literature review align with this conclusion.

Participants' choice to extend relationships with individuals they met in the youth programs after their employment ended can be linked to four studies mentioned under the categories of mentoring and the role of community. Admittedly, maintaining long-term connections differs from mentoring. However, the relationship factor found in both joins the two elements. Hagler and Rhodes (2018), Peralta et al. (2018), and Colistra et al. (2017) all addressed a community relationship component in their studies. Peralta et al. stated that the mentoring-type

relationships built “health and well-being” within communities. In addition to the participants of this study enriching their own lives by maintaining relationships in the community, it is possible the community of Thornton Township benefited as well. In their qualitative phenomenological study, Colistra et al. concluded that community centers were greatly instrumental in developing and sustaining long-term supportive relationships. Similarly, participants in their study identified leaders of the organization as a continual support. The concept of ongoing mentoring was addressed by two participants during the interviews, but it was not sufficient data to specifically address mentoring.

Although the researcher was not surprised by the conclusions of the study, she was surprised that the results related to the literature due to the absence of closely related studies. This may indicate the existence of foundational principles within youth development. The three conclusions on participants' work experiences matriculating through youth programs will further the understanding of youth development. Although PYD was not explicitly identified as a framework for working with the youth in this study, elements of its five factors (i.e., competence, connection, character, confidence, and caring) appeared in the participants' experiences. Suggestions about understanding PYD within this community are made in the next section.

### Recommendations

The recommendations for this study emerged from the literature and the need to understand better the interaction of youth development and matriculation in a work setting. The findings resulted in four recommendations. Although phenomenological studies provide researchers with freedom, especially in innovative studies (People, 2021), they often lack specific data. Creswell and Poth (2018) encouraged researchers to utilize qualitative research for various reasons, including instituting new areas of study. Contrasting the conclusions of this

study with more defined studies in the literature, the researcher recommends further research designed to answer the following four questions:

- What other mechanisms impacted participants' experiences carrying over into adulthood (Jones et al., 2021)?
- What role does leadership play in equal youth–adult partnerships (Weybright et al., 2017)?
- What elements are present in former staff members' decisions to continue relationships in the community (Colistra et al., 2017)?
- What, if any, are the measures of PYD practice and theory within the three programs represented in this study? Would other frameworks such as social justice youth development be more effective?

### **Other Mechanisms**

Although it was concluded that participants' experiences of higher standards led to influence in adulthood, researchers such as Jones et al. (2021) have identified other mechanisms that contributed to this influence. Taking a closer look at more specific elements of this influence could further the knowledge in this area and increase the likelihood of self-sufficient and viable adulthood. The participants described the factors that influenced them in adulthood, but it would be interesting to objectively measure the influence and compare the findings.

### **Leadership in Youth–Adult Partnerships**

Adults may partner with youth to complete certain projects such as those represented in the study by Weybright et al. (2017). However, adults will assume the role of leader, and rightfully so, in most youth–adult relationships. The authors raised the question about the

balance of youth–adult partnerships and adults leading youth. Determining the role leadership plays in equal youth–adult relationships may lead to generational bridges.

### **Relationships in the Community**

Colistra et al. (2017) examined relationship-building within a community center. Expanding that study to investigate relationship-building within the community would link directly to sustainability. Jarrett et al. (2004) attempted to understand social capital in youth programs. Broadening from youth programs to community could provide invaluable information on sustaining communities.

### **Measuring PYD**

PYD did not appear in the results of this study of participants matriculating through work experiences. However, based on a recent meta-analysis of researchers such as Bruner et al. (2021), it would be worth measuring any evidence of PYD. The researcher could ask the following questions: “What, if any, are the measures of PYD practice and theory within the three programs represented in this study? Would other frameworks such as social justice youth development be more effective?”

### **Summary**

A thorough analysis of the data on participants’ experiences matriculating through youth programs yielded results that connect with the literature on youth development. Former staff passionately and clearly articulated the positive and negative aspects of their experiences with three of Thornton Township’s youth programs. Most of the participants continued to engage in relationships within the community regardless of their residence status and claimed these relationships impacted their lives in adulthood. Understanding more details about that impact



could increase the potency of community centers and social service practitioners who serve youth and young adults.

