

**“Hey, those are teenagers and they are doing stuff”:
Youth Participation in Community Development**

by

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To Hazel Blais, my inspiration and light.
The future...

To the late Marla Poole, who taught me to embrace life and live it to the fullest!
The past...

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I could not, at any age, be content to take my place by the fireside and simply look on. Life was meant to be lived. Curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn his back on life. ~Eleanor Roosevelt

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	xii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	xiv
ABSTRACT.....	xv
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES.....	4
1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY.....	5
1.3 RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL WORK.....	6
1.4 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS.....	8
1.5 SUMMARY.....	10
CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	11
2.1 DEFINING YOUTH.....	11
2.2 EXCLUSION OF YOUTH FROM COMMUNITY LIFE.....	12
2.3 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH.....	14
2.4 COMMUNITY CONTEXT FOR YOUTH OF COLOR LIVING IN POVERTY...	16
2.5 MODELS FOR INTERVENTION.....	18
2.5.1 Risk reduction model.....	18
2.5.2 Youth as community assets model.....	21
2.6 BARRIERS TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION.....	27
2.7 CRITICAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	30
2.7.1 Critical Theory.....	31
2.7.2 Intersectionality.....	31

2.7.3 Empowerment Theory	33
2.7.4 Community-Based Participatory Research.....	36
2.8 SUMMARY.....	38
3.0 METHODS.....	39
3.1 RESEARCH QUESTION.....	39
3.2 SITE FOR DATA COLLECTION.....	40
3.2.1 The Community.....	40
3.2.2 The Program.....	41
3.3 DATA COLLECTION.....	48
3.3.1 Focus groups.....	49
3.3.2 Individual interviews.....	51
3.3.3 Fieldnotes.....	51
3.4 SAMPLE.....	52
3.5 DATA ANALYSIS.....	54
3.6 COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH THE BRADDOCK YOUTH PROJECT.....	57
3.7 REFLEXIVITY.....	67
3.8 CONCLUSION.....	71
4.0 FINDINGS: “HARNESS THE ENERGY AND CREATIVITY OF YOUTH”.....	73
4.1 “A POSITIVE IMPACT ON PEOPLE WORKING HERE.”.....	73
4.1.1 Practical knowledge.....	76
4.1.2 Interpersonal knowledge.....	79
4.2 “YOU CAN DEFINITELY FEEL SAFE HERE.”.....	82
4.3 “IT TAUGHT ME NOT TO BE SHY AND JUST LET MY VOICE BE HEARD.”.....	88

4.4	“WANTED MY OWN MONEY IN MY OWN POCKETS.”	92
4.5	CONCLUSION	94
5.0	Findings: “SEEKS TO FOSTER SKILLS THAT WILL AID YOUTH IN ADVANCING TOWARD POSTIVE LIFE OUTCOMES”	95
5.1	“IT IS GETTING YOU PREPARED FOR A REAL JOB.”	95
5.2	“BYP REALLY HELPS YOU GET TO COLLEGE.”	99
5.3	“IT’S A GOOD WAY TO NETWORK.”	103
5.4	“IT HELPED ME BECOME A LEADER.”	104
5.5	CONCLUSION	107
6.0	FINDINGS: “PROMOTE POSITIVE CULTURALLY RELEVANT CHANGE IN THE COMMUNITY”	108
6.1	“IT’S JUST SO LIFE-CHANGING, BECAUSE YOU GOT SO MANY PEOPLE THAT CARE ABOUT YOU.”	108
6.2	“IT’S JUST REALLY FULFILLING”	112
6.3	“YOU ARE DOING SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE WITH YOUR SUMMERS... ”	116
6.4	“SO LIKE WHEN YOU’RE BORED OVER THE SUMMER AND YOU WILL FIND SOMETHING ENTERTANING TO DO WHETHER IT’S GOOD OR BAD.”	120
6.5	“SO REALLY GET TO KNOW THEM. SEE WHAT THEY ARE INTERESTED IN.”	124
6.6	CONCLUSION	128
7.0	FINDINGS: “PROVIDING MEANINGUL AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS”	129
7.1	“BUILD IT BACK UP”	129
7.2	“WE ARE GOOD FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY”	135
7.2.1	Knowing community needs	135

