In this qualitative study, I examine the experiences of staff who work in an after-school program (ASP). Specifically, I investigate their roles in the program, how they support the building of meaningful relationships with their participants, and their perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. Prior to COVID-19, after-school programs were intended to provide a safe environment for students during after-school hours. There is a growing recognition that after-school programs provide opportunities for positive social development, particularly among adolescents (Farrell et al., 2013).

In the midst of the pandemic, ASPs transitioned into all-day programs due to school closures. This transition allowed programs to provide support to students and families who were impacted by the coronavirus, had limited Internet access, and had to adapt to virtual instruction. It was important to understand staff members’ perspectives of their roles in developing meaningful relationships with students in order to support the students’ positive development into young adults, especially in the current setting.

I conducted basic qualitative research in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I chose this research approach because I was interested in how staff interpreted their roles and experiences, how they defined their work, and what meaning they attached to their roles. Positive Youth Development (PYD) Theory served as my conceptual framework for this study. As the name implies, central to PYD is the idea that youth have the potential to change and that such change can support individual well-being as well as the social good that is influenced by the developing person (Benson et al., 2007). Data were drawn from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Durham and Orange County (BGCDOC) after-school programs via a series of staff interviews.
In determining my findings, I developed and applied codes to the transcripts in order to surface central themes. I used member checks as well as peer reviews to help ensure ethical integrity in my research. The reader is able to view the program through the lens of staff, all of whom were at least 18 years old and worked in the program as staff or as a director. My findings revealed that staff saw themselves as valuable resources to their participants, providing support that extended beyond the program’s hours. They viewed the inter-personal relationships they formed as beneficial to themselves and also saw how their interactions with teens had the potential to save their young lives in their at-risk neighborhood settings. I concluded that ASPs, especially in the midst of the pandemic, provided supports for students that could prove to be beneficial to families, participants, and community stake-holders in how to best meet the socioemotional needs of children in any setting.
THE EXPERIENCES OF STAFF IN AN AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM

by

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I would like to thank everyone who supported me in this marathon. To my friends, family, and especially my wife, it takes a village and my village has been there for me every step of the way. I am blessed to be able to honor my final promise to my father, and I hope to continue to make you and momma proud. Special thanks to Drs. Peck, Clarida, and Peters for your support, guidance, and wisdom; I appreciate you all.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

So if I had to say what was an unsuccessful [after-school] program, it would just be a glorified babysitting service. — Principal, 2018

An after-school program (ASP) covers the portion of the day that students have once their traditional school day is over. Also known as Out of School Time (OST), this interval falls somewhere between the hours of 3:00 pm and 6:00 pm.

After-school settings provide a safe place where school-age children can avoid unsafe neighborhoods, drug use, or the potential setting of a teenage pregnancy. There is also research showing that attendance in an after-school program can improve a student’s academic performance as well as decrease their likelihood to be involved in the justice system (Durlak et al., 2010). Although after-school staff assume caregiver roles usually reserved for the home or in schools, their perceptions of their roles in an after-school or OST program are not given the same level of scrutiny assigned to other stake-holders or participants in a child’s education and upbringing (Hall et al., 2010). Current research has shown that the interactions in nontraditional and after-school settings promote important prosocial skills as well as behavioral improvements in and out of school (Jones & Deutsch, 2011). The support that is provided by nonrelated adults in after-school programs have been shown to be an offset to adolescents who experience negative relations with peers or teachers and exhibit problematic behaviors (Mahoney et al., 2002).

My research responds to the dilemma that many of the working parents who have school-age children experience when their students end their academic day and are unsupervised during this time after school (Durlak, Mahoney, et al., 2010). These settings are missed opportunities for youth to form bonds with adults who do not make the same demands of them as their classroom
teachers and individuals who are in the role of evaluators of the student’s academic performance and/or social behavior. After-school program staff typically do not require adolescents to conduct themselves in a manner that obligates the teen to behave in any way that is outside of their normal non-supervised selves or hold them to the familial expectations of their parents. ASP staff allow students a freedom of expression that is similar to their peer group, and these individuals are usually familiar with the culture surrounding the youth. Due to the regularity with which they interact with each other, there are significant opportunities to form relationships and have unscripted conversations between the participants and staff of after-school programs (Rhodes, 2004).

After-school staff can serve as positive adult role models who do not evaluate students academically but instead serve as possible mentors and support positive personal, social, and emotional development. Today’s youth need role models and mentors, as well as structured activities that are able to support them in navigating their growth into positive members of their communities. Teens who have access and the ability to participate in programs after their school day are exposed to prosocial experiences with positive like-minded peers while being monitored by caring adults who provide a much-needed sense of belonging (Mahoney, 2000). It remains imperative that we understand how these adults perceive their role and how it informs their practice. This knowledge is invaluable because it informs staff of how their support impacts the students who are under their care. The effects of staff practices and how students experience the program are what are most likely to produce positive developmental change in the youth who attend after-school programs (C. Smith et al., 2010).
Background

In the late 19th century, compulsory education laws and changes in labor laws caused American children to have more non-discretionary time outside of their school day. This created an environment where youth could experience behavior challenges that Farrell et al. (2012) indicated were more likely to occur in an unstructured setting (as cited in Farrell et al., 2013). One of the ways this was addressed was by the creation of drop-in centers that provided general activities for school-age children. These activities occupied the student’s non-academic time and were loosely supervised by one or two adults. Witt and Caldwell (2010), in their research, note that by the beginning of the 20th century, programs began to target their support towards students by providing activities that sought to support their academic growth, promote pro-social behaviors and/or good citizenship. The growth of formal programs for when young people are not in school has occurred rapidly, but challenges remain to ensure that needs of all children are met once the academic portion of their day ends (VanderVen, 2007).

As the 20th century has progressed and former stay-at-home mothers have begun to enter the work force, school-age child supervision needs have increased. In 1955, 38% of the mothers with children between the ages of 6–17 years old were employed, a statistic that has grown to the point where that percentage is currently 76.4% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2019). While having a dual-earner household was beneficial financially for lower income families, the development of “latchkey children,” the decay of the communities, at-risk youth behaviors, and safety concerns increased the attention paid to school-age unsupervised children and caused the development of ASP programs that function as substitute care, providing a developmental as well as an educational function (Baghurst & Fink, 2018; VanderVen, 2007). With both parents working, the increased need for programs that were targeted towards school-age children coincided with an
increased focus on the safety and supervision of these same children to help prevent anti-social behaviors. Noting that ASPs offer a service that is critical to families when seeking a safe environment for their students during what Palmer et al. (2009) called the “risky” after-school hours, these services allowed parents to work without having to worry about the well-being of their children at the end of the school day (Farrell et al., 2013). Supporting research also indicates that attending a quality ASP can produce multiple positive outcomes for school-age children (Baghurst & Fink, 2018; VanderVen, 2007).

Recent years have shown that after-school programs have grown due to increased political support and funding via the development of federal programs aimed at supporting low-income, at-risk families, noting that these students were usually already recipients of multiple services (Sanders & Munford, 2014). In the early 1990s, the Child Care Development and Block Grant became the Child Care Development Fund. The CCD Fund provided support for low-income families via subsidies to offset the cost of child care. The CCD was replaced by 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) funding in 1994. Similar to earlier program funding, 21CCLC programs also allowed funding for after-school programs, reaching an average federal budget of $1 billion since 2002 (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). The need for these supports points to class differences in child rearing patterns as well as access to activities. While relatively small numbers may experience a variety of activities, many more experience little or no organized activities. Lack of these supports make it difficult for at-risk youth, who are missing opportunities to participate in activities. This issue oftentimes is related to their parents’ economic status and their neighborhood’s access to these resources (Barnes & Nolan, 2019).
Problem

Previous research has identified the importance of meaningful relationships that students form with caring adults and how these relationships support a student’s development of social skills and prosocial behaviors (Rhodes, 2004). ASP staff practices can provide a foundation for the many types of program content and the resulting positive results for participants (C. Smith et al., 2010). After-school programs are intended to provide a safe environment for students’ during after-school hours. There is also growing recognition that after-school programs provide opportunities for positive youth social development, particularly among adolescents, due to the significant amount of free time spent with nonrelated adult staff members (Farrell et al., 2013). As more students are entering school with behavioral concerns that interfere with their learning experiences as well as affect their teachers’ ability to manage classroom behaviors, self-regulation appears to be a real deficiency (VanderVen, 2007). Previous research has demonstrated that after-school staff can build relationships with attendees that promote a sense of belonging as well as allow adolescents to develop positive social norms (Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Researchers have also found that youth who felt that staff were caring and competent were much more likely to engage and attend an after-school program (Fredricks et al., 2014), with the added understanding that physical and psychological safety are critical components to any successful ASP program (Baghurst & Fink, 2018).

Purpose

The purpose of my study was to examine the experiences of staff who work in an after-school program. Specifically, I investigated their roles in the program, how they supported the building of meaningful relationships with their participants, and how they perceived the effectiveness of the program. Asocial behavior among today’s youth creates concerns for both
the mental as well as the physical safety of young people (Baghurst & Fink, 2018). It was therefore important that we understood staff members’ perspectives of their roles in developing meaningful relationships with students in order to support their positive development into young adults. These relationships contribute to navigating negative relations with family members, allow for skill building, goal setting, and encourage strong feelings of support and trust that are very similar to effective mentor/mentee relationships, while providing a protective factor for youth experiencing stressful life circumstances (Mahoney et al., 2002). VanderVen (2007) points out that the ability to form these relationships supports a child’s general sense of security, confidence, and well-being; in turn, these supports allow the child to use these traits as a working model for future relations with others.

**Research Questions**

I answered the following research question through my research: “What are the experiences of staff who work in an after-school program?” I also addressed the related sub questions which were:

- What roles do staff play in the program?
- How do staff members support the building of meaningful relationships with their participants?
- What are staff members’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the program?

**Existing Research**

Much of the research related to after-school programs has been quantitative in nature (Luter et al., 2017). These studies make use of large sample sizes and focus on multiple variables related to the specific needs of program participants. This can be accomplished by focusing on
the youth’s social emotional needs, academic enrichment or remediation activities, physical activity (PA) programs that are focused on healthful living and/or positive youth development (PYD), or simply a safe environment that is focused on providing youth with mentors who serve as caring supportive adults who build positive relationships with adolescents.

In my research, I sought to understand the perspectives of after-school staff and how these perspectives would be reflected their practices within the after-school program. Staff’s interactions with the participants of after-school programs are considered critical to the students’ experiences and largely contribute to their level of success when seeking to improve the socioemotional outcomes of adolescents (C. Smith et al., 2010). However, the experiences of after-school staff have not been examined in depth using qualitative methods. When determining how to better meet the needs of students in after-school programs nationwide, understanding the experiences of the adults who are the primary caregivers and mentors of the youth at the point of delivery becomes invaluable. Whether after-school programming includes physical activities that focus on positive youth development (or PA-PYD), a 21st CCLC based program that targets inner-city or at-risk youth, the local Boys’ and Girls’ club or similar settings, the role of after-school staff is often overlooked.

Only recently have researchers expanded their focus beyond quantitative studies that compare participants to non-participants in after-school programs in order to determine how successful a program may be (Fredricks et al., 2014). My study extends the research that is emerging in relation to staff members’ perspectives and experiences in after-school programs. A growing number of studies related to after-school show that participation in a program with caring adults can lead to improvements in students’ social skills, academic performance, and improved relationships with adults and peers. There is also an emerging consensus among
researchers that positive youth-staff relationships may be a key determinant in these program successes (Rhodes, 2004). Studies suggest that staff members’ positive relational practices with youth, including community engagement and teamwork, contribute to a positive adult-youth interaction that promotes positive youth development (PYD) (Larson, 2000). Simply attending an after-school program is sometimes not enough to support adolescents. Blyth (2006) and Pianta (2008) both stressed that the practices of staff and their interactions with participants were two of the most important aspects of education and human service settings. VanderVen (2007) described remaining challenges to ensure that programs are of quality and the development of quality programming moving forward.

My research shares the perceptions of ASP staff, how they make sense of their roles and show their actions facilitate creating processes that allow for the creation of better school and local communities. Often, schools, parents, and politicians seek quantitative studies that are intended to display how their decisions have generated positive academic, societal, or financial outcomes in relation to adolescents. By focusing on staff perceptions within a free after-school program, I was able to examine and can now share how staff engaged in their practices in relation to the students under their care. It was critical to gain an understanding of how staff perceived their roles and how they contributed to participants’ emotional growth and the development of prosocial behaviors by attending the after-school program (Mahoney, 2000). As Luter et al. (2017) and others have noted, one of the main attributes of a quality program is the opportunity to form positive relationships with adults.

**Brief Description of Methods**

In this study, I share how staff perceive their role in an after-school program and how this informs their daily practice. While many in the research community are conducting meta-
analyses, surveys, or are performing the role of program oversight as a vehicle of government agencies in charge of their funding, oftentimes the researcher’s focus is evaluative and the data is reduced to numeric values that do not capture the experience of staff when seeking their perceptions on the purpose of after-school or their role in it beyond working as program staff. Therefore, I conducted basic qualitative research in this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used this research approach because it allowed me insights into how staff interpreted their roles/experiences, how they defined their work, and what meaning they may have attached to their roles.

It was critical to understand how staff perceived their roles and how they contributed to adolescents’ emotional growth and the development of prosocial behaviors by attending the after-school program (Mahoney, 2000). When seeking to support adolescents in their positive development into young adults, the role of after-school staff cannot be dismissed when they are in a position to support these growth needs outside of the academic setting. As more school-age children are being identified as at-risk, the increased attention paid to the importance of after-school programs and their role in helping with the development of positive adolescent community members is not minimal. Because schools are having to focus on assessments and safety concerns, activities that are focused on the promotion of prosocial behavior among children and adolescents are sometimes overlooked due to the lack of time available. In order to support the emotional well-being of the child, the finite amount of time available during the instructional day is not always sufficient and the lack of this sometimes results in adverse behaviors on the part of students. Due to the school’s response to these anti-social behaviors, families can begin to feel a distancing between themselves and the school setting in relation to their students. Some low-income families feel that this social exclusion is offset by after-school
staff who serve as a resource for the students and their families outside of the regular academic setting (Barnes & Nolan, 2019; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). After-school staff provide much needed prosocial development opportunities for those same students who are adversely affected by their parents’ social and/or economic status (VanderVen, 2007).

**Conceptual Framework**

In this study, I used Positive Youth Development as my conceptual framework. Positive Youth Development overlaps many disciplines, concepts, and strategies. Benson and Pittman, as cited in Benson et al. (2007), shared that PYD links relationships, experiences, and outcomes for youth with the primary principle being promotion of positive experiences for youth and their growth as a result of these experiences, which includes individual and societal implications. Researchers seeking to measure the socioemotional growth of adolescents and the lessening of anti-social behaviors make PYD a popular theory. When exploring the benefits of after-school programs, Positive Youth Development theory allows the researcher to understand the setting of a program and its impact on an adolescent by using a measure of individual or societal impacts (Hirsch et al., 2010). PYD assumes the ability of children to improve their behaviors and socioemotional status when partnered with a caring adult who connects with the youth (Rhodes, 2004). Positive Youth Development theory focuses on the practices of staff as well as outside factors contributing to an adolescent’s baseline status, then measures how the practices, formatting of the program, and positive change in social behaviors impacts the child over a period of time.

PYD is useful when seeking to answer process-oriented questions related to the impact of a program, or when evaluating the socioemotional and social development, and/or academic characteristics of a program’s participants (Durlak, Mahoney, et al., 2010). The capacity of
human potential drives PYD by viewing young people as resources instead of problems that need solving and makes it a popular theory in relation to research related to after-school or out-of-school time programming (Benson et al., 2007). By not having the evaluative role of the adolescents’ classroom teachers or the constraints of their busy schedules, after-school staff members’ perceptions of how their actions help adolescents learn and model prosocial behaviors can be invaluable in determining the best supports for the youth under their care (Rhodes, 2004).

Given the importance of the theory for my study, I describe PYD in more depth in my literature review in Chapter 2.

**Significance**

Much of the research regarding after-school programs focuses on the school-age participants and how these programs provide opportunities for them to develop physical, social, emotional, academic, and/or cognitive skills as well as develop positive relationships with their peers and adults (Greenberg, 2013). By focusing on the perspectives of staff, I was able to determine how they made sense of their practice and their awareness of the opportunities that were available by supporting the positive development of adolescents under their care. I gained an understanding of how they perceived their roles as non-evaluative, nonrelated adults in the support of school-age children (Mahoney et al., 2002). The addition the COVID-19 pandemic created a setting that highlighted the significance of these supports.

When determining the significance of the study, it was of particular importance that there has been an increase of youth at-risk behaviors such as violence, smoking, drinking, and substance abuse that are associated with unproductive use of unsupervised, non-discretionary time that occurs between the end of the academic day and when parents are able to come home (Lee et al., 2017). These and other factors, including the previously mentioned rising number of
kids who are becoming at risk, contribute to researchers’ increased attention to how important the role of after-school programs are in the development of positive community members among adolescents. ASPs seek to support adolescents by keeping them off the streets during the middle of the afternoon after school releases, as well as supporting working parents by providing supervision until they are able to exit work. The pandemic emphasized the importance of these type of settings and parents needed to return to their places of work. Families who did not have the ability to work remotely and did not have reliable Wi-Fi access found how this impacted their students’ ability to attend school virtually as well. After-school programs that adapted to the pandemic were able to support families and schools by offering mentors who promoted prosocial norms to students (Hirsch et al., 2010). With so many positive indicators of an after-school program’s capacity to support school-age children, it was important to understand the perceptions of the staff who were in contact with these students the most. After-school staff are part of the ground troops in the war to support the social and emotional wellness of youth and took the lead during the COVID-19 pandemic. By learning how they made sense of their role, we are better able to navigate how to best equip staff to support the social emotional needs of the students under their care, especially post-pandemic.

**Overview of Remaining Chapters**

In Chapter II, I review related research pertaining to after-school programs. I examine how after-school programs support the social and emotional needs of students, the concept of Positive Youth Development, and the nature of positive adult/child relationships.

In Chapter III, I describe the basic qualitative research methodology that I employed in the study. I also describe the setting as well as how I collected data. I discuss what strategies I
used in the data analysis. I also explore the trustworthiness of the data and my positionality in relation to the research.