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## Appendix A

### Email to Potential Participants

SUBJECT LINE: What was your experience with Thornton Township Youth & Family Services?

Greetings former Youth staff, volunteers, and participants!

We hope this letter finds you well. It has been a while since we have connected with you. Regardless of how long it has been since you have moved on, your time spent with us is forever etched in our foundation. Your involvement has helped serve many residents.

***We are requesting your help again!*** I am completing a qualitative dissertation on the experiences of those who worked and volunteered with our summer and after school programs in at least two different capacities. However, I will not facilitate the interviews due to personal biases.

At this time, we need people who were involved in the youth programs in a minimum of two roles (e.g., participant, volunteer, assistant, instructor, coordinator, office assistant) during different seasons. The participants must be at least 18 years old and comfortable sharing their experiences in detail.

MORE INFO:

- The interviews will take place via Zoom
- Your name will not be disclosed in the results of the study
- Four hours is the total time estimated (includes interviews and follow up)
- Consists of 1 – 4 online interviews (individual and/or group)
- Participation helps us better serve the community

Willing and able participants, please **complete the attached documents (name, program, role, year form & consent form) and send it back to this email address.** The consent form must be hand signed (not electronically signed). Please write in your position in “other” if it is not listed.

Only the first 15 participants will be accepted on a first come, first serve basis and given tokens of appreciation in the form of a \$40 e-gift card once data collection is complete.

If you have further questions, please reply to this email, or contact Mrs. Lewis (the interviewer) at (847) 420-9561. Be sure to leave a voicemail if she is not available.

Sincerely,

India Blakely

Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B

Informed Consent

## “Adults’ Experiences Matriculating Through Youth Programs” Informed Consent

Dear Participant

The information presented in this document all relates to a study being completed and your decision to participate or not to participate in the study. Even if you agree to participate in the study, you may change your mind at any time, and your wish will be immediately granted. Any incentive that was promised to you will not be affected by your withdrawal from the study.

The purpose of this study is to learn about your experiences in the youth programs. The format of the study is a phenomenological study. The procedures for this study include an interview and document analysis. Data will be collected in both through the interview format and document analysis. The researcher may contact you later for clarification purposes, verify that the study results are accurate, and/or share the study results with you.

Feel free to ask any questions that arise at any time during your participation. I want you to feel comfortable and relaxed during the entire process. I also want you to give your feedback on how your information from this study will be categorized and then share the final study with you. This study is not likely to expose you to more risk than what they encounter in their everyday lives. It is not probable that participants will suffer any harm. There is minimal risk associated with this study such as slight discomfort with sharing your experiences. This study's benefits could be understanding the experiences of those who graduate from one role to the next in youth programs.

Your name and identifying information will be kept confidential throughout the entire study and afterward. I am the only person who will know your name. You may choose your own name for me to refer to you during this study. The data will be kept in a secure place.

Please sign and date this consent form giving your agreement to participate in the study described above. You will receive a copy of this form for your records.

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Date

---

Signature of Participant

India Blakely, Olivet Nazarene University



## Appendix C

Name, Program, Role, Year Form

<b>NAME:</b>		
<b>PROGRAM</b> (Circle one per box)	<b>ROLE</b> (Circle one per box)	<b>YEAR</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer Enrichment</li> <li>• Days in the Park</li> <li>• After School Program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer</li> <li>• Assistant/Assistant Teacher</li> <li>• Instructor/Teacher</li> <li>• Site Coordinator</li> <li>• Assistant Coordinator</li> <li>• Office Assistant</li> <li>• Other: _____</li> </ul>	

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

#### Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of adults who have matriculated through specific after school and summer programs from youth or young adulthood. At this stage in the research, the concept of individuals progressing through the youth & family department will be generally defined as matriculation.

#### Research question:

- What are the experiences of participants who worked in the youth programs in more than one role for more than one season?

#### Question prompts

- How do participants describe the experience as a participant in the program?
- How do participants describe the experience as a volunteer?
- How do participants describe the experience as an assistant?
- How do participants describe the experience as an instructor?
- How do participants describe the experience as a coordinator?
- How do participants describe the experience in whatever role they were in?