7.2.2 Improving the physical landscape.....	138
7.2.3 Providing healthy food.....	140
7.2.4 Mentoring younger children.....	141
7.2.5 Producing relevant videos	145
7.2.6 Creating community events.....	146
7.3 “HEY, THOSE ARE TEENAGERS AND THEY ARE DOING STUFF”.....	148
7.4 CONCLUSION.....	153
8.0 DISCUSSION.....	154
8.1 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	169
8.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND POLICY.....	172
8.2.1 Implications for practice.....	172
8.2.2 Implications for policy.....	173
8.3 CONCLUSION.....	174
APPENDIX A.....	177
APPENDIX B.....	178
APPENDIX C.....	179
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	180

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. 2011 Summer Program Completed Projects.....	46
Table 2. 2012 Summer Program Completed Projects.....	47
Table 3. BYP Sample.....	52
Table 4. Practical Knowledge.....	77
Table 5. Interpersonal Knowledge.....	79

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Conceptual Model.....	155
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Youth Participation in Community Development

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University of Pittsburgh, 2013

Abstract

Youth have long been a marginalized, disenfranchised and powerless population. Youth of color living in poverty have an even greater likelihood, due to persistent racism and classism in our society, of being in the margins. These youth are often viewed as destructors of community, despite evidence of structural disinvestment, and are rarely given opportunities to participate in their communities. This dissertation utilizes a community-based participatory approach to collaborate with a group of youth of color residing in an impoverished community who are actively engaged in community development efforts. Focus group discussions and individual interviews, along with observations, reveal that youth have strong interests in participating in their community. When given opportunities to participate, they want to be involved in making changes to improve the neighborhood. Youth expressed having passion for their community, being acutely aware of neighborhood needs, and having creative solutions to community problems. In order to become assets to their community, youth need adults and institutions to operate in ways that promote their strengths and embrace youth as both resources and leaders in the community. As community development often occurs through programs, this dissertation proposes a conceptual model to guide youth programs in providing young people with an atmosphere where they can develop. Young people need these programs to create physically and emotionally safe spaces, to integrate youth into the community, to take a holistic approach in working with youth, to reframe traditional frameworks for prevention, and to offer

youth meaningful and productive experiences where they are making decisions and designing interventions. When youth are supported, they develop empowered self-perception, self-esteem, self-efficacy, agency, capacity, role modeling behavior, team work, expanded social networks, intergenerational connections, economic stability, skills to make long-term impacts and a sense of ownership of the community.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Youth have long been a marginalized, disenfranchised and powerless population. Youth of color living in poverty have an even greater likelihood, due to persistent racism and classism in our society, of being in the margins. Community conditions in poor neighborhoods, such as violence, substance abuse, poor housing and education and other environmental hazards, are prevalent and negatively impact young people (Wells, 2000). The lack of community resources and supports available in poor neighborhoods lead to fewer opportunities for positive development.

Despite evidence of outside forces, especially social and economic disinvestment, negatively impacting poor communities, youth living in such neighborhoods are often blamed for problems in the community and causing the decaying conditions (Checkoway & Guterrez, 2006; Finn, 2009; Checkoway, 1998). They are stereotyped as destructors and become the scapegoats for the conditions in the community. Youth are rarely invited to participate in the community in any capacity and unlikely to be considered assets or conceived to be leaders. Instead, they are criticized for being disinterested and lacking the abilities to effect change. Societal perceptions and media portrayals of youth of color reinforce disempowering notions of youth (Checkoway, 2005; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004; Damon, 2004; Delaney, Prodigalidad & Sanders, 2002; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Youth of color living in poverty often have little power, voice or decision making to shape their communities.

In the past two decades, a paradigm shift has begun altering how youth are regarded by society (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002). Youth are beginning to be valued for the contribution they can make to society and recognized as assets and contributors to positive change in their neighborhoods (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-

Schuster, 2003). This dissertation builds on understandings of how and to what effect youth can participate in community development efforts.