I discuss the findings from my research in Chapter IV. In Chapter V, I analyze the findings from my study, describe how my study relates to the existing research, and conclude by explaining how it moves research forward to contribute to educational settings, families, as well as after-school programs.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Today’s school-age children encounter multiple challenges that occur in the school, their community settings, and home. The ability to navigate these challenges and develop the skill-set needed to persevere through difficult times does not always occur naturally and our younger generations may need additional support during such trying times. Children having access to supportive adults or the potential to engage in their interests or gain much needed social capital to support their growth is minimal due to the relative absence of available adults in their community (Sampson et al., 1999). Out-of-school time (OST) is quickly becoming a setting that is critical for all children but especially for adolescents. When students leave their academic setting, they are more exposed to a time that is a mix of “risk and opportunity.” If this time after school is not organized or structured, risks can range from boredom and socially destructive behaviors to missed opportunities that include academic enrichment or the development of relationships with caring adults (Halpern, 2002). When an adolescent does not have access to athletic programs or clubs after school and is unsupervised during unstructured time after their academic day has ended, situations become “at best unproductive for developing children, and at worst, dangerous” (Roffman et al., 2001, p. 86). There are dynamics among all groups of children and youth, where there is bullying, exclusion, and scapegoating. While teasing and bullying have been around for years, these behaviors are progressing to a point where programs must now make special efforts to prevent children from being socially victimized. This can be achieved by either directly or indirectly by settings, activities, group composition, timing, but critical to it all is the adult presence (VanderVen, 2007).
With a growing number of unsupervised teens whose socializing leads to delinquency and drug use (Cross et al., 2009), the importance of determining how to support these unsupervised youth becomes more pressing and necessary to provide guidance to our future leaders. Positive youth-centered programs create an environment where meaningful relationships with caring adults and like-minded peers promote the healthy personal growth of early adolescents and serves an alternative to at risk neighborhood settings (Fuller et al., 2013). While some providers believe that their program should be shaped by the interest of participants, the adults also have criteria that they consider regarding protection, care, and opportunities for enrichment as well as play (Halpern, 2002). Because many young people experience attachment-related issues, relationships with after-school staff are critical, not simply as a quality indicator but as a key factor in ensuring a meaningful experience and the promoting of positive developmental outcomes (VanderVen, 2007).

In this review of existing research, I first consider literature related to how after-school programs can support the social and emotional needs of students. I define what I mean by After-School Program, provide a background on after-school programs, and examine what social and/or emotional effects after-school can have on adolescents. Next, I explore Positive Youth Development (PYD), which serves as my conceptual framework. PYD promotes the development of behaviors and competences that support young people becoming more productive members of their communities. By focusing on how each person can improve as an individual, PYD stresses that interventions should keep in mind the youth’s present state of being and what their specific needs may be (Durlak et al., 2007). Finally, I examine the nature of positive adult/child relationships, including how these relationships are developed between students and staff and how these relationships promote or support the prosocial behavior of
adolescents. These behaviors, which are also known as “non-cognitive” abilities, include perseverance, motivation, risk aversion, and self-esteem/control which has a direct effect on an individual’s ability to function in a social, academic, or work setting (Heckman, 2008). Research has shown that youth who gain social-emotional competence also model other prosocial behaviors such as sharing with others, helping peers, and expressing concern for others’ well-being. This allows adolescents to be more positive members of their communities and society as a whole (Graziano & Hart, 2016).

After School Programs and Children’s Social and Emotional Needs

Defining “After-School Programs”

Organizers of after-school programs (ASPs) sometimes find it easier to define what ASPs are not instead of what they are. ASPs are a different kind of development institution, one that can identify gaps in youths’ lives and try to fill them while being responsive to the changing needs and circumstances surrounding 21st-century adolescents such as resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Halpern, 2002). In an ASP, there are multiple services and positive resources that are focused on supporting vulnerable adolescents, and after-school programs, as well as their staff, are key stakeholders in supporting the development of tomorrow’s leaders (Sanders & Munford, 2014). After-school programs provide a resource for school-age children who may not receive them under any other circumstances. The settings of after-school programs can be viewed as “intermediary environments” (Noam, 2001, p. 4) that assume roles that are typically offered at home or in school. ASPs provide a safe, secure environment that allows youth to experiment with new roles and ideas that support a positive development into adulthood (Hall et al., 2010). Young people living in communities, especially low-income settings, have an increased risk for problem behaviors and are more likely to be in settings where there is an
increased possibility for delinquent behaviors (Lopez et al., 2015). ASPs have the ability to provide opportunities to foster the personal and social skills of youth. The potential for relationships to be formed with after-school staff provides a safe, secure, space where the potential for an increase in social capital and other related characteristics are gained, especially in communities lacking the resources that support the development of prosocial skills among its youth (Jones & Deutsch, 2011).

For the purposes of this study, I defined after-school programs as a program designed to care for children in the hours immediately following the academic day until approximately 6 pm or when adults are likely to end a typical workday on Monday through Friday. Due to the outbreak of a global pandemic, after-school programs have evolved into all-day programs that support students during remote learning, a result of local school closures and the need for parents to return to work. The two programs in the study began at 7:30 am and ended at 6:30 pm.

**Background on After-School Programs**

School-age children occupy the unique position of failing to be too young to be left alone or not always possessing the level of emotional maturity to be left alone and self-regulate. When the school day is over at approximately 3:00 pm and when many parents are at work, over 15 million school aged children are unsupervised during the hours after the academic day is over (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Hall et al., 2010). In low-income areas, especially those that experience high crime rates, many parents tell their children they cannot go outside. This directive promotes the desire for safety by staying inside over seeking physical, social, and emotional development opportunities out of the home setting (Roffman et al., 2001). As more children are being identified as at-risk, researchers are paying increased attention to the importance of after-school programs in the development of positive community members. With
schools having to increasingly focus on assessments and safety, activities that are focused on the promotion of prosocial behavior among children and adolescents are oftentimes overlooked due to the lack of time available to school staff. ASPs provide time for students to develop meaningful relationships with supportive adults, have a safe place off the streets to avoid engaging in delinquent behavior or becoming victims to adverse conditions that are inherent to being unsupervised during this time after-school (Hall et al., 2010). These unsupervised adolescents need an environment after the academic day that is engaging and secure and that is a place where they feel respected and valued (Fredricks et al., 2014). Settings that support the emotional well-being of the child are vital. Although schools can provide such support, the finite amount of time available during the instructional day limits the impact of school hours only. This creates opportunities outside of the school setting to address these adolescent behaviors.

The time after school also creates an environment where the safety and well-being of children becomes a concern. Adolescents are more likely to engage in risk taking behavior and begin to experiment with drugs, tobacco or vaping products, sex, and alcohol. These same youth who are unsupervised during the time between 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm are exposed to violent crimes involving themselves or peers due to 22% of juvenile crime occurring during this time alone (Newman et al., 2000; Office of Juvenile Justice, 2006). This is especially relevant with at-risk students or youth who reside in at-risk neighborhoods. School-age children who live in adverse socio-economic settings experience higher rates of delinquency, and the activities provided by after-school programs serve as an intervention for improving the positive outcomes for at-risk youth as well as erecting defenses against juvenile delinquency (Lopez et al., 2015). In light of these anti-social behaviors, some families begin to feel a distance growing between themselves, their children, and the school setting. Some low-income families, as a result of the growing
social gap between themselves and the school, feel after-school staff can serve as a resource for the students and their families outside of the regular academic setting (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). These environments are where youth have developed supporting and trusting relationships with the adults, and where staff give the perception that they care about the adolescents’ well-being (Fredricks et al., 2014).

After-school programs have been developed and revamped over the years. At first, they provided a space for youth who no longer needed to be part of the work force and to support working mothers or newly evolved dual-earner households. ASPs now are more mature spaces where youth can explore their interests and develop pro-social behaviors, to help them develop into well-rounded functional adults.

Although academic supports have not been shown to be significant in the case of some after-school programs, there have been secondary gains in parental involvement in school and student commitment to homework, as well as a decrease in adverse behaviors of adolescents (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). The focus on the academic component tends to overlook the fact that many ASPs were created to increase young people’s participation in organized activities and support their personal and social growth through adult-supervised activities, (Durlak, Mahoney, et al., 2010).

**Types of After-School Programs**

After-school programs cover many areas in relation to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) experiences, such as self-awareness, social relationships, and responsible decision making (Durlak, Mahoney, et al., 2010). Some programs incorporate Positive Youth Development (PYD) or Self Development (SD) through physical activities that are organized to build self-confidence and the development of healthy habits that support students’ emotional as well as
physical health with a focus on changing the youth’s understanding of the nutritional value of the food they consume. Critical to all programs is the need of the activities to complement rather than simply serve as an extension of the academic learning day. After-school cannot be a setting where students simply do more school work. ASPs must be a place where the youth can participate in interesting and challenging activities with adults who support their development into well rounded adults (Fredricks et al., 2014). The time after the school day is a setting that has the potential to provide resources that are not always available during a student’s academic time. ASPs serve as a valuable resource to the students, families, and communities that they serve.

One specific type of ASP, Physical Activity (PA) programs focus on increasing adolescents’ access to opportunities to improve their physical health by participating in activities that increase heart rates, promote healthy eating habits, or build knowledge about overall healthful living. Within the past 10 years, the number of obese children has doubled with more than one third of children in the United States identified as obese (Nabors et al., 2015). Programs that emphasize the development of physical activity and the knowledge base of nutritional practices needed for a healthy lifestyle are important due to the increase of a sedentary lifestyle among youth over the past decades. Lack of physical activity, socioeconomic stressors, and other environmental factors are detrimental to youth, particularly youth who are obese or overweight (Baghurst & Fink, 2018). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS, 2008) recommends that youth participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise every day. Children who do not receive this minimum are at an increased risk of becoming overweight or obese adults as well as developing chronic health concerns such as diabetes. They also have expressed a decrease in self-esteem and an increase depression due to their weight status.
Physical Activity ASPs that are considered fun and engaging serve as a means of addressing these health concerns and helping youth develop healthy lifestyles (Bailey et al., 2013; Behrens et al., 2015).

Research related to PA programs highlights the need for an after-school program to be engaging and hold the interest of its participants. Childhood obesity is growing at an alarming rate for youth who are considered to have a lower socio-economic status (SES). Such children take 1,500 fewer steps per day and have a higher rate of childhood obesity than their peers with higher economic status (Behrens et al., 2015). In studies I reviewed, each noted that the efforts of the program were directed at combating the effects of sedentary lifestyles of youth and encouraging them to move more. Whether the program was sport-based, nutritional education class, or a choice of physical activities, the goal of each was to help youth to develop healthier lifestyles and gain a more positive sense of self. Participants’ BMIs were measured, surveys were given to determine present levels of physical activity, and, in the case of the Keep It Moving! (KIM) project, parents and students were surveyed to determine what their perceptions were of the program. In addition, a critical component of program engagement was the relationships developed with staff and peers as well as the facilitation of positive social connections and a sense of belonging (Zarrett et al., 2018). Although some programs expressed some attention to PYD, the primary focus was the increased healthy development of participants.

Unlike PA ASPs that specifically focus on physical activity, most school based after-school programs are generic in nature. They operate on a daily basis throughout the year and offer a broad array of activities. By not having to focus on a curriculum or having the same assessment obligations as the school setting, after-school programs can provide a platform for supporting adolescents’ participation in physical activities or providing support for those who
may be experiencing difficulty in navigating their social or emotional wellness needs. After-school settings also provide opportunities for adolescents to socialize, and research has shown that teens feel most positively when in the company of similar aged peers. The same teens also report a negative mood state when they are alone (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Research shows that youth who feel close to each other are more willing to help each other and develop a “sense of a caring community” to nurture social cohesion among the youth and their peers. When adolescents perceive the atmosphere of a program as being caring and supportive, they are more likely to share a similar outlook on the attributes of the program, staff, and their peers (E. Smith et al., 2013). This finding highlights the need for after-school programs to serve as not simply an extension of the academic portion of the school day but as a valuable shareholder in the positive development of well-rounded youth.

**Positive Youth Development**

Positive Youth Development (or PYD) served as my conceptual framework. It is an approach that focuses on young people’s strengths and assets while reinforcing the idea that the most valuable resource is the youth themselves (Lopez et al., 2015). One of the key components of PYD is that improvement is different for each adolescent. Allowing for how diverse adolescents are, PYD affords the opportunity for each youth to be successful in their own right, while making adolescents more self-aware; this creates lowered risks and an increased capacity to achieve favorable outcomes (Sanders & Munford, 2014). The setting of after-school supports PYD in that it provides opportunities for an adolescent’s self-exploration of interests in an environment that is supportive of their personal positive development (Fuller et al., 2013). Within PYD is the understanding that these outcomes are contained within five domains known as the Five Cs, competence, confidence, connections, character and caring. Each domain is in the
context of adolescent development, spanning the areas of health, physical, social, and cognitive domains. Within each domain are traits such as communication, conflict resolution, self-worth, and health-promoting behaviors in addition to the connections that youth form with adults, peers, and their surrounding community. The trait of character is most difficult to define and measure (Catalano et al., 2004). A sixth C, which is contribution to society, manifests itself once all the other Five Cs of PYD are achieved (Pittman et al., 2002). The primary focus of PYD is to support adolescents in becoming productive and satisfied adults and positive members of their communities. PYD is utilized mostly with at-risk groups and is focused on individuals who have difficulties interacting with their peers, adults, or communities as a whole. By viewing adolescents as having the potential to develop into more positive individuals, PYD reminds adults that children are a work in progress and are capable of improving their lives with the proper supports.

In their longitudinal study of PYD, Sanders and Munford (2014) sought to determine how usage of PYD supported vulnerable youth who were recipients of multiple societal supports based on Positive Youth Development. By using self-report questionnaires administered by trained interviewers, the researchers found that the youth who experienced two positive experiences via the services they received would report better wellbeing in comparison to their peers who reported inconsistent or two negative service experiences. Sanders and Munford (2014) measured experiences by determining the relationships among service quality, wellbeing, resilience, and risk and the presence of three positive relationships with either their caregivers, friends or school. In their study of a sports-based youth development program, Fuller et al. (2013) used semi-structured interviews when interviewing participants and their parents to determine what attracted minority boys to participate in youth programs based on sports. Their
research sought to determine what kept them involved and how this translated into positive developmental outcomes. Fuller et al. (2013) used a framework of the Five Cs and the Sixth C to code interviews deductively in order to determine participants’ experiences and why they continued to participate in the program. In their study “Measuring Collective Efficacy Among Children in Community-based Afterschool Programs,” E. Smith et al. (2013) sought to determine the level of collective efficacy among participants within three school districts in close proximity to each other. By using surveys via small electronic PDAs (personal digital assistant), researchers sought to determine each child’s collective efficacy in relation to the after-school program and their connectedness to their peers. This measure was also informed by two assessments of collective efficacy among the adult staff and used to assess the level of positive youth development that is evidenced by the level of caring adolescents may have felt for their peers (E. Smith et al., 2013).

The findings from each study point to the importance of PYD and how it supports participants in developing pro-social behaviors with peers, family members and other non-related adults. Whether individually or collectively, each study was able to determine an increase in PYD based on their research.

While Sanders and Munford’s (2014) findings emphasized the importance of consistent use of PYD across services, they also emphasized the need of service to directly address risk levels of at-risk youth. Fuller et al. (2013) discovered that the promotion of positive relationships and opportunities to explore self-interest in a safe environment supported PYD in adolescent participants. In addition, E. Smith et al. (2013) determined that by using collective efficacy, adolescents modeled traits of PYD by caring about the well-being of peers due to the collective sense of caring shared by the group.
PYD positions youth as being resources themselves. No matter what their starting point, each child is measured by their personal growth and not by a standardized rating system. Previous researchers have hypothesized that young participants have diverse pathways, and the interplay of each person’s character traits, resources, and risk factors related to their relationships play an important role in the level of growth a youth may experience. Positive growth occurs most often when youth have opportunities for meaningful relationships that support their abilities and encourage adolescents to pursue their interests (Sanders & Munford, 2014). With a focus on relationship building through participation in effective PYD programs, adolescents are able to have these supportive relationships with peers and adults while being in a safe environment that is designed to help youth to reach their full potential (Fuller et al., 2013). By utilizing the benefits of having a community of caring individuals, after-school is a helpful setting for youth to be engaged and supported. These opportunities promote a sense of belonging, engagement, leadership, and involvement among participating youth (E. Smith et al., 2013).

**Adult and Child Relationships in After-School Programs**

After-school programs serve as a launching pad for supporting youth in the development of positive peer and social interactions and support the social and emotional development of children, especially adolescents. Programs that have positive staff to student relationships contribute to mutually caring and respectful relationships between adults and youth, which can in turn support positive interactions among peers, family, and school personnel (Durlak, Mahoney, et al., 2010). It is important to note that simply providing an adult presence is not sufficient to produce social capital for youth or promote prosocial behaviors (Sampson et al., 1999). In their study of out-of-school time programs, VanderVen (2007) pointed out that a quality program provided safety in regards to the child’s needs both physical and psychologically. These ideal
settings provided opportunities for youth to form positive relationships that transcended the ASP setting and helped their pro-social behavior to extend beyond their time within the program. These positive relationships with staff must develop over time, and this also includes positive results in relation to the parents of participants. These relationships further support children by providing their parents with what is sometimes their only positive interaction with the school. Research has shown that supports provided by after-school staff, especially in the case of low-income families, generate positive impacts that transcend grade levels and familial structures. It sometimes is the only positive relationship that parents may have with the school setting (Barnes & Nolan, 2019). Interactions consisting of activities that create social supports youth can draw upon as they develop help to reinforce these relationships. These typically occur in the presence of strong personal ties similar to those found in close-knit friendships and/or kinship networks. Activities that encourage teamwork, situate and mediate developing relationships between children, and take specific factors of the child’s interests and energy level into account serve to empower children while supporting positive pro-social behaviors (VanderVen, 2007). Children experience an increase in resource potential that may not have been an option before and can use this social capital to achieve desired outcomes via the social ties created with ASP staff (Sampson et al., 1999). Teachers of children who participated in a university-assisted community school (UACS) after-school program reported that their students performed better academically and became more active participants in class (Luter et al., 2017). Youth who participate in structured programs or activities with vested adults receive constructive feedback and are in a setting that allows for them to improve upon a behavior or activity at the time of occurrence. After-school settings are beneficial environments where positive family engagement practices cultivate a warm, welcoming space, contributing to quality relationships with families (Barnes &
Nolan, 2019; Rhodes, 2004). By serving as safe havens with structures in place to support academic as well pro-social improvements, ASPs are an important resource to school-age children. This is especially true for students who live in low-socioeconomic environments. Their attendance in the after-school program, as opposed to hanging out with friends, improved participants’ overall academic performance (Luter et al., 2017).