#### **OPENING SCRIPT**

Hi (smile). Before we begin, do you give me permission to video and audio record this and all subsequent meetings about this dissertation? The video will be used for the purposes of completing this dissertation and kept confidential. (Get an answer and Begin recording)

I am confirming that you have given your consent to video and audio record this and all subsequent meetings about this dissertation for the purposes of completing this dissertation.

Please confirm.

Thank you for agreeing to allow me to interview you about your experience as a former staff in Thornton Township's After School and Summer Programs.

Please confirm the name you would like to be called for the duration of this study. Thank you.

This interview is about a qualitative phenomenological dissertation to analyze experiences like yours. As mentioned, the interview will be about an hour. You were an essential part of Thornton Township Youth & Family Services and this is an opportunity to talk about your experiences with them. The research will provide community program leaders with reinforcement on understanding youth and young adults who mature within the work setting which allows leaders to better help with development.

No one will know your identity besides the researcher. Your name and identifying details will be kept confidential. We have received your signed informed consent stating that you understand and agree to participate.

Before you begin sharing your experiences, let me confirm your positions and dates of employment. (CONFIRM positions and dates) Does that sound about right?

Now, I want you to take a deep breath and just relax. When you answer the questions, please remember that I was not there. So, you're describing your lived experience to someone who has never heard of this phenomenon.

Appendix E

Group Interview Protocol

Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the experiences of adults who have matriculated through specific after school and summer programs from youth or young adulthood. At this stage in the research, the concept of individuals progressing through the youth & family department will be generally defined as matriculation.

Research question:

- What are the experiences of participants who worked in the youth programs in more than one role for more than one season?

Prompting questions:

- How do participants describe the experience as a participant in the program?
- How do participants describe the experience as a volunteer?
- How do participants describe the experience as an assistant?
- How do participants describe the experience as an instructor?
- How do participants describe the experience as a coordinator?
- How do participants describe the experience in whatever role they were in?

**OPENING SCRIPT**

**BEFORE RECORDING HAVE THEM CHANGE THEIR DISPLAY NAME TO THEIR**

**ALIAS**

**RECORD AFTER NAMES ARE CHANGED**

Hi. Before we begin again, this is a confirmation that everyone has given permission to video and audio record this and all subsequent meetings about this dissertation. The recordings will be used for the purposes of completing this dissertation and kept confidential.



Thank you for agreeing to allow me to interview you about your experience as a former staff in Thornton Township's "After School or Summer Programs." Often in our communities we don't have the research to validate the work that was done. So, your input is more valuable than you probably realize. Although this is for India's dissertation, she and her professors are expecting this to be bigger than her dissertation. Your experiences are unique and warrant capturing. The research will provide community program leaders with reinforcement on understanding youth and young adults who mature within the work setting which allows leaders to better help with development.

This is a recap that the interviews are for a qualitative phenomenological dissertation to analyze experiences like yours. As mentioned, the interview will be about an hour.

Please remember to use one another's aliases.

Emails will be sent to you until the dissertation is complete. So, remember to check your emails regularly.

An email about this meeting was sent with the following information:

"The purpose of the group interview is to get more information about your experiences with Thornton Township Youth & Family. Often, there are things we are prompted to remember and say in a group that we did not share in the individual meeting.

Here are a few tips:

- Have a quiet place to be on camera for about an hour
- Relax and connect with one another
- The interviewer will prompt you and maintain healthy group dynamics
- Talk with each other (share detailed experiences and examples)

- Use your alias names (TYPE THEM AS YOUR ZOOM NAME)”

When you discuss your experiences with each other, please remember that I was not there. So, you’re describing your lived experience to someone who has never heard of this phenomenon.

**INTERVIEW PROMPTS:**

Have them to share examples of their experiences

Don’t be afraid of 3 second pauses

Don’t say “great,” “good job”, etc. – remain neutral/neither encouraging nor discouraging

Give a 10 minute warning before the end of the job (“We have about 10 minutes left, is there anything pressing that you would like to share before we end)

**CLOSING SCRIPT:**

Thank you again!

There will be one more focus group for Summer Programs and a separate one for After School Programs.

Summer Programs is 6pm on Monday June 7<sup>th</sup> via Zoom

After School Program is 7pm on Monday June 7<sup>th</sup> via Zoom

You will receive another Zoom link for this meeting. Would you confirm your attendance at this meeting? Please direct all questions to India via email. Thank you again and this ends the interview.