This study uses a community-based participatory research approach to garner a perspective of youth participation in community development from a group of young people who have been actively involved in community development. These youth were participating in a youth-based program, the Braddock Youth Project (BYP). This program provides work skills training for youth in the area of youth participation, where youth are working together to restore the community of Braddock, Pennsylvania. The population consists of mainly African American and bi-racial youth living in poverty. Using qualitative research methods, including participant observation, focus groups, and individual interviews, I explore how youth perceive their role in community development. These findings come directly from youth who have participated in a community development at the BYP. This program's mission is to engage BYP members in creating positive changes in their community with the major goal of providing meaningful and sustainable community development projects, generated and maintained by the youth. The goal of this research was to understand the lived experience of youth by providing them an opportunity to share their perceptions and views. The research question guiding this study was: How do youth conceptualize their role in community development? The major aims of this study were to better understand why youth wanted to participate in creating positive change in their own communities, what they had to offer to their communities, how being in a program that promoted community development work impacted them, and how adults worked with youth to assist them in bringing about these changes.

In this dissertation, I use a critical perspective to convey and explain the experiences of youth. Two theories, Intersectionality and empowerment, guide this research; community-based

participatory research was the methodological framework. This critical theoretical perspective allows for an alternative explanation of how and why youth are vital players in their communities. It addresses issues around power and inequalities experienced by youth.

As stated above, I used focus groups, individual interviews and participant observation to collect data for this study. I conducted focus group discussions with youth serving in leadership roles of interns from the 2011 and 2012 Braddock Youth Project summer programs, and with youth participating in the 2012 Braddock Youth Project summer program. I conducted individual interviews with youth who had graduated from the Braddock Youth Project. All of the focus group discussions and individual interviews were conducted by me. With the exception of one individual interview, all were completed at the Braddock Youth Project. Much of these data will be used by the Braddock Youth Project for program development, advocacy, and grant writing purposes. The questions focused on how young people perceive their roles in their community, their understanding of community needs, why they are participating in a program that engages them in the community, what they learn and gain from their involvement in community projects, what difference they are making in the community, what roles youth should play in the community, what they believe they can do to make their community better, how can effectively work with youth, as well as perceptions of budget cuts to youth-based programs.

Field notes were also used as a source of data for this dissertation. I took detailed field notes during and after my interactions with the Braddock Youth Project program and participating youth. These notes describe what I observed and heard during my participant observation and included “what does it mean?” notes which contained my own thoughts, perceptions and feeling about the experiences and exchanges (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Data analysis occurred, through an iterative process, starting at data collection. As the data were being collected, I used a sequence of interrelated steps of data analysis. These steps include reading, coding, displaying, reducing and interpreting (Ulin, Robinson & Tolley, 2004). A research team, made up of four BYP youth and two AmeriCorps members, were actively engaged in the process of data analysis. The research team read half of the discussions and we worked together to develop the codes. Together we reviewed the data and we made sense of what we found. Prominent themes were discussed as well as responses that fell outside the consensus. Direct quotes were selected to support the findings, which ensured that the voices of the youth were guiding the findings. Whenever possible, the voices of youth are used to explain the findings presented in this dissertation. Youth held leadership roles in the data analysis process and all members contributed to the process.

The findings from this study resulted in the development of a conceptual model to inform youth-serving organizations about best practices when engaging young people in community development. The findings from this study are grounded in the voices of youth and support the notion that when given real and meaningful opportunities to participate, youth can become architects of their own and their communities' futures (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

1.1 YOUTH IN THE UNITED STATES

In the United States, according to the 2010 Census data, twenty-four percent (74.2 million) of the total population is under the age of 18. The population of those under the age of 18 grew at a rate of 2.6% from 2000 to 2010 (US Census Bureau, 2010). According to the America's Children in Brief, Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2012, there were 73.9 million children in the United States in 2011, with 25.1 million between the ages of 12-17. The population of those under the age of 18 is expected to grow; a projected increase to 101.6 million

is anticipated by 2050. Racial and ethnic diversity among young people is expected to increase in the coming decades with a projected increase of youth of color. It is estimated that by 2023, less than half of all children will be White, non-Hispanic (ChildStats, 2012).

The number of children living in poverty has also increased in recent years. In 2000 and 2001, 16% of children ages 1-17 lived in poverty. In 2010, 22 % of children (16.4 million) lived in poverty. Additionally, youth of color are more likely to live in poverty. In 2010, only 12% of White, non-Hispanic children lived in poverty, while 39% of Black, non-Hispanic children and 35% of Hispanic children lived in poverty (ChildStats, 2012).