In settings where staff are caring and competent and in which they have opportunities to interact with their peers in smaller groups, youth were found to be more likely to be engaged as willing participants in an after-school program (Fredricks et al., 2014). Because children are not always in an environment that promotes positive adult interactions or provides the space to utilize their new-found prosocial behaviors, after-school offers an environment that is supportive of their growth in these areas. Oftentimes, young people find themselves in settings that may not view their behavior as a positive or as the social norm; after-school programs, however, can provide a needed space that allows for youths’ lives to be more supportive of their personal growth and development. ASPs also allow youth time to process and gain a deeper understanding of their actions (Durlak et al., 2007). Well attended programs point out that participants felt a bond with one or more adults who worked at the location. Stating that although they wished for a caring, nurturing relationship, the adults were not overly intrusive and respected the child’s boundaries (VanderVen, 2007).

After-school staff can serve as resources for students who seek individuals they can relate to and also have the feeling that they are cared for by these same adults. When children feel supported, they are more likely to make positive decisions in regards to their social, emotional, and societal well-being and avoid adverse decisions that are detrimental to their positive development. This response to the relationships formed with these non-familial, non-evaluative
adults is a positive for students as well as their families because these settings can also provide information through bulletin boards, informational workshops, and direct referrals to service providers that offer needed support for the students and their families outside of the educational environment (Barnes & Nolan, 2019). However, providing a climate that allows and supports relationships forming among staff and youngsters is easier said than done (VanderVen, 2007).

Children in after-school programs gain a level of social capital when they are supported by caring adults. Lower resource communities and similar settings that do not always provide opportunities to gain social capital see after-school programs as a resource where these skills can be attained, while the relationships that are formed with non-familial adults are a critical factor in encouraging this development (Jones & Deutsch, 2011). The relationships formed with after-school staff provide children the opportunity to expand their social capital while providing a safe setting after the academic day ends. Youth who participate in these settings experience higher self-esteem, increased motivation, and academic achievement (Mahoney et al., 2005). At-risk youth are also faced with less time than in previous years to gain important prosocial skills during the academic day, but the after-school setting provides an opportunity where these skills are gained and supported by caring adults. After-school staff members’ role of supporting these behaviors helps promote a sense of belonging and establish positive social norms (Rhodes, 2004). When the adult-youth relationships within the program are supportive, they influence all students and staff. Staff must realize that they are much more than overseers or monitors, and administrators who lack understanding of relationship dynamics often violate cultural practices of diverse groups of children. These practices contribute to increasing adverse behaviors among youth participants instead of curtailing them (VanderVen, 2007).
Jones and Deutsch (2011) explored how ASP staff members’ relationships with youth promote positive development and prosocial behaviors. After-school staff members’ support of students in their programs have been shown to have positive effects on adolescents’ overall social behavior, equipping them with tools that they may not have obtained otherwise. The researchers observed interactions for a year and interviewed adolescents ranging in ages from 12 to 18 years old. In each instance, the researchers discovered that staff used their relationships with the youth as foundations for engagement and promotion of positive developmental outcomes (Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Using the club-as-home model allows the youth to develop emotional attachment to the program based on psychosocial aspects instead of simply programming. This highlights how important it is for youth to feel cared for and that close relationships with staff are an important component to the overall after-school environment and a key indicator in the success of youth developing positive prosocial skills (Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002). Drawing from the perceptions of Boys & Girls Club, interpersonal relationships among staff and participants shows that staff will draw upon their relationships with adolescents in order to promote engagement in developmental activities. The 2002 National Research Council (NRC) study was also cited in reporting that after-school and youth programs served as an asset to youth and promoted healthy development and prosocial behaviors.

Jones and Deutsch’s (2011) research used the relational model to highlight the implications of how interpersonal relationships are supportive of the achievement of social capital for youth while also facilitating the development of caring relationships with adult staff. The emphasis on how the closeness of the staff to adolescents built a sharing of power and authority aligns with Aitken et al. (2007), who found that this negotiation of authority allows informal learning environments to support staff building relational trust that may be even higher
than their relationships with their teachers or other evaluative adults. When programs align their activities with the strengths of young people with resources found within the broader community, including supportive positive adults, healthy social development occurs (Lerner et al., 2014).

In their study, Jones and Deutsch (2011) noted that staff were dedicated to all the students in the program and were making the most of their time with youth. Using the relational model with hints of PYD, staff were able to see each adolescent as an individual and then allow for their level of growth based on where they were when they entered the program. Although this is valuable data and helps programs to explore the effectiveness of their practice, my question remained: why do staff choose to develop these relationships? When exploring the impact of positive relationships with caring adults, it was important to determine why staff develop these relationships.

In this vein, Noam and Bernstein-Yamashiro (2013) examined the role of practitioners in developing relationships with children in schools and after-school programs. In doing so, they highlighted the importance of staff and how their influence can be a determinant in the positive development of youth. The researchers point out that very little research has been conducted on these topics. They also explain how ASP staff roles are less formal and hierarchical. The quantity of relationships matters less than the quality of the relationships that are formed (Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). By taking an interest in students’ lives, ASP staff make them feel like they are part of a community. After-school personnel serve as links to the community by sharing the culture of and commitment to the neighborhood where the children live. Because after-school programs are not assessed on the academic performance of adolescents, ASP staff are not under the same pressure that teachers in regular day schools experience (Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Although staff may wish for the student to perform well during
their school day, staff are not accountable for any academic results, and therefore they are more likely to have a more relaxed relationship with the students. However, ASP staff do not receive the same training as classroom teachers and school day staff, and they may not be equipped to deal with some of the more traumatic events that an adolescent may experience. Noam and Bernstein-Yamashiro (2013) recommend providing professional development for staff in order to enhance their knowledge and skill base so that they can support students in more areas.

E. Smith et al. (2013) focused on how ASP staff provide guidance and support to adolescents by developing collective efficacy or a sense of community among its participants. Collective efficacy is the perceived sense of being connected to peers. This study sought to understand how collective efficacy impacted children’s behavior in relation to their fellow youth, and their willingness to act on behalf of their community and other perceived members of their community.

In their study, E. Smith et al. (2013) found after-school to be a helpful setting for youth engagement in a structured and supportive environment. Adults who had also developed this sense of community were more successful in building collective efficacy among children. In addition, this collective efficacy was found to be an important factor in reduced levels of aggressive or violent behavior among youth (E. Smith et al., 2013). The impact of building community among youth is important in helping them develop social emotional capacity as well as become productive members of their community. Although their research provides valuable insights into ways after-school staff can support at-risk youth, the study did not fully explore how after-school staff developed relationships with students, their perceptions of their roles, or how they impacted students’ building of collective efficacy. Instead, their research only examined adolescents’ perceptions of after-school programming. My research expands on how
the building of community among staff, youth, and families positively impacts adolescents and how after-school staff perceive their contribution to this effort.

In their study of participants’ perceptions of a university-assisted community school (UACS) after-school program, Luter et al. (2017) observed participants of the program as well as interviewed two of the central administrative staff. By conducting a case study of the perceptions of parents and children who participated in the UACS, Luter et al. (2017) sought to explore their experiences in the ASP and how participants viewed the program differently than the regular school day. Specifically, researchers sought to link how universities served as catalysts for school reform as well as neighborhood transformation by utilizing the UACS model. Researchers documented the participants’ and families’ everyday experiences within the program (Luter et al., 2017). Ideally, the UACS model includes a “community development” model where the university and school combine resources to address underlying issues that could potentially cause the school to underperform and link activities that support the regeneration of the surrounding neighborhood. The UACS model also included benefits for the community as well by offering increased services to students, increased sharing of university’s resources, teacher networking opportunities, and the utilization of college student paraprofessionals who could offer needed resources such as health screenings.

In their study of a UACS after-school program, Luter et al. (2017) used PYD as a framework to highlight how participants found the program to be a “fun” place to do homework and a safe haven from any of the negative factors in their neighborhoods. They also discovered how the UACS supported youth and their families as they attempted to navigate the processes of school. Similar to my study, researchers used a qualitative methodology to study the perceptions of youth and parents. However, instead of a case study approach, I utilize a basic qualitative
research approach. I agree with the researchers that the perceptions of participants are important. They included two interviews with staff which served to deepen the researchers’ understanding (Luter et al., 2017).

In a study of after-school and out-of-school time programs, VanderVen (2007) emphasized the importance of relationships and activities that were tailored to participants’ interests or needs. Staff and administration who failed to acknowledge cultural differences, or simply the differences among youth, contributed to programs not meeting the needs of attendees and therefore being viewed as unsuccessful. Although activities were noted as being of importance, the researchers emphasized the essential role of relationships, which resonated with my own research. Whether confronted by dysfunctional familial relationships or limited prosocial behaviors, youth benefitted from the relationships formed with caring adults who staffed ASPs since they helped them transition into adulthood.

Summary

In summary, the perceptions of after-school staff were often overlooked for data that was strictly related to youth and the impact their behavior had on the community, families, or schools. Since their beginning, after-school programs have served a need for families and communities that had youth who were out of school and did not have supervision. The role that ASPs play in providing caring, supportive supervision for adolescents has only taken on more significance. Through Positive Youth Development, various types of programs, and the relationships formed, caring adults contribute to supporting youth in developing prosocial behaviors that will extend beyond the academic day and into their daily life (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011).
The current research related to after-school programs, PYD, and adult to youth relationships principally concern the viewpoints of participants and families or focus on the impact of ASPs on their communities. The area that has been missing in the existing research literature was an understanding of the perceptions of after-school staff, which are the adults who are at the front line in working with adolescents in the hours after school. ASP staff are invaluable in developing relationships with youth who are experiencing difficulties that are hard to address in other settings. In the current setting of COVID-19, the program in my study became the sole setting to address these needs. Staff in all after-school settings, including the university-assisted community school (UACS) model, assert that the reform of higher education and neighborhoods is simultaneously due to the intervention of the program (Luter et al., 2017). Staff can provide the supports children need, but they may not have a full awareness of how to support participants or be prepared for the level of support that a student may need. Staff who support youth by allowing their input in appropriate decision-making processes can decrease problem behaviors because the youth feel in collaboration with adults instead of in conflict (VanderVen, 2007). Although staff may not always have the same training as classroom teachers, the absence of assessments, the freedom that staff have to choose their activities, and a supportive setting all combine to provide a resource that many youth need in order to develop behaviors that will benefit them in everyday interactions with peers, adults, and their community. After-school staff members’ perceptions of the part they play in this equation is critical in determining how to ensure that youth are receiving what they need to be successful.

My research expands on the findings of existing studies by highlighting staff members’ perceptions of their roles in youth’s social emotional development and how these perceptions informed their practice when working with adolescents. Although valuable, previous research
did not seek these insights. Even when researchers examined the perceptions of participants and families, they interviewed staff for a deeper understanding (Luter et al., 2017). Therefore, further research was needed in order to determine what ASP staff perceived about their role, how they accomplished their goals, and if they were aware of the impact their role played in the development of well-rounded youth. After-school staff may not receive the same training as their academic instructors, but these same staff have shown themselves to be positive resources who provide supports that students’ classroom teachers may have a difficult time supplying. By focusing on the perceptions of after-school staff and if they were aware of the elements of supportive culture in adult-youth relationships, my goal was to empower after-school programs to ensure that staff were aware of how critical they are in the positive development of the youth they work with daily.

Our current 21st century environment is not always supportive of youth, especially adolescents. Having said that, I contend that when there are opportunities to support these individuals, as adults, we should always seek opportunities to meet that need. This goes beyond simply monitoring students. It includes having a vested interest in seeing children be successful and using this valuable out-of-school time to make impactful experiences for adolescents. While everyone may not view after-school this way, it is imperative that the reader understands the perceptions of the staff who are the primary providers of coverage within an after-school setting.

In the next chapter, I provide an overview of the methodology I used for my research. My use of basic qualitative research methods helped me determine the perceptions of after-school staff. The use of semi-structured interviews and careful coding of these data points helped me determine insights that may have been lost in surveys, group interviews, or observations.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

In the previous chapter, I provided an overview of existing research related to my study. I explained how I intended to add to this current scholarship with the goal of examining the experiences of staff who work in a middle grades after-school program. After I investigated their roles in the program, I interviewed staff to see how they supported the building of meaningful relationships with their adolescent participants and examined their perceptions of the effectiveness of the program. Basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) served as my methodology.

In this chapter, I begin by describing the pilot study I conducted prior to developing my research proposal. Then, I provide an overview of my study’s setting and describe my participants. Next, I discuss my methods of data collection and data analysis, including how I used coding in order to identify central themes. I also discuss my positionality in relation to my research, which also addresses any insights I may have had regarding the study. Finally, I provide a summary of this chapter. As I discussed in my literature review, there is research regarding the experiences of ASP participants and families; however, staff’s perceptions of their roles and how these perceptions inform their practice needed further investigation.

Pilot Study

For my pilot study, I interviewed principals about their perceptions of after-school programs based at their schools. I soon discovered that their focus as administrators concerned ASPs offering academic supports for the school day, providing supervision for students whose parents needed to work, or ensuring that homework was completed prior to parents arriving so the students could do something other than school work once home. One principal’s statement
that she knew that a bad program was a babysitting service caused me to rethink who I was interviewing and why. Once I spoke with a middle grades site coordinator about how staff perceived their roles in after-school, I realized that insights from staff members would be valuable in understanding their actions within a program and how they made sense of their position. I finished my initial round of pilot interviews with school administrators and decided that the perceptions of staff who worked closest with the students would be most valuable. Although the administration’s insights supplied some perspectives that I anticipated, I found the staff’s perceptions to be richly descriptive and indicative of individuals who had more direct insight into the after-school program. Principals, I learned, were concerned about how instruction could be extended into the after-school program, while after-school staff viewed the program through the lens of students, their interactions, and how participants responded to their work with them. The focus of the program altered from solely academic to purely supportive of the participants and their interactions with them. Their responses caused me to reflect upon the purpose of an after-school program and what as a researcher, would be more supportive of students and families who participated in the after-school program.

**Research Questions**

My study focuses on the following research question and sub questions:

“What are the experiences of staff who work in an after-school program?”

- What roles do staff play in the program?
- How do staff members support the building of meaningful relationships with their participants?
- What are staff members’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the program?
Basic Qualitative Research

The methodology I used in my dissertation was basic qualitative research. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 6). Due to the fact that all qualitative research is interpretive in nature, my goal was to interpret how these individuals constructed reality in relation to their work with adolescents and have an understanding of how they made meaning of their experiences as they related to their roles as after-school staff. With these considerations, I decided that a basic qualitative research model was the most appropriate for my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In my basic qualitative study, I used interviews as a means to collect data for my research. I conducted interviews with staff to hear their perspectives regarding what the purpose of an after-school program was, how they interpreted their role in the program, and what meaning they attributed to their experiences. I then followed up with a second interview to go further in-depth into how they perceived their individual role within the program and how this informed their interactions with students. By gaining insights into ASP staff’s perceptions and experiences, I am able to share with other stake-holders how after-school staff interpreted their roles and their potential socioemotional impact on the children under their care. My findings regarding how ASP staff addressed the social emotional needs of the adolescents under their supervision may increase the potential for meaningful adult-youth interactions which support positive social emotional development of teens (Rhodes, 2004).

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, the nature of qualitative research is its focus on process, understanding, and meaning-making. This all occurs while the researcher serves as the
primary instrument of data collection. My research focuses on how staff interpreted their experiences and what meaning they attributed to their role in an after-school program.

**Setting and Participants**

The program I investigated in this study is part of an after-school initiative sponsored by the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which started out in 1906 as three women in Boston, Massachusetts opening their door to boys in their neighborhood to keep them out of trouble. Boys & Girls Clubs of America currently provides programming for children and youth from the ages six to eighteen across the country. By offering programs based on five core program areas, character and leadership development, education, career exploration, health and life skills, arts, sports, fitness, and recreation, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America serve as a resource for many disadvantaged youth in our country (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2005).

According to their website, the Boys & Girls Clubs of Durham and Orange County (BGCDOC) was created in a merger of adjacently located Durham and Orange Counties to become one entity. Prior to this, the initial program was based solely out of inner-city Durham and was known as the John Avery Boys & Girls Club.

In 1939 Mrs. Mamie Dowd Walker requested that the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs solve the dilemma of juvenile delinquency. After a series of initiatives, votes, and submission of needed documentation, the John Avery Boys Club Incorporated became a participating agency of the Durham Community Fund, a predecessor of the United Way, in 1943 (2018). The John Avery Boys & Girls Club became the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Durham in 2015 and finally transitioned into the Boys & Girls Clubs of Durham and Orange County (BGCDOC) in 2017. With a history that began in 1939, BGCDOC is listed on their website as being a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to educating and protecting children while
preserving the beauty and innocence of childhood (2018). The BGCDOC follows the Boys & Girls Clubs of America’s model by offering the five core program areas of character and leadership development, education, career exploration, health and life skills, arts, sports, fitness, and recreation. Their focus is unique in that it ensures that these core areas are reflective of the cultural needs of the participants and their community.

The Boys & Girls Club of Durham and Orange County (BGCDOC) is based in three physical locations but is considered two programs of the greater entity. The Durham portion moved into a new facility within city limits in 2020, with the Orange County program being based at two housing developments in a partnership with the town of Chapel Hill’s Public Housing Authority. Many of the student participants were from families that are below the poverty line, qualified for free or reduced lunch, and/or resided in a local low-income housing area. What began as an after-school program based in a single classroom has grown through the 2018 partnership with the Chapel Hill Public Housing Authority into a 70+ participant program that serves young boys and girls Kindergarten – 10th and had a waiting list of 25 to 30 children prior to the outbreak of Covid-19. The BGCDOC program is offered free of charge to families from the surrounding school districts and public housing communities. All three sites are considered to be part of the BGCDOC and participants receive similar supports throughout their time in the program.

Due to the outbreak of Covid-19, one of the Chapel Hill locations had merged with the other in an effort to continue services while reducing operational costs. For my research, the interviewees were staff members or site directors from one of the two locations. Their ages ranged from 18 to 50 years old. Each site had at minimum two staff members with classroom teachers or local volunteers offering activities throughout the week. Pre-covid students arrived
via school bus, program van, or walked to the program if it was located within their apartment complex. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, students would be given time to greet peers seated at their table, eat a snack, color, or just relax after being in school all day. After these interactions among their peers, students would participate in programs that focused on social-emotional wellness, healthy habits, and presentations provided by community partners of the program. Although based at two apartment complexes and a school, all were considered as part of one program as well as participated in the same activities. Covid-19 caused the programs to change their schedule and structure due to the closure of local school districts. Each district the sites serve had decided to go fully virtual and offered remote learning to students in lieu of face to face instruction. This model had students and teachers working virtually instead of in-person with a classroom teacher during the academic portion of the day. Due to families having limited or no Internet access and with the majority of parents having to attend work; the after-school programs evolved into an all-day program that allowed students to come in and do their work at their local Boys and Girls Club while providing families the ability to return to work.

For this study, I focused on the program staff who spent the most time with students and served as group leaders within the program as well as any other volunteers who also spent a larger portion of time with program participants. I also interviewed the program directors in order to gain an all-around view of the program. In line with UNCG IRB and district research guidelines, I requested consent from participants in advance of beginning the interview process with them.