These data documenting the growing population of youth, especially those from racial and ethnic minorities and those living in poverty, provide evidence of the need for a better understanding of this population. They also support the need for this dissertation work, as youth of color are a significant and growing demographic.

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Youth have been stigmatized, marginalized and lack the power to make decisions that affect their lives. Additionally, they are silenced and, in many circumstances, unable to speak on their own behalf. In some cases, youth are also deemed to have negative impacts on the communities in which they reside. A changing paradigm is challenging the way youth are perceived. Nations around the world, including the United States, are beginning to appreciate the energy and creativity youth can bring to solving problems and engaging in society. Research on youth engagement and participation is beginning to shape social policies and program development for youth. This research is intended to challenge the traditional models of working with youth by expanding the awareness of what young people are capable of contributing to their communities and to the larger society. This dissertation adds to the growing body of research

and provides a unique perspective given by youth who are working in the area of community development.

1.3 RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL WORK

Social workers have historically worked with oppressed populations to bring about social change. Both social work practitioners and researchers have taken up the call to work with individuals, groups and communities in addressing injustice, disparities, and oppression from multiple avenues, including practice, policy, and research. Social workers' expertise is in working from a strengths perspective and working in empowering collaborations with those in marginalized positions. Because social work also operates from an understanding of a person in their environment, social workers are well positioned to advocate for youth and promote youth participation in community development. However, it is argued that social work professionals may not fully extend this mode of practice to younger citizens. Instead, the field has been critiqued for socially constructing adolescence as a time of pathology, influenced largely by the medical model. This reductionist paradigm has been said to inform the interventions utilized by human service professions, including social work (Finn, 2001). Programs serving youth that embrace a risk-reduction, rather than an empowerment model, perpetuate the dominant discourse of pathology and youth as trouble. In order for youth to be treated more holistically and in ways that promote their abilities, professions need to challenge the pathology discourse and re-conceptualize what it means to effectively work with youth.

The integration of an international human rights perspective to current social work training holds the potential to prepare social work professionals for the task of working with youth in empowering ways. The United Nations has spearheaded efforts for the integration of human rights for youth and the inclusion of their voice in public affairs. The United Nations is

“an international organization founded in 1945 after the Second World War by 51 countries committed to maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations and promoting social progress, better living standards and human rights” (United Nations, 2013, para. 1). While, in the United States, limited attentions as been given to the participation of youth in civic and community life, there is a growing international movement to include youth.

In 1989, the United Nations developed the first legally binding document to assure a full range of human rights to children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was designed to guarantee all children under the age of 18 basic human rights, including civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. More specifically, these rights consist of the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; protection from harmful influences, protection from abuse and exploitation; and the ability to participate fully in family, cultural and social life (UNICEF, 2013).

The CRC has served as a guide for other nations in terms of establishing human right for their young citizens. The United States is one of only two countries that have not ratified the CRC; therefore it has not assured human rights for young people. Nybell, Shook & Finn (2009) noted that in the United States few social workers seem to know about the CRC. In reviewing the literature on youth participation, relatively little has been written about the CRC by scholars or practitioners in the United States. As noted above, other nations have implemented protections, opportunities, and programs to promote the human rights of children and youth. While the progressive literature on youth participation mainly comes from these countries, there are some noteworthy efforts written about in the United States. These efforts, however, are not systematic.

As social workers integrate a rights perspective to their practices with youth, they will be able to more fully promote and implement a human rights and strengths perspective with youth and, therefore, will be positioned to lead the efforts of working with youth to promote empowerment, leadership development, and youth participation in the United States. They, ideally, will be able to model positive collaborative relationships with youth where power is equalized in the relationships and where youth are respected for what they can contribute to society. Social work will also be able to promote and encourage youth involvement in leadership in youth-serving institutions and in public policy. With a holistic view of youth, social workers will be able to champion efforts to disseminate this working model more broadly, and can become the educators and trainers of other professionals working with youth. Social work will also need to advocate for policy change and develop further research in the youth participation arena.

1.4 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The purpose of the first chapter is to provide an overview of the topic area, describe the necessity for the research, and introduce the study. The relevance of the research and its significance to the field of social work are also described.