**Qualitative Data Collection**

In executing my basic qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I conducted interviews with staff to hear their perspectives regarding what the purpose of an after-school
program was, how they interpreted their role in the program, and what meaning they attributed to their experiences. Asking questions across a range of topics related to my research questions helped me as a researcher to better understand staff’s perspectives. Although participants’ answers varied, I discovered common themes across the data during my analysis phase (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). See Appendixes A and B for my interview protocol.

Keeping in mind that the researcher is the primary source of data and due to the safety measures put in place because of a global pandemic, my initial act of observing was replaced by interviewing some staff twice. In lieu of these observations, I asked staff more detailed questions about their experiences and perception of the program. I also coded the transcripts of these virtual interviews to note common themes and continued to seek valuable information in this regard. This allowed me to gain a fuller picture of the after-school program. I used symbols, abbreviations, and member checks which ensured that what I recorded was as accurate as possible in relation to what was shared at the moment during the interviews.

**Data Analysis Strategies**

The analysis of the data gained from these interviews involved me identifying recurring themes by coding the transcribed interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I approached coding like I was “mining” the data, digging below the surface and seeking the hidden treasures contained within. Coding enabled me as a researcher to probe deeper into the data and helped me avoid shallow and unrelated findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The use of transcriptions and the careful coding of the data ensured that I did not overlook parts of interviewees’ responses and helped me provide an accurate portrayal of staff’s perceptions of their experiences and the program. After coding the transcripts with one-word codes or similar methods, I was able to
identify several themes that emerged from across the data. These themes are represented as full-sentence statements in Chapter IV when I report my findings.

**Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

In order to ensure trustworthiness, I employed the strategies of respondent validation, member checks, and peer reviews. Through respondent validation, I gained the feedback of staff in order to ensure the accuracy of my interpretations of the interview data throughout the process. Maxwell (2013) considered this method to be the single most important way to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting what an interviewee meant to say. This related directly to my goal of gaining the perceptions of after-school staff and understanding their meanings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also conducted member checks after I concluded interviews with staff so that the data gained from our interviews reflected what staff intended their insights to be. Finally, the process of peer review was built into my dissertation so that I would have a peer to assess if my findings were plausible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In conducting my research, my goal was to ensure that I described and explained the world as my participants saw it and did not attempt to approach the study as an evaluation of the program (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition to the steps I described above, I recorded my interviews, had them transcribed by a third party, and had my findings and coding peer reviewed in order to ensure trustworthiness. In my transcriptions and field notes, I included descriptors that were useful in providing insights but I focused mainly on the participant’s dialogue. The member checks ensured that what was meant to be shared was accurate and reflective of staff’s insights and provided authentic interview responses that may have otherwise been misconstrued.
Positionality

My role during the study was Director of School Community Relations for my school district, which consisted of the middle and elementary after-school programs, as well as summer programs. Dodgson (2019) shared that although the researcher is the research instrument, readers need to understand who is doing the research. My role led me to research after-school programs and their impact on the social emotional (SEL) wellness of student participants. The drive to improve the experiences of the students who participated in the district’s programs was my number one concern. After researching after-school programs that professed to have SEL components embedded in daily activities, I then sought to adjust my program’s offerings. In my previous role as a school-based administrator, I observed how an increased focus on assessments and achievement scores left little room for any social emotional lessons or activities. I saw the value of embedded positive social/emotional practices within after-school programs as a resource that could support the development of prosocial behavior in all students but especially in adolescents.

My role allowed for the implementation of this type of programming and the development of partnerships that supported students in learning positive behavior options. These steps improved their emotional wellness, provided strategies for better social skills and allowed for an improvement in their interactions with peers, teachers, and school administrators. Social emotional wellness and lessons are not new ideas. They have been measured by various quantitative tools, but the insights of program staff had not been used to their fullest potential in gaining an understanding of how staff made sense of their role in an after-school setting.

I found it imperative to explain (both to my study participants and my dissertation readers) my positionality as an after-school administrator as it related to the disposition and
assumptions I brought to the research being conducted. This allows the reader to better understand how I may have arrived at my findings at the conclusion of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations

When responding to possible limitations to my research, I needed to address my own biases and beliefs about what an after-school program should be. This includes being reflexive in my research and analysis of the data. Being conscious of this and recognizing how my positionality may have affected the setting, including how the questions I asked were answered and how the data was being collected, as well as how my findings would be interpreted (Berger, 2015). However, Pillow (2003) shared that it may be a cause for concern if the researcher has not shared similar experiences as their interview participants. Would the researcher truly understand and be able to convey the message of their interviewees? By being in the field of study, I was able to use this familiarity to offer a deeper understanding and still allowed for the interviewee to tell their story rather than push them in certain directions (Berger, 2015). A final limitation to be considered was the small sample size but this is common in qualitative research.

Summary

In summary, I applied basic qualitative research methods to my study of the perceptions of after-school staff and how those perceptions informed their practice with children in ASP programs. ASP staff members’ relationships with youth have been shown across an array of different types of ASPs to be supportive of school-age children in making more prosocial decisions as well as improving their relationships with adults, peers, and families (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). The settings and participants in my study provided a rich mixture of insights that informed my research in multiple ways.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from the interviews and observations that I conducted for my study. These findings stem from interview transcripts, field notes, and the coding of the interview transcripts that answered the following research and sub questions:

- What are the experiences of staff who work in an after-school program?
  a. What roles do staff play in the program?
  b. How do staff members support the building of meaningful relationships with their participants?
  c. What are staff members’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the program?

The chapter is organized into three separate sections. In Section I, I describe the process of the eleven interviews that I conducted. In Section II, I use the interview data I collected to provide profiles of my participants. In Section III, I describe my findings, which were the four main themes that emerged from my analysis of the data.

Section I: Interview Process

My data collection method involved the use of semi-structured interviews, allowing staff to expound upon the questions listed in my interview protocols and give a more nuanced perspective of their roles (Appendices A, B, C). I organized the questions into categories aligned with the study’s research questions. I interviewed each staff member twice, with the exception of one staff member whom I only interviewed once due to how brief their tenure had been with the program.

When I began the interview process, I sought to understand the roles each staff member played within the Boys & Girls Club. Each interviewee felt they contributed to the program but
the functions of their roles were fluid because of their support of each other and the students they served. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many shared how their roles had changed but their mission remained the same throughout, and this was reflected in their interview responses.

 Setting

The Boys & Girls Club has historically served as an after-school or summer program for youth. Due to students being in school all day, the interactions with students were from 3:00 pm to 6:30 pm only or 8:00 am to 6:30 pm in the summer, when there were limited academic expectations of their school age participants. However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting public school closures, the Boys & Girls Club began to receive students during the day when they would usually be in a classroom setting. This free service allowed parents to return to work who were unable to work virtually and provided a safe environment for their students during the day while they were engaged in remote virtual learning with their individual school systems. Having a reliable Internet connection and adults to supervise their children during the day was a benefit to these working families.

Because of this change in operations, I asked staff about their current roles, their roles prior to the pandemic, and how their roles may or may not have changed as a result of COVID-19. Sharing their experiences and those of the students they worked with allowed interviewees to explain their perceptions of their individual role, the responsibilities of their role, how they built relationships with the students, and how they perceived the effectiveness of the program. In the next section, I provide each participant’s profile that emerged from these interviews.

 Section II: Participant Profiles

To conduct this study, I interviewed five staff members and two directors from the two Boys and Girls Club of Durham and Orange County (BGCDOC) locations. Staff were
interviewed twice and each director was interviewed once. All participants were at least 18 years old, racially categorized and identified as Black with the exception of one Latina female, and currently worked within the program at the time of the interviews. All participants worked directly with students and worked in the full-day program that was created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to protect the identity of the interviewees, I removed any identifying information from the transcripts, edited their names from the interviews, and used pseudonyms as outlined in Table 1 to protect participants’ identities.

Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms, Gender, Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Member Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candice</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Profile of Brandon

Brandon was a 20-something Black male and recent college graduate. His experience in after-school programming began with a career in a day-care, volunteering with the local library, and later working at the Boys & Girls Club. His experiences as an adolescent attending a tutoring program were his first interaction with an after-school program and contributed to some of his activities with participants in regards to rewards.
In my interview with Brandon, he based his role on his interactions with the students, stating that many times he would hover near a group of students to “just to see if my presence changes something and it usually does.” Continuing this thought, he shared,

“You have to look out for more things because obviously in a massive pandemic, a lot of things are going to go awry in the classroom and at home. So sometimes you still have to look out for warning signs. But I’ve also taken additional training to prepare me for that as well, through the Boys and Girls Club.

When I asked about the differences of his role before the pandemic, Brandon stated, “We were just strictly an after-school program.” Reflecting on how it has changed he said, “I can actually sit down and say hey, I can spend all day and help this one kid who’s in class with their work.”

Taking into consideration that because students are in the program longer, Brandon noted that his work day was longer, but when asked about his responsibilities, he said,

I have numerous responsibilities, but my main responsibilities are just to make sure that, you know, throughout the day all of our members are safe and that they are engaging, learning, and are ready for what happens at school. So this an after-school program. So it’s like the same learning environment that they would typically get at school with a little bit more relaxation and, you know, just all encompassing.

During our interview, Brandon’s major of psychology came into play often and how he integrated his college studies into his work stating,

I was in adolescent psychology at the same time I was doing some volunteer work at the school. So I was like, oh, this was happening at that moment. So I would kind of take those lessons literally from college and take them right into the school system. So I was like, I got to apply new information, like right then and there. And then when I really got
to thinking about it, I was really just practicing as I was learning, which I think is the best way to learn.

Leveraging his academic studies with his daily practice equipped him for his current role within the program as well as allowing him to grow as a staff member. With the virtual learning facet adding to their schedule, he expressed how his role allowed him more freedom. He said,

Sometimes you might have to get creative, sometimes you might have to think outside the box and I’m glad that some of my training has taught me that because when I was at the Boys and Girls Club, I had people help me like, OK, this is something I have to do. Before I never had to actively teach stuff like programs. So I had people help me develop programs and now I’m helping others do the same. I remember one time my co-worker talked to her group about Zodiac signs and that really got them involved and, you know, then they were really ready to actually dive into what we had to say, what we had to teach them. So it’s about working with them so they can work with us too.

Brandon referenced his time working in a school setting and how it helped him adapt to the change of the after-school setting due to COVID-19. He stated,

So definitely my core in our interactions right now is schoolwork. Something that I’ve learned is I can actually teach if I need to, if their teachers give it in a way, I actually figure out the way that teacher taught it and then teach the exact same way just so they don’t get confused.

Brandon believed that supporting students when they were experiencing emotional distress is key to relationship building. He shared,

If I ever had someone who just for whatever reason they were having a hot moment, I would just pull them to the side and give them something else to do. I think it worked out
because once I really got to know each individual child and like, you know, some of that background, it became easier because not only that, I know that child. I have a relationship with that child. That child ended up having a relationship with me, too. So it was like, wow, I feel the difference I started to make.

Brandon referenced his recently acquired BS degree and was aware of how his studies were reflected in his interactions with students. He stated,

I see way more in the way of behavioral things that was going on, so I will always be the person they will call on to say, hey, hey, you take this student out in the hallway and talk to them.

By serving as a positive role model for students, Brandon found that the building of these relationships also supported his mental well-being. When discussing this, Brandon said,

I guess I’m kind of role playing a little bit when I was just like, OK, this is like the person I needed. So I try to role play as a person I need. I think that’s basically the driving force behind me being here is being the person that I needed when I was younger.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how the BGCDOC provide programming for the families they serve. When I asked Brandon about this he shared,

Well, I think the most obvious answer right now is the pandemic. Everything being switched to virtual learning is extremely different, I work for the Boys and Girls Club and we help. We are a community outreach in that way. So we’re helping students who typically wouldn’t have any help because their parents are at work and whatnot, we are there to kind of help.

The BGCDOC has specific program guidelines they follow with each participant weekly.

Brandon stated, “that has changed a little bit because of the pandemic but overall programming
still looks the same.” When asked about his perception of the effectiveness of the program, Brandon explained that the BGCDOC built a sense of community for participants and provided a safe space from areas that could be detrimental to their well-being. Brandon said,

I think it means providing a community. I think it means providing a safe place for students after school. So, you know, it’s a lot of different things the kids could do after school. But I like the fact that they actually get to come to the Boys and Girls Club and they actually get to spend that time. They can be doing God knows what without us, we are community outreach and we teach citizenship values. Especially when you get into, teen programs, that’s really beneficial.

Expanding on this thought, he shared in the second interview that,

I think that’s the most important part altogether of any after school program is to provide something productive for kids to do after they get out of school, because when they get out of school, they’re going to be doing something. You have so much evidence to where some people don’t actually get out of those situations because they didn’t have a place to go. Maybe they couldn’t go home. Maybe they did get involved with something that they didn’t know that they were going to be involved in. Maybe they thought money was tight and they had to do something that they thought that was the only way they could provide.

So everyone comes from different backgrounds, but I guess I view after school as this potential and that potential I love to think about that potential being good, because you have people who don’t go to after school programs and be perfectly fine, people go home, do their homework and play the game for a little while or watch TV, do your homework, get their work done and go back to school the next day but that’s not everybody.
Profile of Virginia

Virginia was a Black female and former member of the military. Her career began as a substitute within a school-based program and upon the retirement of her predecessor, she began her role as a director in the after-school program. She did not attend programs in her youth and only participated in after-school as an adult. The experiences she had at a young age through her adolescence helped her develop an appreciation of the role of after-school programs. Virginia stated that the initial entry into her role was “a little bit of the make it or break it type of situation.” Sharing that a relative was currently incarcerated and how serving in the military saved her life, she viewed her role seriously and felt that the youth who attended the program needed support in every area of need. Her staff were not to work in the program just for a paycheck. She shared her expectations of staff within the program as,

Men and women who understand my vision and understand the importance of these types of programs, so the vision and the expectation for my staff is to make sure that they are being positive role models and making sure that they know their students. So I don’t want to walk into the building and see a student who is having a meltdown and for my staff not to know what’s happening. The staff needs to know the whole student. The importance and the expectation for them are to just know the kids, and what they need.

Having served as an after-school floater in the beginning of her career, her earlier life stressed to her the importance of programs like the Boys & Girls Club. Starting out by creating a partnership with public housing, she was able to expand the program’s outreach but faced difficulties with the emergence of the pandemic, sharing that the goal was to reopen “once we have a hold on the COVID pandemic.” She stated,
I knew that the program was a solid program and I wanted it to be run by somebody who was going to make sure that the best happen for these kids, for one, they are coming from, again, low income families with parents, single home, single parents. Some of their parents have been incarcerated. Some of their parents are battling cancer. So these students specifically have a harder time.

Virginia’s lived experiences greatly influenced her vision and perceived role within the program, feeling that if her cousin had access to similar programming, his outcome would have been markedly different than his current circumstances. During my interview with Virginia, it was stressed how the importance of knowing the students and their families was paramount. She shared,

So there is not a single solitary child in this program that I cannot give you a background on. Family, home life, siblings, favorite colors, what they like to read, what they like to see, what sports they like to play and that is the expectation for the entire staff to know these kids. Because at the end of the day, if there were someone who took that much interest in my cousin or myself, maybe his outcome would have been something different.

Her passion for these relationships are tied directly to her life experiences. She did not attend a program in her youth and instead was responsible for her younger siblings. In addition to providing emotional support, she also shared that,

Whether that is this child is in a mental crisis and needs some help or whether or not it is that, you know, dad is locked up and I haven’t talked to him in six months, you know, so it is very important to know the student, to know the family, to know the home life. We
can only be mentors and push them to be greater than what they are if we know their circumstances.

The expectation that this was the norm and it would be translated across other areas of the program was clear and, considering the current setting of the pandemic, she was aware of how important it was that basic needs were addressed. Citing how the program was a support for the families of the participants and how that transcends simply being a program for children, she said, “I have parents who I make sure that they get food boxes because I know that they’re worried about that and they need to make sure that there’s enough food for the children.”

Virginia reiterated that it required staff to care about the whole child, including the family and community, to ensure what she felt was successful relationship building. She stated,

I feel like if that expectation is met, then any other expectation is met, which is making sure that they get their homework done or making sure that you teach them about healthy lifestyle, healthy living, making sure that they are exercising and making sure that they are eating properly. I feel like if you know a child and the child’s circumstances and you actually have some type of bond with them, then that expectation right there is when you know that you want the best for them.

When Virginia shared her perception of program effectiveness, she mentioned the needs of low-income families and how they were not met for various reasons. She noted, “A lot of students could not go to an after-school program because their parents couldn’t afford the program or it was always full.” Without having a relationship with the child outside of the school setting, she felt it was impossible to be effective. Addressing the needs of children and their families outside of academics was important and critical to success. So when she decided to start the Orange County location for the Boys & Girls Club of Durham and Orange County, she said,
It is about being able to support these kids and in a manner that supports the entire kid. I can’t reiterate it more than saying that if you don’t know Tommy, Sally, Susie, whoever, you don’t know what’s happening to them, what’s happening in their lives, you can’t facilitate them. You can’t help them. You can’t nurture them. You have got to be a component of those kids’ lives. So the program basically, whether or not it’s an after school program, whether or not it’s an education program, it is always about the kids and there will be success.

**Profile of Caleb**

Caleb was a 20 something Black male who, prior to attending college, was in the Army for several years. He attended programs in his youth but not like the Boys & Girls Club setting. Acknowledging that he was simply seeking employment, he discovered a career in the program. He was currently enrolled in school in order to expand his knowledge of non-profits and programs for youth.

Caleb entered the program simply seeking a job and shared that he discovered a career instead. He felt strongly about his role within the program, the ability to teach outside of a set curriculum, and his work with teens. He stated,

I did know for a fact I didn’t want to be in the classroom. I personally don’t have the patience for that. But I think the after school portion of it worked out better for me because I am still be able to impact the kids that I had without being within the confines of the school system. So basically, for example, you know, it’s Black History Month. I can actually teach black history, not just what you just learn in school. I’m going to teach you about Malcolm X and the Black Panthers and, you know, things that the school
system will not, you know, even remotely get close to. So I think being in a program like this, I’m able to be able to impact the kids that I’m around in that sense.

The pandemic changed the Boys & Girls Club program and affected student’s access to outside entities, but Caleb was upbeat when discussing the difference. He said,

Now, the fact that because of COVID, the kids are here all day versus two or three hours after school, you know, we have to solely dedicate the whole eight hours that they’re here to ensuring that they’re actually getting their schoolwork. So the biggest difference is, is that, the education piece. So like normally during the school year, we don’t really have to worry so much about school because they’re in school eight hours a day. That’s taken care of by the school system. We just provide the after school program. But now we are a little bit deeper into their studies and everything like that. So we have to keep up with their teachers and make sure that they’re doing their school work and stuff like that.

Beyond what he shared as “Do you get good grades?” conversations, Caleb expressed that he did not know the ins and outs of the school system. “I’ve never really had to worry about that up until this week.” With the program being more engaged with the student’s learning, he discovered the gaps related to various students’ engagement in class and what was needed to help each child to focus. He shared,

It’s kind of interesting because we started this program in the middle of the first semester, so it’s like, you know, there was some kids that’s been on top of the work since the first day of school. Then there’s others that rarely even logged into the classes. So it’s sort of hard and it’s hard to play catch up, you know, and to actually get them into that role, say like, hey, you know, you got class at eight thirty nine or 9 o’clock. You need to be logged in. You need to make sure that, you know what’s going on. So some kids do not take to it
as well as others and are kind of like they really need that classroom interaction, you
know, but there are some kids that I know personally that are thriving better now than
they were actually in the classroom. So it just really depends on the individual and their
circumstances surrounding them.

Caleb informed me that in his earlier years, there were gaps in his life experiences that shaped
his actions while working within his role in the Boys & Girls Club. Although he did not feel like
he was at-risk, he did realize that there were things he had not been exposed to as a youth and,
that while serving in his role within the program, he made discoveries related to himself. He
shared,

I didn’t really culturally learn anything about myself until I got to college, which is crazy,
you know, but actually these kids that I have here, I actually have some type of sense of,
you know, who they are and what they are and how they’re looked at in society, because
we actually have a program called Passport to Manhood that I did every summer, every
summer with all the boys. It was one summer in particular, maybe two summers ago
where we actually had a talk about what’s actually going on in the world in terms of
being men of color, you know, and things that we see and things that we have to deal
with, especially at the height of all the police shootings and protests and all this stuff.

Caleb also drove the van for the program and picked up students within the different housing
developments. Although it had been decided to consolidate their two programs into one during
the pandemic, he also pointed out how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the time frames of the
program but still found areas where his role expanded in a positive manner. By providing
programming that developed as a result of the pandemic, he learned that, due to the extension of
their time with students, they took on more of an academic support role. He explained that “this
is my first time actually conversing with school guidance counselors and social workers.” He stated,

So we haven’t been able to provide the same events and programs that we would have been able to do during a regular school year. Making sure that you’re in class, making sure that you’re actually paying attention and making sure that you actually asking questions, if you’re on a topic or subject or asking, making sure that, hey, if you don’t feel comfortable asking questions in class, understanding that your teacher does have office hours, you know, these are the things that matter.

Having been a former athlete, Caleb embraced his relationships with fellow athletes and built bonds with students over sports but learned that other areas had to be addressed. In the midst of the pandemic, he observed students wanting to just give up or not put forth any effort regarding academics. The discussions with participants about being able to fight past negative situations was one of his focus areas. Caleb shared his perspective regarding relationship building as helping attendees develop resiliency. He stated,

Being able to say, like, hey, one avenue closes, one door closes, being able to have a backup plan or be able to maneuver your way into a situation where that other door opens up for you because a lot of these kids, you know, give up after one try. You know, and it’s sad, but there’s nobody that’s really around in their lives, you know, to be able to tell them, OK, what are you going to do about it? OK, that happened. OK, what’s next? You know, so I think that’s one of the bigger, that’s one of the bigger issues. I think that’s one of those big issues in our community. We’re so quick to give up, you know.

Caleb also shared how critical it was that during the pandemic he took advantage of the additional time with older students to build relationships. He shared,
I mean, being that the only time I actually got to interact with the older kids was during the summertime and that’s the only time that we would have them and that would be like two, two and a half months or something like that. So during that time, we still got to cram in, like everything that we teach them, like we do, college tours and stuff like that, and be able to talk about, you know, the college experience. So, you know, being able to have more time with them, to be able to stress the emphasis of that, you know, is very rewarding.

While he felt that these experiences were rewarding, it was also necessary to know that everyone did not have the same support system at home, and he felt that participants needed to know that staff were there for them at all times. Caleb went on to say,

I mean a lot of these kids come from situations and stuff like that where they get the support that they need or they may get some kind of support from their parents or guardians but it’s kind of limited because they have to work or they got other situations going on. You know, we do have kids here that have parents locked up and things of that nature. So just making sure that they understand that they have that support and the support is ongoing regardless of what the circumstances or situations are. Just let them know that they have that extra help and support and we’re here to listen to whatever.

Caleb’s perception of the BGCDOC program’s effectiveness was stated in contrast to a program he had attended as an adolescent and how the two programs differed. He said,

I don’t ever remember getting into any depth about culture and things of that nature. So even in after school programs, I get extra help. We didn’t really do too much programming as far as I remember, it was more so like after school babysitting type thing.
Caleb felt the changes caused by the pandemic exposed areas of need for participants in relation to their educational experience. When discussing his perception of the program and how it was effective, he shared,

If they need extra assistance with anything, we have resources here that’s able to help them with whatever subject they need help with. It’s interesting because a lot of these kids need that extra support being the fact that they’re not in the classroom. You know a lot of these kids, before we opened the program, weren’t logging on to their classes at all, so it was just kind of like one thing after another. So being able to have this program open allows a lot of parents to go back to work and make sure that their kids are doing the right thing, make sure they log into their classes and do work, things of that nature. So we’ll have a majority of the kids’ schedules. Well, more than most of them are the same, a few of them are different. So we don’t have a consistent schedule per say, with the exception of light lunch and snacks and they’re normally gone by four o’clock. So we’ll try to squeeze in like a class here and there but being in front of a computer seven, eight hours at a day is mentally and physically draining. Honestly, because I think a program outside of school will make the difference in a lot of these kids’ future. The school system, honestly, I think, needs to catch up with the times that we’re living in.

I think we actually have the freedom to maneuver more, maneuver around more than the school system. So I think that, you know, having these programs, these after school programs, whether it be boys or girls clubs you know, whatever entity can make can make the difference and what these kids do after they graduate. You know, they get the grades and all that stuff, the transcripts and all of that but I think a lot of a lot of the character that these kids have can come from these external programs.
Profile of Donna

Donna was a 40-something Black female who worked within the school setting due to her children and how it helped to align their schedules. She expressed concern that programs like the Boys & Girls Clubs would not be able to continue due to the pandemic and a lack of much needed funding. The ability to meet children where they are and provide a respite from their environments was something she felt strongly about.

Donna had worked within programs throughout her life due to making sure she was available for her own children while they were school-aged. Donna’s perception of her role within the program was modest and she shared,

I feel my role is basically the support staff, I cover basically anything that needs to be covered, whether it’s covering a class, whether it’s covering the bathroom runs, covering the front desk, any administrative, little things I could do, paperwork, anything that needs to be covered. So I am basically a staff coverage person.

She explained, “I’ve always revolved around children.” In sharing her remembrances of a project that the Boys & Girls Club performed in the community, she stated,

We were planting trees and to get them to learn about trees and keeping their area, their neighborhood beautiful and what the tree is and how it just blooms. The hard work it takes to dig a hole, you know, it’s a lot. You watching the kids, just their eyes light up and they’re so engaged, you know, like, wow and then they take care of things. You’re teaching them so many different aspects. So that’s like something I like to see a child grow.
Donna made it clear that, “You want people to work with kids who actually care about kids.” Her exposure to the difficulties students experienced in the classroom had been increased due to the outbreak of a global pandemic. She shared that,

   It’s important that you have a lot of patience and care because everything is different, whether they have a little mental health issue or autism or they are a little slower at learning. They’re harder to learn how to teach, to read. You have to watch them and see what their difficulties are and then try to understand and help them in a way that they’ll get it. Not you just can’t go on, OK? This is how everybody learns. They learn differently and individually and sometimes it takes different things that you have to do with them to help them grasp what they’re learning.

Having fun, being a support, and helping children learn were her passions. Her attitude as a positive and caring adult was palpable, and Donna’s compassion shone through in each interaction. While being a support for a student, she said, “I couldn’t hug them or anything, which I would have done, but we can’t do that. So it’s just telling them that a person really loves them.” She felt that each child was special and needed a patient adult who would help them academically. When discussing her interactions during the pandemic and the related closure of schools, Donna summed up her role by saying,

   Hey, you know, can we help with anything you need to do? Can we put it on the smart board and help you work out whatever is going on? We’ll read aloud with them, whatever we can do to help them keep themselves comfortable and do their work, sit beside them to help tutor them with their work. We try to keep them engaged, that they need a little break or something. We take a walk, you know, to the restrooms or we just take a walk. You need to breathe or something like that. Let’s take a minute, OK? Let’s get back into
work. So we try to make it as comfortable as possible and we’re seeing that that’s really going well, staying engaged. They still want to do their work and then they know at two thirty when school is over, time to have fun.

Throughout her interview, Donna continued to speak modestly about her role within the program. However, when we began to discuss what aspects she felt were most important, Donna shared,

It’s just really nice to see them learning and having fun learning, you know, and just participating with one another. You know, especially in our community. All you see is and hear about is bad things, gangs, fighting, kids doing crime. This is different. They’re not doing that. They’re getting along, you know, and that’s going to take them further in life. Life lessons they’re learning. So and then there’s the joy to know that, OK, I was a part of a life lesson and it can change a child’s life.

Her interactions with the children produced many positive feelings for her. Donna moved to North Carolina when her children were young, and she found particular value in being a part of students’ formative years as well as being part of the larger community. These were important in building relationships with students and the community as a whole. She stated,

That brings joy to anyone’s heart. To me. I mean, I don’t know. I know that the raising of kids and, you know, you have a hand in the community. You just see it, like if you haven’t seen a child in ten years and all of a sudden I see a child from kindergarten. Here they are in middle school. Wow. You know how much they’ve grown. It’s beautiful. I really love it.

Donna felt it was important that students knew they had someone on their side who believed in them. Sharing,
Wherever I can help someone either feel at ease, you know, so that they can fit in. In a game they didn’t kick the ball, right? They kept missing the ball. Oh, come on. Let’s try it and let’s try it this way to encourage the kids. You know, I like to stand on the outside and give encouragement, you know, hey, good job. You know, make sure they feel good. You know, keep them playing, be a cheerleader.

She continued to express the importance of ensuring that children felt good about themselves, saying,

You know, it just gives them a sense of being someone and that’s important. I really feel that’s important. You know, especially as a mom, you know, when your kids feel down on themselves or they just don’t feel like their enough, you know, especially today’s times. They need encouragement. They need to know, hey, if my mom is not, you know, cheering me on or my dad is not there, everybody’s working.

Donna believed that relationships with the children were important but shared that parents needed to be involved as well, “The staff get to know who the parents are and just have a community dynamic that everybody works together.” This collaboration was especially important during the pandemic. Due to their new responsibility of supporting students learning remotely, some participants were having difficulties adapting to their new normal. Donna said,

I’m glad I was here, because sometimes we get busy. You just can’t ignore the teachers. This can’t stop the classes. Let me take one child out. I’m around. Hey, I see something. Let me step in and help. That was one of the times I was able to step in and help. The child finally felt a little better, came back to the class, sat down, and I think they did a fun game or something. At the end of the day, he was able to play the Xbox and stuff until his parents came and then they went to the gym.
Incidents like these caused Donna to feel that what she provided was needed even more in a pandemic setting. Covid-19 made individuals feel separated from each other and encouraged her to nurture those relationships with students even more. She concluded her thoughts as,

So little things we can do, even if it’s five minutes or something. You know, it’s for the child, to help them, you know, make them feel better, just calm them. In that sense. What I give is priceless to me. Caring is one of the biggest things and being kind. A lot of people don’t have kindness and a lot of kids are growing up without kindness and they need to see a little bit of kindness or a lot of kindness. So that’s something I feel I bring to the table here and I enjoy that. I lead with my heart.

Donna shared, “My children used to go to Boys and Girls Club, not here but where I’m from and they have very good programs.” Her perception as a parent also guided her belief in the value of the program, its effectiveness, and the support it provided for students. She said,

You know, sometimes kids are just so wound up with adult issues nowadays that they don’t know how to be a kid anymore. Here they can be a kid you know, and that’s important for a child to feel like they can be a child be innocent and have fun. No stress, no chores. I don’t have to do this. I mean, even though you clean off your desk and things like that, but, you know, they could just have fun here. I think that’s what’s most important for them to feel like a kid. So what do you need from us so you can get better? You know, I think it’s so important for afterschool programs or any organization that helps children to help broaden their horizons, to help them be better than what they are, you know, and help them grow and mature to be better citizens in society. I feel that the ideal purpose for after school is definitely having a place for children to go out, that kids can either be themselves, get the help that they need, be a part of a group of kids they feel
comfortable with or just around. Adults that are safe and a very safe place for them to be, a nurturing place because we do nurture them as well.

In closing, Donna wanted to make sure she shared her concerns in relation to children not having access to programs like the Boys & Girls Club in the future. She stated,

I think my biggest concern, if these organizations closed down, if they don’t get the funding that they need to stay open. I think it’s so important to the kids and just our society to give them something that they’ll never forget for the rest of their lives. You know, I will always go back to my memories of when I was tap dancing and doing dance classes and gymnastics when I was a little girl at the Boys and Girls Club, you know, I will always go back to my memories when my children, my son, was the first time they did an ice hockey tournament for black kids, you know, I mean, it was so astounding what these programs can do for children, you know and my thing is I just hope everyone fights as hard as we can to keep after school programs or any programs for children open for them and fight to keep them for many, many, many years to come. I mean, I just want to close with that. I mean, there’s nothing more important than helping the youth nowadays, especially our kind of kids. I mean, because they’re lacking. They’re falling, they’re being left behind and it’s terrible. It’s very terrible. This is where it starts. We have to help the youth, even at these little stepping stones like this, to be there for the children to let them see that there is more to life.

Profile of April

April was in her early 20s and came into program in lieu of working as a bartender trainer. When I asked why she chose to work in the Boys & Girls Club she commented, “I
thought it was something cool to do during the quarantine because they have safer things going on than my original job and I felt a little unsafe, so I had to come here.”

April’s decision to work in the program as a result of the pandemic and the peace of mind that the Boys & Girls Club provided with their safety protocols were determining factors in her being an employee of the program. These processes as well as the limited exposure to others made it a preferable occupation. “I’m comfortable, it’s not too stressful or a lot of major things are going on. It is just the same kids, same people all the time.” Because she did not work in the program prior to COVID-19, April did not have experience with what things were like prior to the pandemic. She reported to work near the end of the academic component of the full-day program and viewed her role as more of a support to other staff. She shared,

I’ll come in and either half or a little over half of the students are in class about to wrap it up, and some of them will be done earlier because they’re done after they have their morning classes, just lunch and after that it’s over. So we have a fun activity for them to do while the other kids are in class, those kids are a little quiet so they can hear the teachers. Then around 2:30 is snack time. That’s when we’ll talk. Let’s have conversations about different things and try to get them to do a little game. Gym time we’ll have either a little game that they’ll do to get a little stress out or whatever. They’ll have free time. I’ll play soccer, football, Frisbee, whatever it is they want me to do with them and then it is time to go home.

April felt her role was simply to help the students at the end of a long school day. Her interactions with students were based on their interests and what activities they wanted. She felt that this allowed other staff to perform their program roles, and she simply enjoyed the time with students.
Although she had been with BGCDoc for a limited time, she shared how her previous life experiences shaped her relationship building. Citing her experiences as a mentee and how these experiences helped her develop relationships naturally, she explained,

I’ve always had mentors growing up, I still talk to a few of them just to check in on them and they check in on me like, oh, you’re still doing this? You’re still doing that? So I was like somebody I can always give my life to. Somebody I could depend on to support me always and me knowing that I bring that to them because they can talk to me about anything. We’ll have our fun time. But if something serious comes up, I’ll shut down all the fun and make sure I handle the situation first, if anything. So, you know, it’s just my experience, I try to show them how I felt and what it meant to me and let them know, hey, I’m here for you, too.

Sharing that she felt being a positive role model, reinforcing a positive self-image, and being a resource for students when they’re having a bad day were important. April stated,

It’s just wonderful to adapt to different things and see a new view on different things and see how they take the time to make sure everybody’s OK. Everybody has their capability. If you feel uncomfortable, you have somebody to talk to. Hey, you feel uncomfortable, you need to sit down and talk to me. Just let me know something’s wrong. Let me know and I’ll try to help you fix it. So it’s not like you’re struggling on your own.

April attended a Boys & Girls Club in her youth and shared that the program was a bit different from her experience years ago. She said, “I would say they’re more focused on things like STEM here.” She shared that her experience had revolved around sports but was impressed with the level of focus put on participants’ academics. Due to her role being more dedicated to the time
after the academic day, she felt her perception may not encompass the whole program, but she shared,

    Well, I view this program as a way of staying off the streets, you know, just bettering myself or someone else, bettering themselves and not falling behind the dangers and violence, and also that’s going on, whether white, black, Hispanic, whether you are living in a little tougher area, you have somewhere to count on. You don’t have a lot of people to talk to at home. I have somebody to talk to here.

Her relationships with her mentors added to her insights and in closing she shared, “Encourage kids to do better than what they’re doing, nothing else, no matter what anybody says, you can do it and keep it in your mind. You can do it.”

**Profile of Candice**

    Candice was a mid-40s Black female who affectionately called the Boys & Girls Club the tiny little building off to the right. She shared that, “I decided to stop one day because I really want to see what was going on in this little building.”

    Candice had recently retired as a juvenile police officer. She had worked previously as a part-time employee, and she became a full-time employee with the Boys & Girls Club upon retirement. Her previous career introduced her to the program and the experience caused her to apply. She explained, “I said when I’m not working on the street, this is where I need to be. This is where I want to be.” Her interactions with the students covered a range of topics, and she enjoyed her conversations with teens the most, saying,

    I don’t know about a whole lot of other age groups, but teenagers don’t like mornings.

    It’s something about the morning time that makes them very, very irritable and very grumpy. So when they come in, the first thing I want to know is about is the last time I
saw them, I wanted to know what happened when you left this building and you got in that car and you went home, the first question I asked is, did you tell your mom you love them? You didn’t tell your dad that you love them today because it’s just a thing we have to do. When you get in that car, you tell your mom you love them and everybody answers that question. Yes, they answer that question over the years, maybe I did. So pretty much they do virtual learning now. So I kind of walk around just to make sure they’re on their laptops and on the computers. They’re in school. That’s pretty much how the day goes. But once they finish that, we do what’s called real talk and it is real talk.