In Chapter 2 of the dissertation, I cover the review of literature and the theoretical framework. I provide the background and history of youth and youth participation, which thereby framed the need for this particular study. First, I define youth and then discuss the exclusion of youth from community life, the historical perspectives of youth, the community context for youth of color living in poverty, models for intervention, and barriers to youth participation. I describe how I use a critical perspective building on theories of intersectionality

and empowerment. Additionally, I discuss the research methodology and introduce community-based participatory research.

Chapter 3 details the methods utilized in the study. I begin by discussing the research question and the site for data collection. This is followed by a review of the process for data collection. The sample, the data analysis procedures, and community-based participatory research with the Braddock Youth Project are explored. The chapter ends with a discussion of reflexivity.

Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 present the findings from the study. These chapters focus on the impacts of the BYP on youth, their skill development, their sense of the relevance of spending time at the BYP, and how they impact the community. In Chapter 4, I discuss the how the BYP harnesses the energy and creativity of youth. BYP members discussed the knowledge they gained from their participation in the BYP, the physical safety and emotional safety youth felt at the BYP, the development of youth voice, and the desire and pride youth have in earning their own money. Chapter 5 highlights how BYP seeks to foster skills that will aid youth in advancing toward positive life outcomes. Youth discussed the skills developed through their involvement in the BYP program. Youth affirmed learning work skills, receiving school support and college preparation, and mentoring in the areas of networking and leadership. These skills do not solely prepare youth for the future but are also intended to improve the quality of their lives as youth. In Chapter 6, I discuss how BYP promotes positive, culturally relevant change in the community. This chapter presents youths' interpretations of their work, their impressions of why their work is important, and opinions on relationships with adult staff. Chapter 7 addresses the meaningful and sustainable community development projects conducted by BYP youth. This chapter shares the opinions, thoughts, views and beliefs youth hold about their community and

the contributions they make to improve the community. The topics covered include the youth's understanding of the historical context of Braddock and their commitment to rebuilding the neighborhood, the changes they have already made in Braddock, and how youth have changed how adults perceive young people due largely to their commitment and hard work in the community.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, presents the discussion of a conceptual model, based on youths' views, for understanding how programs can promote youth participation and leadership. The discussion also places the findings in the context of what knowledge is new to the field and what builds on previous knowledge regarding youth participation in community development. Next, the limitations of the study and future research are discussed. The chapter ends with the implications for policy and practice.

1.5 SUMMARY

Youth of color living in poverty are often excluded from participation in community life. Because they are frequently regarded as the problem in communities, they are rarely invited to be part of the solutions (Dennis, 2006). However, new models for understanding the experience of youth and new appreciations for what youth offer communities have challenged more traditional notions of youth engagement and participation. Despite having these new models, youth voices are relatively absent from the discussion. This dissertation attempts to provide an understanding of youth participation in community development by allowing youth at the Braddock Youth Project to share their views, opinions, and experiences on the topic. These are the voices necessary to shape effective and culturally-responsive social programming and public policy directed at young people, and to ensure the inclusion of young people in community life.

2.0 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I review the literature on youth participation in community development. This review highlights what is currently known in the field. The areas of discussion include defining youth, the exclusion of youth from community life, the historical perspectives of youth, the community context for youth of color living in poverty, models for intervention – the risk reduction model and the youth as community asset model, and finally the barriers to youth participation. Following the review of the literature, I discuss the theoretical framework guiding this research. A discussion of the critical perspective leads to an overview of critical theory, empowerment theory and community-based participatory research.

2.1 DEFINING YOUTH

Individuals, not yet defined as adults in the United States, are described by multiple terms, such as teenagers, adolescents, children, young adults, kids, young people, and youth. All of these terms have multiple working definitions, not fixedly or rigidly defined. The designation of youth in the academic literature and popular discourse has varied depending on the source. The similarity across the definitions of youth is that the distinction falls somewhere between being a child and an adult. A frequently utilized definition of youth is provided by the United Nations (UN). The UN defines youth as an individual between the ages of 15 to 24 (United Nations, 1985). The UN explains this definition is used mainly for statistical purposes with the acknowledgement that it overlaps the legal definition which differentiates adults and non-adults in many countries. In some countries, including the United States, age 18 distinguishes those who are considered adults from those who are not. The UN recognizes the category of youth as socially constructed. They note that the conceptualization of youth differs by country depending on the socio-cultural, institutional, economic and political factors of the place. Additionally, the

UN recognizes the category of youth can be further distinguished between teenagers (13-19) and young adults (20-24) due to the different sociological, psychological and health problems facing the two groups.