Candice’s background in law enforcement reinforced the importance of her role within the program. “If they’re there every day, I know where they are not every day.” She was aware of how many of her program participants were viewed by the general public, a view that was not always favorable. Drawing from her previous experiences as a juvenile officer, Candice had memories where she felt that situations got out of hand that could have been averted. Reflecting on one such incident, she shared,

So part of my responsibility, knowing my background, is to help educate those boys what to do when you are walking into the store and you get stopped. What to do if you’re with your friends and you get questioned about something, how to move, how to step, what not to say, what to say, you know, so that’s just only a small part of my responsibility. But I take that to heart because I’m actually seeing with my eyes some really horrible situations that I know, I got back to the police department on a couple of occasions and just I kind of threw stuff. I threw things around the room out of frustration. My responsibility is huge. But that is one of my responsibilities that I really take to heart is
making sure these kids are safe because safety is the number one goal when they come in the door.

Remembering these incidents inspired her to create a program for the Boys & Girls Club called Street Smarts. The activities helped the teens navigate the sometimes-difficult landscape that many of the program participants lived in. Candice stated,

So when we run a program called Street Smarts, I like that the part of the program that we can role play. So when I allow them to role play, they kind of like pick a partner and they get to act out different scenarios. Those scenarios for those kids get so emotional you would be amazed how in depth and these kids really feel. I make the situations or the scenarios so realistic. So their response, you know, some of them even get emotional, they get emotional. But, you know, you get to see exactly how they’re feeling and how they would handle, you know, every scenario that I throw at them. So that is by far my favorite part of the program, is the role playing in the scenarios that I give them.

Candice’s early childhood and young adult life were at the forefront when she conducted her programming with students. She felt that her role in the program was enhanced by it because she believed in each child. Her closing thoughts on the topic were, “It doesn’t take much to change you. You know, if you’re around five people that doing a certain thing, you’re going to be number six and I was almost six.”

Candice’s observations of the program began while still in her previous career. When she learned about the program and began to volunteer, the role relationships played were integral to her work in her full-time job. She shared,

I kind of would take some of the things that they were telling me as far as some of the things that we were doing wrong and that we would do to make the situation worse.
When we approached them, I had no idea it was they felt that way, you know, and I could take some of that stuff back and start training some of the other police officers like, hey, you might not want to do this when we approach, you know, any type of juvenile or just because they’re standing here doesn’t mean they’re automatically selling drugs. You know, we’ve got to stop running up on them like that. We’ve got to stop chasing them.

In her interview, Candice described her work in the Boys & Girls Club as “the best decision I’ve made.” Sharing how everyone was critical to making the program functional, she said, “we do still have that village here and everybody sticks together and everybody holds whoever that is accountable for what that is.” Her work as an officer showed her that it was important that she shared with participants some of her knowledge in that realm as well. She stated,

I have a lot of boys, I have more boys than girls and I really wanted the boys to know what not to do. You know, it seems crazy to a lot of people, but we have to nowadays. You have to teach our boys what not to do. This is what you don’t do and this is what you don’t say.

As a juvenile officer she was aware of how some of the adolescents would be viewed by fellow officers, and she felt her relationship with them would allow her to help them survive interactions with officers who may not know them personally. She said,

My teenage boys, they don’t look threatening to me, but as soon as they walk out the door and they get approached by somebody else, they look threatening. You know, they look like they might cause some harm or try to hurt somebody, you know, so I personally teach them what to do.

Candice’s interactions with the adolescents had not changed due to COVID-19 because she felt she would continue to do what she’d always done, leverage her relationships and interactions
with students to help them navigate life outside of the program. Drawing on her childhood and its difficulties, she said,

I did a whole lot of research on how kids think. I went all the way back to when I was a teenager and I was not a very good teenager. Not at all. I went back to what actually helped me, what helped me, what made me decide not to go back into the same situation or take that same path my mom took. What helped me and I came up with a process is called it change and rearrange thought process. Basically, it is a form of impacting a juvenile so much or basically repetitive, positive behavior changes and rearranges thought processes and I use it every single day for my young men and young women. I use it and sooner or later it kind of becomes implanted in their minds to say certain things, even talk a certain way or this behavior is not accepted. This behavior right here is positive.

Candice shared her initial impression of the program in her first interview. In her former role she would ride by and say, “I really want to see what was going on in this little building.” What she saw inspired her to volunteer, then she was hired to work part time and later became full time once she retired from law enforcement. When asked about her perception of the effectiveness of the program, she shared,

This was the tiniest boys and girls school after school program I’ve ever seen in my life. Those kids were packed in there having fun and these were teenagers in there and some middle schoolers and I was like, wow, you know, while I’m out arresting these kids. This is the place these kids need to be at.

She reflected on her career and how the program supported students she had met under different circumstances. Saying,
I was actually a juvenile officer, a specialized police position that our only job really was to deal with juveniles. When I say deal with, we were the ones to actually go into the home or the school and put the kid in some handcuffs and take that child away. That was my role. I can’t tell you how many kids I took away so I worked with kids before, but on a whole different level, you know, it was completely different from trying to keep them out of jail than putting them in there.

Her perception of the program was that the Boys & Girls Club not only provided a space for the adolescents to be safe but also a space where they were supported instead of punished. She shared,

I saw counselors in there talking to the kids and really finding out the root of the issue instead of automatically saying you are a criminal or what you just did was so bad and you deserve to be punished for it. I started thinking differently because I was just so used to being around all those other cops, you know, and you kind of get brainwashed to say, oh, you know, he’s 13 years old, it’s nine o’clock, he is walking down the street. I didn’t know, you know, so seeing them and seeing how happy those kids were at the time, it changed my mindset. In my opinion, the ideal purpose of an after school program is to get those kids in that building and keep those kids safe.

Candice finished with how she wished she’d had access to a similar program in her youth and that she would have made different decisions if provided the support within the Boys & Girls Club. “We have that village theory. It takes that village and I love it.”

Profile of Sandra

Sandra was a mid-20s-aged Latino female who began her relationship with the Boys & Girls Clubs while attending college. The flexibility worked well with her busy schedule, and she
served as a liaison for the LatinX community. After moving away, she came back in a year and soon transitioned into her current leadership role in the program.

Sandra’s role as a supervisor in the program shaped her perceptions of the role she played in the program. She viewed the program as a whole, and when sharing the purpose of the program, she said,

The purpose of the program is to provide opportunities to student and serve any student that needs us most here at the club, we try to provide them with unique opportunities, expose them to different things, make sure their academics and they are successful and just pretty much successful in life, in anything that they’re doing or that they do. Then also try to give them opportunities that they may not receive outside of the club or on an everyday basis.

She shared the differences she saw as a result of the pandemic and expressed how the program had changed to adapt. The change of being simply after-school and transitioning into an academic setting did not alter their focus for the students to be their best. She stated,

Well, as far as the students being successful in academics, we collect report cards each quarter just to see where each kid needs to work or if they need tutors or if we can offer them different program needs or offer them additional services. We collect the report card each quarter, assuming they turn them in, and we’re able to compare and contrast to see whether they’ve went up in the grade level or whether they improved or whether our assistance has been effective or not.

Because of her role as a program supervisor, Sandra said, “I don’t spend that much time with them in the classroom.” She viewed her role as ensuring that programming was in place for the
students and, prior to the pandemic, was always pleased to hear positive feedback from the students regarding visitors.

I think my favorite part of what I do is making connections, making partnerships, getting these programs in and then seeing how much they enjoy the program or during the program, them having a good time being engaged. Then they’re just like when I know they enjoy it, when they ask, hey, can we do that again or, hey, when are these people coming back?

During our interview, when I asked about relationships formed within the program, she felt that due to the pandemic, some of the activities had changed but relationships continued to be a critical part of the interactions in the program. She shared,

What’s different is, I mean, this program is a comprehensive program. It gives students the ability to get their work done and focus on their studies. Get tutoring and then also get opportunities to experience, you know, maybe new sports, new experiences, and new field trips. To expose them to different areas of work or different occupations, different things like that.

Sandra had attended sports camps as a youth and young adult but felt the Boys & Girls Club offered something beyond that. When sharing her vision of the program, she stated,

My vision for the program is to continue offering kids new opportunities to continue and making sure that they’re successful in their studies and making sure that they’re getting better each year, also serving as many youth as we possibly can. I mean, there’s obviously restrictions with COVID, but as soon as we can open and even if we’re in the COVID state where we can only serve X amount of kids, being creative to serve as many kids as possible.
Sandra’s perception of program effectiveness was rooted in the experiences that the children had access to and ensuring that they allowed them to explore their interests. She said, This program is a comprehensive program, it gives students the ability to get their work done and focus on their studies. While I was getting the experience of being on a sports team and stuff, it really wasn’t like helping with school work and different things like the club offers. The club also offers leadership programs and just overall programs for the child, whether teaching them about respect or about hygiene, several different things. My vision for the program is to continue offering kids new opportunities, to continue making sure that they’re successful in their studies and making sure that they’re getting better each year.

After a bit more reflection, Sandra closed with,

To me, I think our program means opportunity. I think a lot of these kids come from different backgrounds and they’re exposed to different things. So I think when they come here, it’s a safe space and it’s an opportunity for them to let go of whatever they’re going through. Just come here, do what they need to do, they know that we care about them here. They know that we love them, they know that we genuinely care about them and they know that we try to do the best for them. So I think for me, I feel like it means mostly opportunity. I’m just giving them an opportunity to be a kid because we never know what these kids go through outside of the club. So just giving them an opportunity to kind of have fun, still stay focused, but still be exposed and experience different things.

Section III: Findings—Four Main Themes

In this section I present the four primary themes that emerged from my analysis of the data. The themes I identified are:
Theme 1: Program Staff See Their Roles as Resources for Children to Be Successful in Life Outside the Program.

Theme 2: The Pandemic Has Changed the Purpose of the Program for All Staff

Theme 3: Staff View Inter-Personal Relationships as Beneficial to Themselves as well as Participants

Theme 4: The Program Has the Potential to Save Lives

Theme 1: Program Staff See Their Roles as Resources for Children to be Successful in Life Outside the Program

The Boys & Girls Club of Durham and Orange County primarily serves students and families from at-risk communities. By providing this resource to families free of charge, they are a valuable asset for working families in need of a safe place for their children while they are engaged in virtual learning as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. These families could not afford the programs offered by the school district or other entities due to the fees. While some programs may have accepted assistance from Social Services, the BGCDOC did not require anything from the parents outside of registration. There were multiple reasons for participants to attend, but I noticed that staff always positioned themselves to be a positive resource for each child.

While interviewing Brandon and Donna, they both expressed their roles as being an adult who students could talk to, would take a walk with, or give them a moment to process their emotions away from the group. Caleb’s desire to impart his wisdom in relation to being resilient, or Candice’s drawing on her prior career in law enforcement to teach young Black males how to interact with law enforcement were lessons meant to be of impact outside of the program and used to help them through life. Virginia echoed these sentiments when she shared, “If there were someone who took that much interest in my cousin or myself, maybe his outcome would have
been something different.” Donna echoed the same concern, wondering what would occur if programs were not available for young at-risk children. Although each staff member shared how they supported the students while they were attending virtual instruction, they shared the common factor of their desire to support the social, emotional, and physical well-being of the child outside of their academics.

As I conducted my interviews with staff, I wondered if past participants were ever able to share with current attendees the value of these lessons or if they used these lessons once they left for the day. I recalled some of the stories shared and the passion was evident from staff that they did all they could to support each student under their care.

**Theme 2: The Pandemic Has Changed the Purpose of the Program for All Staff**

   When the COVID-19 pandemic began, the response varied throughout the country. No one knew what would happen, how things would change, nor the impact the virus would have on the families affected. When local school systems decided to have all students attend school virtually, families were presented with difficult decisions. Some families had jobs that required them to be in-person in spite of the pandemic, some families had limited or no Internet access, and many families did not know how to support their children academically. Combined with resources that were provided to children daily like meals, tutoring, counseling, and supervision while parents work, many families faced obstacles that would be difficult to overcome with the school closures. Based on the responses of staff, their focus shifted from strictly providing after-school programming to becoming a stand-alone resource for their families. Virginia shared,

   They worry about the pandemic. They worry about where their next meal is going to come from. They worry about their parents if they’re going to have a job. A lot of these parents were laid off and some of them have returned back to work and some of them still
have not. A lot of the parents, especially the refugee families, their parents work in food
service, which everybody knows those hours with the restaurants and things being closed,
all of those things were cut back but if you make them feel comfortable enough, if you
make them feel like there is no judgment, if you make them feel that you want absolutely
the best for them and their children, they’ll say, hey, I need a little help, whether it be by
phone call, text message saying, you know, go ahead and get that food bag and bring it
home this weekend.

During my interviews, staff described how their routines had changed, but after students’
academic day was completed, their focus returned to providing supportive programing and
helping students decompress after attending their virtual classes all day. Brandon said,

I guess it’s like, honestly, when they can release some of the tension from being in class
all day, like gym time or they have free time. I understand this is not the most the most
wanted circumstance for anyone. So the fact that some of my students do get to have
those moments where they’re just like, OK, I’m done, I want them to be done, I want
them to say, OK, if you have work it’s homework, make sure you do it at home. If you
want some help, we will do it here during your free time. But that’s up to you. You can
opt out your free time to do your homework because I’m always here to help. But I don’t
want to keep making them get on the computer. I don’t want to keep making them have
to do work unless they need it. Like if they’re behind in work, then yes, we do have to
use your free time, but typically, none of my students are really ever too far behind in
work where we have to do that. So I kind of like to give them like, OK, your day is over,
you’re finally done.
Continuing to provide programming was important to all staff of the program, but the impact of the pandemic, virtual learning, its impact on the families had caused the staff to align their roles to support families outside of their previous after-school mindset.

Theme 3: Staff View Inter-Personal Relationships as Beneficial to Themselves as Well as Participants

The Boys & Girls Club program has always been viewed as a safe space for students outside of their at-risk environments. The programming is designed to support the development of positive behaviors on the part of participants, and each staff member modeled this expectation. What I discovered while interviewing staff was the impact of the program on BGCDOC staff members and how they viewed the program as beneficial to themselves. Throughout the interview process, staff expressed how working within the program helped them in their personal lives and created positive feelings. Staff would share their childhood experiences and, whether they attended a program or not, they expressed how they saw how if they had attended a BGCDOC program, their life would have been better for it.

When I interviewed Candice, she shared that after working as an officer all day, the program provided a welcome respite. She said,

So when I was stopped at this little tiny little Boys and Girls Club, I promise you everything that I was going through, being a police officer and all those things going on in the streets, I can’t even begin to even tell you how bad that stuff was to see. You know, I saw shootings and I saw so many different things, but that was the one place that I can actually go to and I saw joy.

Caleb was impressed with his group due to how much he felt they were more culturally aware than he was at their age. He shared,
Having them be able to tell me what it is that they feel and that what they see is really eye
opening because I didn’t see that you know. I’m sure the same amount of police
shootings and stuff like that was happening but now it’s different because they’re more
culturally aware of the circumstances going on around than I was at that age.

During the interviews, it was shared on multiple occasions how important staff viewed the
program, not only for the participants but how much of an asset it was to their own lives.

**Theme 4: The Program Has the Potential to Save Lives**

The Boys & Girls Club of Durham and Orange County primarily serve families who live
at or below the poverty line. The students who attend their programs are considered at-risk or are
exposed to environments that put them at risk so it was reasonable when staff spoke of the safety
of the building and how children could feel safe within its confines. While conducting my
interviews, staff expressed their concern for the children and shared episodes that modeled their
concerns. Students and staff had the type of relationships that occur with individuals who are
aware of all aspects of each other’s lives. Participants felt comfortable with staff and staff
expressed that this was critical to know the whole child. Caleb shared,

> I would say my favorite part is actually being able to interact with the older kids, you
know, being able to answer those tough questions that may come that you may not want
to ask your parents or anything like that. You know, be able to better prepare our future
you know?

Candice shared similar sentiments when she said,

> We should be teaching those kids the right way to go. That after school program is really
the difference between life and death. It is. It’s not in between, we can’t make up
anything. It is life or death and if we don’t take it that seriously, then it will be death.
Donna felt the same and she stated, “There’s nothing more important than helping the youth nowadays, especially our kind of kids.”

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I presented the results of the staff interviews that I conducted for my study. After constructing profiles of each participant, I found common themes among them. These four themes represented the findings of my study. I found that staff viewed their role as resources to support participants outside of the program, that the pandemic had caused purpose of the program to change, and that the inter-personal relationships formed were beneficial to staff. I also discovered that staff felt the program had the ability to save lives. I have provided evidence for each theme, along with direct quotes from staff.

In Chapter V, I have analyzed my findings by describing how they relate to the research literature I reviewed in Chapter II. I also discuss implications of my study and provide my recommendations for research and practice. I conclude the chapter with a reflection on what I have learned while conducting my research.
CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

My purpose for this study was to determine the perceptions of staff in an after-school or similar out-of-school program (OST) setting. To do so, I used basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) as my methodology to investigate the experiences of seven program staff from the Boys & Girls Clubs of Durham and Orange Counties (BGCDOC). All staff were over 18 years old; all but one identified as Black and all worked with children within the program. The study consisted of semi-structured interviews.

In this chapter, I begin by answering the research question and sub-questions with my findings and connect my findings to the literature that I reviewed earlier in Chapter II. I will also revisit my theoretical framework of Positive Youth Development (PYD) as an analytical lens in order to gain a deeper understanding of my findings. Next, I discuss implications of my study and make recommendations for practitioners and researchers. It is my hope that by sharing my findings, information and related guidance, participating families, staff, participants, and/or community stakeholders will be aware of the significance and level of influence possessed by after-school and its program staff. I conclude the chapter with a personal reflection by providing my insights regarding how the study has impacted my practice as well as my perceptions of after-school programs.

Analysis

In this section, I answer my research and related sub-questions with my findings. To enrich my analysis, I connect my findings to existing scholarship from the Chapter II literature review. I will begin with the primary research question:

*What are the experiences of staff who work in an after-school or similar program setting?*
In the previous chapter, I provided profiles of each staff member interviewed in order to share the experiences of after-school staff to answer this broad question. The use of profiles allowed each staff member to answer the semi-structured interview questions. The embedded member checks ensured the accuracy of their statements and revealed the staffs’ experiences in the program as well as the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic through their individual lenses. As staff shared their experiences, each had a different reason for working within the program but all had a common focus of helping youth. As Caleb shared,

So what really interested me into coming into this in this field was, I’m not going to sugarcoat it. I didn’t expect to get into it. It kind of found me. After getting a degree in English, I knew I didn’t want to teach. I didn’t want to be in the classroom. So I wanted to find something, waiting to be able to use this expensive degree and be able to impact others about positive things, positive role models, leadership, and things of that nature. So I actually stumbled across this position with the Boys and Girls Club, in essence just looking for a job versus a career. So my initial thoughts, I’m just using this for something right now to be able to pay the bills. Then over time, I was like, I’m actually starting to enjoy it.

His story mirrored others who sought to support children outside of the school setting. Candice’s upbringing and family background highlighted how her experience caused her to want to support teens. She stated,

I grew up in the city, in foster care, so I haven’t had any programs. I just needed somebody, a family. That was really hard because I find a family, next week I found another one. So I didn’t grow up and have an opportunity to do things like this.
Pointing to the importance and impact of her experiences with adolescents, Candice continued by sharing,

I know for a fact a program like this, knowing what we do for the children and what I see every single day. I know this would have changed a lot about the way I grew up. I was already in foster care, so I kind of hated the world. I got taken away from my mom and then I was bounced from house to house to house. When I became a teenager, rebellious is an understatement. It was pretty bad as a teenager and having a program like the Boys and Girls Club or after school program would have completely changed my whole thought process.

The experiences of staff were student-focused and viewed consistently with the objective being to do what was best for participants at all times. When describing her perception of the program, Donna shared how she viewed the programs’ environment compared to participants’ neighborhood settings and how many were at-risk settings. In the interviews conducted with program staff, the wide range of experiences, reasoning, and backgrounds gave me a broad and diverse data set to study. By having such a diverse data set, I was provided a rich pool of information to help build my study.

I will now focus on the sub-questions. In my first sub-question, I asked: **what roles do staff play in the program?** In response to this question, I found that **Program Staff See Their Roles as Resources for Children to be Successful in Life Outside the Program.** The Boys & Girls Club of Durham and Orange County program staff all felt strongly about their role within the program and how they supported students. In each interview, staff shared how important the role they played was in being a support to students outside program hours. Each staff member had a different reason for working within the program but all shared the importance of being a
support to participants. Staff explained how they wished for their students to be successful outside of and after their participation in the program ended. ASP employees also expressed their thoughts pertaining to how they or their family members could have benefited from the program and that by having access to the program, how this could have potentially helped them experience success later in life or helped them or their family member avoid adverse situations. Sharing that many students were not able to have access to positive adult role models and how important it was to serve in that role for students, April stated, “Just let me know something’s wrong. Let me know and I’ll try to help you fix it. So it’s not like you’re struggling on your own.” Sampson et al. (1991) made this observation as to the importance of programs and how they provided supportive adults due to the relative absence of available adults in the youth’s community. ASP staff felt their role was to ensure participants were supported outside of the program’s hours.

As I reflected on their responses, it was clear that staff focused on how they could support their participants in learning how to be successful in life. This encompassed the time within as well as when they left the program for the day. C. Smith et al. (2010) shared that staff’s interactions with participants were considered critical to their experiences and contributed to the adolescent’s level of success when seeking to improve the participant’s socioemotional outcomes. Staff members’ sharing of taking time with students during their virtual instruction to have a moment to decompress came to mind. Brandon stated, “I would just pull them to the side and give them something else to do.” His interaction with the student allowed them time to let go of whatever their stressor was and then resume their academic work. The interviews with staff shared the reasoning of Larson (2000), in that their positive practices contributed to a positive interaction between the adults and youth in alignment with positive youth development (PYD).
Donna’s observation of the teens planting trees in their communities caused her to share, “Watching the kids, just their eyes light up and they’re so engaged.” This mirrors Blyth (2006) and Pianta (2008) on how the practices and interactions of staff with participants were two of the most important aspects of education and human service settings.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not allow for many of the activities they may have conducted prior to the global outbreak but this did not stop staff from supporting students as they transitioned from primarily after-school hours into the full day virtual learning environment. There were limited options because of capacity, safe personal spacing, and other CDC requirements but staff continued to express how their interactions were even more critical than before because of the pandemic. Caleb shared that “Being able to have this program open allows a lot of parents go back to work and make sure their kids are doing the right thing.” Even as he shared this he also stated, “But being in front of a computer seven, eight hours a day is mentally and physically draining.” In the midst of the pandemic, staff continued to serve as an important component in their participants’ support systems as echoed by VanderVen (2007) and Barnes and Nolan (2019). COVID-19 had reduced physical interactions among individuals, and, as a result, many adolescents were experiencing an increase in personal attachment-related issues. Staff members’ roles were a critical factor in promoting positive developmental outcomes for these students and helping this influence extend into their personal lives. To quote Caleb, “I think a program outside of school will make the difference in a lot of these kids’ futures.”

Caleb’s insights suggested the second finding related to the first sub-question, which was that The Pandemic Has Changed the Purpose of the Program for All Staff. After-school staff have been at the front of the global pandemic response and its effect on educational systems worldwide. As local schools closed, programs like the Boys & Girls Club of Durham and Orange
County (BGCDOC) supported at-risk and/or low-income families by providing all-day virtual learning sites for students from kindergarten to tenth grade. Throughout my interviews, I asked staff how the COVID-19 pandemic had changed the program from their typical after-school program day, keeping in mind that after-school programs (ASPs) have been shown to allow youth an opportunity to gain competence in modeling behaviors such as sharing with others, helping peers, as well as expressing concerns for others’ well-being (Graziano & Hart, 2016). The modeling of these pro-social behaviors by participants was especially important in the COVID-19 setting of the program. As Halpern (2002) noted, after-school programs can identify gaps in youths’ lives and try to fill them while being responsive to the changing needs and circumstances surrounding their participants. During my interview with Virginia, her expectations of the staff were that they knew the students who participated in the program. She shared, “There is not a single solitary child in this program that I cannot give you a background on.”

The pandemic dictated that the program needed to extend its hours and, as a result, staff spent the majority of the day with students. Noam (2001) viewed the after-school setting as an “intermediary environment” that takes on whatever role is needed in the home or in the school setting. When I asked about how his role had changed in the midst of pandemic, Caleb shared,

I would honestly put it more in the perspective of a counselor. You know, more so, it was the first time actually conversing with school guidance counselors and social workers and stuff like that, and ensuring that the kid is actually getting that work done. It’s tougher mainly for me because I’ve never worked in the school system, so I will really know the ins and outs or lack of really before coming into this year.
Sanders and Munford’s (2014) research shared that ASPs provided multiple services and positive resources that focused on supporting vulnerable teens. So as a result of the extended exposure to students, staff altered what they provided for students and their families in order to meet them at their current areas of need and not simply continue the program’s status quo. This ability to adapt was shared by Virginia as she expressed how the needs of participants and their families had changed due to the pandemic and its stressors. She explained,

They worry about the pandemic, they worry about where their next meal is going to come from. They worry about their parents, if they’re going to have a job. A lot of these parents were laid off, some of them have returned back to work and some of them still have not. A lot of the parents, especially the refugee families, their parents work in food service, those hours with the restaurants and things being closed, all of those things were cut back.

So the BGCDOC program adapted from simply providing free child care for families during participants’ out-of-school time (OST) to providing free supervision for students during virtual instruction and then transitioning into an after-school program once participants’ academic day concluded. Sandra shared a breakdown of the change in structure, summarizing,

Instead of strictly after school and summer camp right now, we’re offering a day. We serve breakfast, they get online for school, and each child is on line from 8:00 to 2:00 but it kind of depends on the child and the school they go to because the parents give a summary of the schedule. Bring their laptops, computers, chargers, mask and some water. So we just kind of help them go through the day, making sure that they’re online, staying on task, completing their schoolwork. Most kids are done by 2:30. So once that takes place, each class rotates through the gym so they can get some physical education. Then
they go back to their classroom, they do some programming, whether it’s Boys and Girls Club programming, bullying awareness, arts and crafts, they play trivia, or bingo. They do just different things like that. It just depends on the day and what we have going on.

Providing a resource for school-age children who may not have received them under any other circumstances aligns with Noam’s (2001) research pre-COVID, and BGCDOC modeled these actions for their families during the pandemic. COVID-19 shifted the program’s purpose, by highlighting an increased focus on not only the student but the entire family being recipients of support from the program. Lareau and Horvat (1999) as well as Barnes and Nolan (2019) shared that the growing social gap between schools and families has allowed after-school staff to serve as a resource for low-income families in lieu of the school’s office. As a result of the pandemic, when staff viewed the needs of students, they included their families as well. Virginia shared, “It is very important to know the student, to know the family, to know the home life.”

In response to social distancing and the pandemic, after-school staff expanded their roles to meet this need. Brandon shared how they transitioned during the pandemic by stating,

We’re an extended day camp, we were just strictly an after school program before. We are more encompassing now, with more help with the online platforms, getting students situated, making sure they’re in class, and making sure that they are getting the best education out of the experience. The main responsibilities are just to make sure that throughout the day all of our members are safe and that they have an engaging learning environment for what happens at school. It’s like the same learning environment that they would typically get at school with a little bit more relaxation and just all encompassing.

In line with best practices identified in Fuller et al. (2013), the BGCDOC provided a safe environment that was designed to help participants to reach their full potential. For example, the
positive staff to student relationships helped nurture a much needed mutually caring and respectful relationship between staff and their young attendees. This in turn supported positive interactions among peers, family, and school personnel (Durlak, Mahoney, et al., 2010). With the emotional strains of COVID-19, families were more receptive to support from the program and allowed them to adjust for changes caused by the pandemic. Sandra shared how the program changed as a result,

It’s a little bit different right now, instead of strictly after school and summer camp, we’re offering a day. We serve breakfast, they get online for school and each child is on-line from 8:00 to 2:00. Breaks kind of depend on the child and the school they go to. The parents give a summary of the schedule, bring their laptop, their computers, chargers, mask and some water. So we just kind of help them go through the day, making sure that they’re online, staying on task, completing their schoolwork.

The changes due to the pandemic allowed staff to adjust their roles, and they expressed how they were more attuned to their student’s emotional state than before due to the increased responsibility and demands made of the participants who were attending school virtually. Since she was part-time, April did not work during the morning portion of virtual instruction. By the time she arrived, the students were nearing the end of their day and she felt she had a responsibility to support them after a long day of virtual learning. By providing activities and games, she was able to help them relax after a long day of virtual instruction. Staff members’ roles may have changed due to the pandemic but all interviewees expressed that the most important aspect was being present and supporting the youth. For example, Caleb still felt it was important to provide the role of mentor to the teens. His role adjusted to being more of an advocate and spending time ensuring that the students took full advantage of the resources
available to them through their various schools. The roles of staff and how they adjusted to the effects of the pandemic mirror Barnes and Nolan (2019) in their findings that in the case of low-income families, the positive impacts of the program transcend grade levels and family structures. The after-school setting allows for beneficial environments where these positive interactions cultivate a welcoming space that contributes to quality relationships with the entire family (Barnes & Nolan, 2019; Rhodes, 2004).

I turn now to my second sub-question in which I asked: How do staff members support the building of meaningful relationships with their participants? I found that Staff View Interpersonal Relationships as Beneficial to Themselves as well as Participants.

In their study, Fredricks et al. (2014) shared that youth were more likely to be engaged as willing participants in programs where staff were caring and provided opportunities for positive interactions with these same adults. Spaces where the adults allowed students to process their actions and gain a deeper understanding in order to develop positive social skills would allow them to be positive members of their communities. By respecting their boundaries and not being overly intrusive, staff allow participants to improve at their own pace and provide support as needed (VanderVen, 2007). When asked about the setting and how it supported the building of meaningful relationships, April shared,

A lot of people have been here since their kids or two or, you know, they have siblings that have been here for a long time from K through two and up to high school now. So it’s just like knowing that people have been here for so long and they’re comfortable here.

When children feel supported, they are more likely to make positive decisions in relation to their social and emotional well-being. Because the relationships they form with staff are non-
evaluative unlike with their teachers, and/or non-familial, participants are more relaxed (Barnes & Nolan, 2019).

Similarly, Barnes and Nolan (2019) note how after-school program settings provide families with information and resources outside the school environment. In my interview with Virginia, she stated,

It seemed like a seamless transition because for me, even in an after school program before I moved over to the Boys Girls Club, my after school program was a continuation of the day. It was, let’s make sure that we’re still positive and we still have the same goal. Because a lot of these kids spent the majority of their day with someone else because their parents are working.

Staff felt that the pandemic supported the building of meaningful relationships with participants by allowing them more time to make these interactions purposeful. In their 2011 study, Jones and Deutsch pointed to how the relationships formed with adolescents served as foundations for engagement and promotion of a productive life once they leave the program or school setting. The study performed by the National Research Council (NRC) in 2002 also highlights after-school as an asset in supporting youth in developing healthy and prosocial behaviors. Pleased with the ability to add older attendees due to school closures, Caleb shared,

We were able to add in middle school and high school programs. So the middle school and high school programs open up a lot of things for us and that’s where I wanted to be, part of a high school program.

Candice found that the additional time with children due to the pandemic gave staff an opportunity to discuss current events and their current socio-emotional state. She shared,
So we sit around in a circle and we do what’s called real talk and we get so involved in that, time just passes. Then it’s almost time to eat lunch. They wash their hands, they eat lunch, and they still want to talk about the real talk we talked about earlier. After that, we’ll run a program. We do programming on street smarts, smart girls. We do passport to manhood, we do all kinds of programs here. After that it’s almost time to go home, that’s the typical day.

Importantly, staff viewed their interactions with students as being beneficial to themselves as well. Although each staff member’s focus was the participants, they acknowledged that their own well-being benefited from their interactions with students. When expressing how the program allowed her to feel better after a long day at her full-time job, Sandra shared, “When I’m not working on the street, this is where I need to be. This is where I want to be.” In their study, Durlak, Mahoney, et al. (2010) shared that positive staff to student relationships contributed to a mutually caring and respectful environment. Sandra went further to explain, “I know for a fact a program like this would have changed a lot about the way I grew up.” Building of these relationships with the students helped her see participants differently and helped her interactions with the students outside of the program.

Simply providing an adult presence would not be sufficient to produce or promote prosocial behaviors (Sampson et al., 1999). However, especially in the case of low-income environments, the supports provided by staff generate positive impacts that transcend grade levels and familial structures (Barnes & Nolan, 2019). Having caring, nurturing relationships with adults who respected their boundaries (VanderVen, 2007) allowed for participants to build these important relationships that permitted them to experience an environment that contributed to their success and the forming of these positive adult to youth interactions. These interactions
promote a sense of belonging and help establish positive social norms that transcend the program’s hours and applied to staff as well as students (Rhodes, 2004). These interactions allowed staff to understand that they were more than overseers or monitors but rather were valuable resources for the children they serve. Acknowledging a similar thought during his interview, Caleb shared, “I felt like this was where I needed to be, where I need to be now.”

Due to the pandemic, many students were experiencing adverse socio-emotional interactions in multiple settings due to the closure of schools. The program became a safe place that allowed them to build positive interactions with caring adults in the absence of their classroom teachers. Providing this support while their schools were closed caused Brandon to observe, “I can actually sit down and help this one kid who’s in class with their work because they’re struggling.” He also shared how important it was that he provided a positive example by stating, “I have to try my best to present myself in the best light to say, these are healthy thinking adults who want to see you on your way.” By building on these interactions and viewing participants as individuals, ASP staff were able to build quality relationships that allowed for youth to feel like parts of the community (Noam & Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2013). Donna summed this up by saying, “It just gives them a sense of being someone and that’s important.”

In my final sub-question, I asked: What are staff members’ perception of the effectiveness of the program?

As a whole, the staff viewed the program as effective, yet each expressed a difference in how they measured effectiveness. In each interview the perception of success was aligned with their ability to support the participants who attended the program. I also found The Program Has the Potential to Save Lives.
According to Aitken et al. (2007), when staff allowed attendees to determine activities, relational trust increased. Similarly, in her interview, Candice felt that her interactions with adolescents helped her build trust. She shared that after working all day as a juvenile officer, her volunteering and later work in the program allowed her to improve her approach as an officer. She saw the program as a respite after a long day on the other side of juvenile interactions and helped her grow in her interactions as an officer. She stated,

When I was stopped at this little tiny little Boys and Girls Club, I promise you everything that I was going through, being a police officer and all those things going on in the streets, I can’t even begin to even tell you how bad that stuff was to see. You know, I saw shootings and I saw so many different things, but that was the one place that I can actually go to and I saw joy.

Virginia stated simply, “Staff are really committed to the kids and they show it through their work. So the kids like them.” Her perception of effectiveness tied back to staff members’ support of participants.

Each staff member’s insights were based on how their role helped each participant in being successful. Whether providing mentorship by helping youth navigate potentially life-threatening circumstances, filling in the gap for environments that were not supportive and/or unable to provide socio-emotional supports to youth, these same programs also facilitated activities that expanded the life experiences of participants or simply served as a space where students knew the program was populated by adults who cared about them. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the perception of program effectiveness remained how the program sought to meet as many individual needs of each student as possible.
The program even supported saving the life of participants. Jones and Deutsch’s (2011) research highlighted how staff members viewed each teen as an individual and were then able to allow them to experience personal growth based on where they were when they entered the program. ASP staff also had a less formal relationship with teens and served as links to the community by sharing the culture and a commitment to the neighborhood where the children lived. Virginia shared that when she noticed that the need was greater than the facilities she had at the time allowed, she stated, “There was still a great need and that caused my pushing for a partnership with public housing to get the facility that we’re in now.” This move allowed for the program to continue to grow and support more local families. By removing barriers such as transportation, at-risk families had a support system that allowed them to return to work during the pandemic and allowed them to provide for their families’ needs.

After-school programs (ASPs) provide a safe setting that allow the youth who participate to experience higher self-esteem and increased motivation (Mahoney et al., 2005). ASPs also provide a safe space where youth have time to process and gain a deeper understanding of their actions (Durlak et al., 2007). As a former juvenile officer, Candice recalled incidents where adverse situations could have been avoided, and students needed to be aware of how they were perceived by some parts of society. VanderVen’s (2007) research implied that staff had to realize that they are much more than monitors, and anyone who lacked understanding of relationship dynamics often violated cultural practices of participants. These actions created an environment where adverse behaviors increased among youth participants instead of curtailing them. Every staff member I interviewed shared how being respectful and caring about the child outside of simply being a participant made a difference in their relationships and how it helped build a level of trust that allowed teens to receive the support they needed. When reflecting upon her own
childhood, Virginia thought of a relative and shared with me how she felt that if there had been a program similar to the Boys & Girls Club of Durham and Orange County, he would not be incarcerated.

**Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

In Chapter I, I shared that my conceptual framework would be Positive Youth Development (PYD). PYD overlaps many disciplines, concepts, and strategies. This framework also links experiences, relationships, and youth outcomes with the overarching goal, being positive youth experiences as well as the development of pro-social behaviors. Positive Youth Development considers each youth as an individual and their growth is a reflection of the participants’ personal improvement. PYD assumes each child has the ability to improve their behavioral and socioemotional status when they are partnered with a caring adult who connects with them (Rhodes, 2004). In this section, I reconnect my findings to Positive Youth Development.