2.2 EXCLUSION OF YOUTH FROM COMMUNITY LIFE

It has been argued that youth have historically been a marginalized, disenfranchised and powerless population. In part, this is because youth are excluded from involvement in most political processes and denied many rights granted to most adults (Bessant, 2004). Because youth hold no legal rights to make independent decisions or to exercise personal freedoms in the United States, they have little voice or representation in public life or civic matters (Frank, 2006). Traditional definitions of citizenship, particularly the legal definition which designates 18 as the age of citizenship, exclude many youth from civic life. Those who ascribe to this designation of citizenship only afford citizenship to adults. The conceptualization of citizenship is significant because it shapes how society thinks about who should be included in participation and decision-making in civic life. In the United States, participation in community life is not guaranteed to all citizens, rather it is viewed as a privilege extended formally to adults; “who [are] accepted as worthy, valuable and responsible member[s] of a everyday community of living and working” (Painter & Philo, 1995, p. 115). The full range of citizenship is rarely extended to youth. Young people are perceived as “apprentice” or “incomplete citizens” (Matthews, 2001). However, some argue for the right of youth to participate in citizenship. “The demand that children be included in citizenship is simply a request that children be seen as members of society too, with a legitimate and valuable voice and perspective” (Roche, 1999, p. 479). Currently, youth remain removed from the role of active citizens.

In fact, youth are often excluded from involvement in most major decisions impacting their lives. While youth are centrally the focus of many policy and programming debates, such as schools, juvenile justice, incarceration, curfews, police harassment, sexual education, GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) issues, health care and environment hazards in their neighborhoods, they are rarely included in decision making (Young Wisdom Project, 2004). Moreover, they are rarely invited to participate in civic life within their local communities or within youth-serving programs or organizations. These exclusionary practices obstruct young people's abilities to fully participate in civic life and to act as citizens.

Young people are generally not expected to contribute to the welfare of their family or the community, and typically have minimal genuine and meaningful opportunities to participate in the community or in decision making that affects their lives. Kurth-Schui (1988) quotes Toffler when discussing societal impacts of the exclusion of youth:

The secret message communicated to most young people today by the society around them is that they are not needed, that society will run itself quite nicely until they- at some point in the future- will take over the reins. Yet the fact is that the society is not running itself nicely...because the rest of us need all the energy, brains, imagination and talent that young people can bring to bear on our difficulties. For society to attempt to solve its desperate problems without the full participation of even very young people is imbecile (p, 118).

While youth are often excluded from participating in community life and young people are not expected to be significant contributors to the greater good of the general public, their participation has the potential to add unique and innovative solutions to social problems.

While the practice of excluding youth in general from civic life is pervasive, youth of color living in poverty suffer greater alienation. Youth of color usually operate on the periphery of community life and are rarely involved in community affairs (Checkoway, 1996). Youth of color living in poverty are additionally oppressed and ostracized given the compounding

marginalization they experience due to the pervasive racism and classism in our culture.

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) confirm this when they describe public policy treating youth of color as delinquents, criminals and general civic problems. Further, they suggest these policies reflect the fear of youth, especially youth of color who are often stereotyped and become the scapegoat for a range of social problems. Some of the labels used to describe them are “troublemakers”, “irresponsible”, “lazy”, “underachievers”, “apathetic” and “dishonest” (Close & Lechman, 1997). These labels are dangerous in many ways but, especially concerning, when no other representations are put forth because youth begin to accept these negative portrayals of themselves (Checkoway, 1996). Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) state “...many adults think of young people as problems, and young people accept adult images of their deficiencies rather than viewing themselves as agents of change” (p. 3). If young people embody these disempowering images, it is difficult for them to create alternative identities to the ones assigned to them by adults and, therefore, become contributing citizens to civic life.