In their research, Benson et al. (2007) shared that Positive Youth Development views youth as resources instead of problems that need solving. Combining this concept with the building of positive relationships with staff, PYD helps shed light on staffs’ influence and its resulting impact on the experience of participants. By hearing the staff’s perceptions, I was able to realize the impact of their relationships with children, the impact their support had helping students during the pandemic, and the resulting support that extended to the families of attendees. All staff emphasized the importance of supporting the children’s socio-emotional state more than their academic achievement.

PYD highlights that afterschool and similar programs do not have the evaluative responsibilities of classroom teachers and have a more relaxed schedule than the typical school
setting. This allows for more freedom in the programming and the modeling of prosocial behaviors that staff utilize and cite as being one of their primary goals for the youth under their care (Rhodes, 2004). Staff stressed the importance of supporting students and meeting them where they were emotionally. A key component of PYD is that improvement is individualized and, given how diverse teens are, this allows for each youth to be successful and aware of their own personal improvement. This decreases the risk and increases the capacity for favorable outcomes (Sanders & Munford, 2014). Brandon provided similar sentiments of the potential of the afterschool setting when he stated, “I see that there’s potential to do good and do bad.”

While conducting my interviews, I noticed that program youth were always spoken of in a positive light. The findings of my study led me to question the settings that the students experienced in a typical school day and whether the traditional academic setting could benefit from these strategies post-pandemic. Students who refused to engage in their studies previously were experiencing success and logging in consistently while not causing disruptions to the learning environment and attending the program regularly. I concluded that afterschool staff members’ roles in the life of at-risk adolescents was critical to the success of many of their participants, especially in the midst of the pandemic. Table 2 features the connections between my research questions, themes, the 5 C’s of PYD, and the study’s findings.
### Table 2. Connections: Themes, The 5 C’s of PYD, and Evidence from the Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Sub-Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>PYD Tenet</th>
<th>Evidence from the Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What roles do staff play in the program?</td>
<td><strong>Theme 1:</strong> Program Staff See Their Roles as Resources for Children to be Successful in Life outside the Program.</td>
<td><strong>Competence:</strong> The ability to act effectively at school, in social situations, and at work.</td>
<td>Although staff did not see themselves as the only resource available to students, it did not prevent them from seeking to provide support to participants in every aspect of their lives in order to support their success in various settings and diverse groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What roles do staff play in the program?</td>
<td><strong>Theme 2:</strong> The Pandemic Has Changed the Purpose of the Program for all Staff</td>
<td><strong>Connection:</strong> A feeling of safety, structure, and belonging; positive bonds with people and social institutions.</td>
<td>After-school programs transitioned into all-day learning centers that provided resources to students and families that they had previously received at the school level. Staff shifted from strictly a program focus to include academic support while still providing socio-emotional supports of program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do staff members support the building of meaningful relationships with their participants?</td>
<td><strong>Theme 3:</strong> Staff View Interpersonal relationships as beneficial to themselves as well as participants</td>
<td><strong>Connection:</strong> A feeling of safety, structure, and belonging; positive bonds with people and social institutions.</td>
<td>Staff expressed how conducting programming helped themselves as well as the increasing participants’ capacity for success. Each stated how they or their peers would have benefited from participating in a similar program. Staff shared on multiple occasions the importance of providing emotional support to participants and encouraging their success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are staff members’ perception of the effectiveness of the program?</td>
<td><strong>Theme 4:</strong> The Program has the Potential to Save Lives</td>
<td><strong>Character:</strong> Taking responsibility; a sense of independence and individuality; connection to principles and values. <strong>Competence:</strong> The ability to act effectively at school, in social situations, and at work. <strong>Contribution:</strong> Active participation and leadership in a variety of settings; making a difference.</td>
<td>Staff expressed their concerns for participants outside of the program and shared how their goal was to equip youth with skills and behaviors that would allow them to navigate sometimes dangerous community settings and environments. Staff expressed in interviews the capacity of participants to be successful and their program’s focus on community engagement. Each staff member believed that the goal of the program was to support students in becoming productive members of their communities and society.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Implications

My research granted me a deeper understanding of the experiences of staff in an after-school program. The study was staff-focused and I was interested in how program staff utilized these roles to support students in their practice. After-school programs have provided a space for students while their parents were at work for quite some time in America and the onset of COVID-19 highlighted the importance of these programs as they evolved into full day academic support programs. ASPs nationwide continued to serve as a resource for working families by providing reliable Wi-Fi access and adult supervision of school-age children while many public school settings were closed to students and their communities. After-school staff embraced this new normal and used their increased time with participants to introduce whole-family supports, additional mentoring, and access to resources that were typically provided by the school setting. This after-school program became an all-day setting that helped families avoid the mix of “risk and opportunity” resulting from the pandemic influenced school closures, instead providing a supportive setting staffed with caring adults (Halpern, 2002). The positive youth-centered setting allowed for an alternative to the at-risk setting of their neighborhoods and supported the development of positive adult-child relationships (Fuller et al., 2013). In the midst of a pandemic, ASPs became a hub of support for the families they served. I believe there are implications within these findings in relation to families, staff, participants, and community stakeholders that will prove to be invaluable as we exit the pandemic and begin to resume what was considered normal prior to COVID-19. I discuss these implications in the following sections.
Families

In the study, I believe that participating families were very appreciative of the program and were aware of how important the program was for them. Staff members’ sharing of how they provided support to families as well as students was an indicator of this. Due to the closure of schools, many families found themselves in a position where they had to obtain child-care for their school-age children while they were scheduled for work. Many families who needed this resource did not have the option of working from home; therefore, the ability to have free adult supervision as well as reliable access to the Internet made the program invaluable at a time when these items were usually provided by the school setting.

The results of this study can help families understand the importance of after-school and OST programs as well as their impact on their communities, helping them gain an understanding of what these programs provide, the impact of their positive adult-child relationships, and how the programs support families as a whole. This implies that participating families were attempting to support their children during virtual instruction but may not have had Wi-Fi access and/or had parents that needed to return to work in-person. Families who had reliable Wi-Fi access and/or had parents who had occupations that allowed for them to work remotely may not have the same needs as participating families. Also, families who did not need or seek to support their students in their virtual instruction or had students attending in-person during the pandemic would not seek the use of this program. The families who utilized this resource needed the program in order to return to work and needed a supportive space for their school-aged children. I am hopeful that the emotional supports they received during the pandemic allow them to return to the regular setting better prepared for their new normal.
Staff

Staff were the focus of the study and were the primary interviewees. Based on the interviews and responses I received, staff were passionate about their relationships with participants and families as well as their roles within the program. The role of staff in programs is critical due to the importance of the relationships formed with youth and how they impact the quality of not only the program but the outcomes for participants as well (VanderVen, 2007). The pandemic emphasized the role of ASPs as they transitioned into full-day programs by identifying gaps in the lives of participants and seeking to fill them while being responsive to the changing of their needs (Halpern, 2002).

Prior to the pandemic, after-school staff were seen as a resource for parents outside of the regular academic setting due to a growing social gap with their students’ schools (Barnes & Nolan, 2019; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). After-school program staff should always be aware of the impact of their role and how their interactions affect the youth under their care. Staff should incorporate PYD into their interactions and strategies in order to ensure that they are allowing the youth to be a resource unto themselves. By allowing for individual levels of improvement, staff members are able to support the youth to succeed to the best of their personal ability and not some pre-determined scale or assessment score. This allows for staff to recognize the most valuable resource, the youth themselves (Lopez et al., 2015). Programs that utilize PYD or similar methods are finding that the practice provides much needed support mechanisms for at-risk students as well as builds stronger adult-child relationships with participants. Combined with the increased capacity to be supportive of favorable outcomes, these practices are especially important for youth in a post-COVID-19 setting (Sanders & Munford, 2014).
Program Participants

As highlighted by Lopez et al. (2015), school-age children who live in adverse socio-economic settings experience higher rates of delinquency. After-school programs serve as an intervention for at-risk youth. This is done by supporting the promotion of positive outcomes as well as helping youth in the development of defenses against juvenile delinquency. The increased potential for adverse outcomes intensified in the midst of the pandemic and closure of many local schools. Students who did not have access to Wi-Fi or the means to obtain access to the Internet were placed in a position of not only being left behind but in some cases also tasked with caring for younger siblings as their parents returned to work in order to support their families. The setting provided by the BGDOC supported adolescents and their families by providing various supports for not only the teen but their siblings as well. By allowing a space for socializing with similar aged peers and support in navigating their social and/or emotional wellness needs, the program helped prevent the negative mood state that some teens report when they are alone or feel isolated (Shernoff & Vandell, 2007). Students who did not experience any adverse socio-emotional effects from the pandemic and school closures would be the exception to this.

The findings from this study can help participants and their families gain a deeper understanding of how after-school and/or OST programs are supportive of their social as well as emotional well-being. The caring and supportive atmosphere of a program makes it more likely that participants will share a similar outlook on the program, staff, and their peers (E. Smith et al., 2013). Students who attend these programs must understand that a critical component of program engagement is the development of positive social connections and a sense of belonging among staff and peers (Zarrett et al., 2018). After-school programs continue to serve a need for
at-risk populations and have proven to be a valuable resource for the youth they serve especially
given the potential after-effects of the pandemic.

**Community**

As shared in their research, Jones and Deutsch (2011) pointed to how communities that
were lacking in resources benefitted from the development of the pro-social skills gained in the
after-school setting. The pandemic and its’ resulting issues have reshaped the role of after-school
programs and their relationship with their local communities. The BGDOC’s program settings in
Durham and Chapel Hill provided a place where parents could have their children supervised and
be given the ability to complete their virtual school assignments all while been monitored by
caring adults. This resource combined with the food provided to families and children allowed
working class families as well as first responders to return to work and support their
communities during the pandemic.

VanderVen (2007) shared in their research that after-school programs provide settings
that helped youth to develop pro-social behaviors that extended beyond the program and into
their day-to-day interactions with peers and non-related adults. By serving as a safe place off the
streets, the program helped many participants in avoiding delinquent behavior or becoming a
victim to adverse conditions that increased in the midst of the pandemic (Hall et al., 2010).
Community stakeholders must learn to capitalize on the positive effects of after-school and/or
OST programs and seek opportunities to ensure these programs are available to youth, especially
in at-risk communities. In the aftermath of the pandemic, students and their families must
recognize the role ASPs and OST programs serve as valuable shareholders in the positive
development of well-rounded youth (E. Smith et al., 2013).
Recommendations for Future Research

This basic qualitative research study was conducted to answer the question “What are the experiences of staff in an after-school program?” Due to the limited amount of research done on the perceptions of staff and the importance of the relationships they form with participants, it was important to gain an understanding of their role within programs. To expand upon existing research, my focus was to increase my understanding of their experiences through interviews and the coding of the related transcripts in order to discover any underlying themes.

For future research, it would be beneficial to be able to observe staff in practice as well as investigate additional programs to provide a more comprehensive study and expand to more participants. An added study would allow for more staff to discuss their experiences and the included observations would allow for a more detailed study. In addition, a future study that focuses on participants who had access to the resources provided by these programs in comparison to youth who did not and how this impacted their re-introduction to the traditional school setting would be helpful in capturing the strategies that may have proven to be supportive of the students in the midst of their virtual learning environment and how to facilitate similar situations in the future. The recommendations that emerged from the research can add to the limited research related to the perceptions of staff and help improve the experiences of students in a post-pandemic setting.

As children return to their school settings, this research can be used to support their socio-emotional well-being as they attempt to navigate their new settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed some areas of concern in relation to the emotional well-being of school-age children. By extending this research, its findings could support students coming from other stressful environments and how to provide them the resources they need to be successful.
Due to the lack of literature that directly addresses the perceptions of staff, more research is needed to guide programs, families, participants, and community stakeholders on what actions must be employed in order to support the development of the most supportive setting for youth. ASPs serve a purpose that is not always possible for the traditional school setting can provide. In traditional school settings, the need to assess students, curricular needs, or similar items take precedence. These requirements are not present in the traditional after-school setting. Therefore, expanding the information available in this area could provide data that would be beneficial to all stakeholders.

**Reflection**

My research provided me the opportunity to interview after-school program staff who worked in an after-school and/or similar program and allow them to share their perceptions of their role. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was provided the additional opportunity of seeing these programs adapt to the closure of schools and how the Boys and Girls Clubs of Durham and Orange County adapted to continue to serve their participants and, by extension, their families as well. My professional role allowed me to have an intimate understanding of after-school programs but by interviewing a program outside of my oversight, I was able to gain authentic insights that may have otherwise been skewed by staff under my supervision. This study allowed me to observe opportunities for participants, families, programs, as well as community stakeholders to understand the importance of ASP programs but also areas of support that these and/or similar OST programs can provide participants outside their program hours. I was unaware of how vested staff were in the lives of their students nor was I aware of how important programs such as these were during the pandemic in supporting families in not only returning to work but the implications of how at-risk these communities were as a result of COVID-19. It
was evident during my interviews how staff viewed their roles as being critical and how they supported not only participants but sought to provide them life-changing guidance.

As previously mentioned, during my study COVID-19 forced schools to close to the public. Many occupations were required to convert to virtual interactions and parents were presented with the unique experience of attempting to work from home, support their students’ online education, and keep their families safe from the risks of the pandemic. Due to restrictions, I was unable to observe the program in person but I was allowed the opportunity to interview staff virtually and to hear their narratives about their roles within the program. Because the program was located within a low-income housing development, services had evolved in order to support the participants and their families by providing resources such as food for those who expressed a need. I often thought about these families and how critical the program was in supporting them by not only allowing parents to return to work but by providing meals for families as well as snacks during the day for students. This is in conjunction with providing a safe space with reliable Internet access to support their student’s virtual learning.

The interviews I conducted were critical in helping me answer the question, “What are the experiences of staff in an after-school program?” As a result of this study, I have been able to gain a deeper understanding of staff in these programs, how they built relationships with participants, and what were their perceptions about the effectiveness of the program. This study has helped form my belief that in order to fully support children, particularly adolescents, the practices of after-school program staff should utilize PYD as well as always putting kids’ emotional needs first; these practices should help all stakeholders understand how important the socio-emotional needs of children are and how this in turn can support their academic performance. Until students are shown how important they are by the adults who care for them,
the adults will miss seeing the full potential of those same students who otherwise may not receive this level of care.
REFERENCES


http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/researchFactSheets.cfm


“What are the experiences of staff who work in a middle grades after-school program?”

Staff Interview 1 Protocol

Interviewer:

Thank you for your time today, I like to hear your insights regarding after-school and your perception of it. Due to the pandemic, I may ask you questions about how the program has changed because of the effects of COVID-19.

1. Tell me a little about yourself, what brought you to this program?
2. What type of work did you do before you came to this program?
3. How long have you worked with:
   a. Students (any setting)
   b. Students (after-school)
4. What caused you to want to work in an after-school program?
   a. Tell me more about that.
5. Did you attend a program in your youth?
   a. Tell me more about that.
6. What do you see as different from when you were the same age as the youth you work with now?
   a. Any similarities?
7. Tell me about a typical day at the program.
8. What’s your favorite part of the day with the kids?
9. What do you like the most?
   a. Has this changed over time?
   b. Tell me more about that.

10. Tell me what after-school means to you.
APPENDIX B: STAFF INTERVIEW 2 PROTOCOL

“What are the experiences of staff who work in a middle grades after-school program?”

Staff Interview 2 Protocol

Interviewer:

Thank you for your earlier interview, after reviewing our previous discussion, I thought I’d like to hear more of your insights regarding after-school and your perception of it. Due to the pandemic, I may ask you questions about how the program has changed because of the effects of COVID-19.

1. Did you work in this after-school program last year?
   a. If not, did you work in a different program?
   b. Where, and for how long?
   c. What if anything is different?

2. What is your current position?
   a. How would you describe your responsibilities in the program?
   b. What would you say is your “role” when working with children?

3. What do you do (activities) while working in the after-school program?
   a. What student/staff activities do you like the most?
   b. Why do you think student/staff like this activity more than others?

4. What is your favorite aspect of the program?
   a. Why?

5. What are your core interactions with the students during after-school time?
   a. Do you play any sports with the students?
b. If so, what sports and how do you engage the students through this sport?

c. Do you have insights on why they prefer this sport?

6. Do you have any clubs during after-school?
   a. If so, what are they?
   b. Why do you think these clubs are available?

7. If it was up to you, would you provide anything different?
   a. Why?

8. Did you and/or the participants do any volunteer work?
   a. Why or why not?

9. What do you feel is the most important aspect of after-school for students?
   a. How do you support this?
   b. When do you do this?

10. Tell me about an interaction where you had to support a student.
    a. Why does this interaction stand out to you?

11. Do or have you had any conversations or interactions that you would consider “Meaningful”?
    a. What was the topic, subject, or gist of the interaction?
    b. What do you do when these moments occur?
    c. Do you have these interactions with other individuals involved in the program?
    d. Why or why not?

12. What are staff members’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the program?

13. How did you learn about this program? When did you start working for the program?

14. What made you apply?
15. Is it what you imagined it would be?

16. How do you perceive the after-school program?
   a. Why do you perceive it that way?
   b. Is it what you imagined it would be?
   c. Why or why not?

17. What would you say is the purpose of the after-school program?
   a. Why is that?

18. Is it the purpose you thought it would be?
   a. Why or why not?

19. Do you think anything else should be happening while students are in after-school?
   a. Why or why not?

20. In your opinion, what would be the ideal purpose of after-school?
   a. Why is that?
   b. What would that look like?
   c. How would you accomplish this?

21. Is there anything you would like to share before we end our interview?
APPENDIX C: DIRECTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

“What are the experiences of staff who work in a middle grades after-school program?”

Director Interview Protocol

Interviewer:

Thank you for your time today, I like to hear your insights regarding after-school and your perception of it. Due to the pandemic, I may ask you questions about how the program has changed because of the effects of COVID-19.

1. Tell me a little about yourself, what brought you to this program?

2. What is the history and purpose of the program?

3. What are your expectations for program staff?

4. What brought you to the position of overseeing this program?
   a. Tell me more about that.

5. How long have you worked with:
   a. Students (any setting)
   b. Students (after-school)

6. Did you attend a program in your youth?

7. What do you see as different from when you were the same age as the youth you work with now?
   a. Any similarities?

8. What would you say is your vision for this program?
   a. How do you execute this?
   b. How do you measure if this is occurring?
c. What makes you feel that this has been accomplished?

9. What are some characteristics you look for in applicants?

10. Are any of your staff former attendees?
    a. Tell me more about that.

11. Can you tell a difference in their performance compared to a non-alumnus of the program?

12. How do you handle staff turnover?

13. Tell me about a typical day at the program.

14. What’s your favorite part of the day with the kids?

15. What do you like the most?
    a. Has this changed over time?
    b. Tell me more about that.

16. What does an after-school program mean to you?