2.3 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES OF YOUTH

Youth-serving organizations are cultural institutions that shape and define the roles of youth in our society. Finn (2009) provides an important historical perspective on programs serving youth. During the time of the Industrial Revolution, poor immigrant youth, living in crowded unsafe areas with limited parental supervision, were placed into programs practicing what Finn has termed containment and control. Youth were supervised as a way to prevent involvement in deviance and crime. Those participating in these programs were poor urban youth who were categorized as “trouble” and deemed “dangerous” with the potential to prey on the “innocent” children. Finn references the work of Kett (1977) and Griffin (1993, 2001) who documented that lower class youth, not middle class youth, were represented as inherently

“dangerous”, “corruptible”, and potentially “corrupting” and thus in need of social control. These particular youth were seen as prime candidates for intervention (Finn, 2009). This historical perspective is critical because the philosophical underpinnings of these early programs continue to dominate how many contemporary programs work with youth. Much of the same discourse is used today when describing youth of color living in poverty and it can be argued that many of the intervention programs hold similar control and containment missions.

In contemporary society, youth continue to be conceptualized in ways that are disempowering and place them in marginalized categories in need of intervention. Kurth-Schai (1988) describes three conceptualizations of young people that she explains are mapped along a youth-in-society continuum. At one end of the continuum is the idea of “children as victims of adult society” which assumes that young people are vulnerable and in need of protection. Located at the other end of the continuum is the notion of “children as threats to adult society” which holds that youth are dangerous and in need of control. Between these two positions is “children as learners of adult society”. This assumes that youth are incomplete, incompetent and in need of adult guidance. These notions continue to influence the ways societal institutions interact with youth and nowhere on this continuum is a position where youth are valued or appreciated for what they have to contribute.

The current public discourse continues to represent youth of color living in poverty as “trouble” or “problems” and closely resembles the historical representations of what it meant to be a young person living in impoverished conditions. When programs working with youth are designed and operate from this perspective, one of powerlessness and need for intervention, they can offer little more than to contain and control youth.

2.4 COMMUNITY CONTEXT FOR YOUTH OF COLOR LIVING IN POVERTY

Much like their historical cohorts, youth of color living in poverty continue to reside in communities replete with social and environmental problems and offer limited resources to promote positive and healthy opportunities for young people. Some of the conditions facing these neighborhoods include poor housing, deteriorated neighborhoods, over-crowded schools as well as exposure to crime and racism (Wells, 2000). Additionally, poor adults and youth are overrepresented among those in jails and prisons. Policy makers, at the federal and state levels, have passed legislation that decreases spending in public education and social welfare and drastically increases spending for incarceration (Young Wisdom Project, 2004). Dwyer (2007) notes youth residing in these communities are highly policed and over represented in the legal system.

In 1998, Checkoway argued that economic recession, changes in industry and employment, and reductions in federal and state expenditures had worsened conditions for poor and minority youth and neighborhoods. State budget deficits and tax revenue shortages had depleted funds once available to provide services for youth and poor neighborhoods. The decrease in services often occurred at times when these youth and communities had an increase in needs. Community businesses and other important institutions disinvested from poor neighborhood in favor of other more affluent locations. This disinvestment resulted in “a downgrading cycle of deteriorating physical infrastructure, inadequate human services, weakening social supports, and withdrawal of people and institutions” (Checkoway, 1998, p. 765). This further placed youth and their families in conditions where it is difficult to succeed and thrive.

Current indicators confirm that youth and families are doing worse as a result of the 2008- 2009 recession and slow economic recovery. Key findings from the 2011 Child and Youth Well-Being Index, a composite of 28 key indicators of well-being compiled by the Foundation for Child Development, indicate that the existing economic climate has a large negative impact on family economic well-being. Since 1975, all of the improvements in material well-being of families with children under the age of 18 have been lost. Findings of a large increase in the percent of children living below the poverty line, a decrease in the secure parental employment rate, decline in the overall median family income for families with children, and declines in the incomes of single-headed families (both for males and females) result in negative impacts on the quality of life of children and families. As a result of the economic downturn, delayed indirect impacts have occurred, and are occurring, in other areas that impact the lives of children and families such as publicly supported schools, community facilities, and health programs (Foundation for Child Development, 2011).

Similarly, Brookings (2011) found that children's economic well-being has declined between 2010 and 2011. Over the past four years, child poverty grew by a percentage point or more each year, with 22 percent of children living in poverty in 2010. Children receiving the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have dramatically increased in the past four years, and approximately 6.5 million children under the age of 18 are living in families with an unemployed parent during an average month of 2011 (Brookings, 2011). More recent findings suggest large numbers of children are still living in poverty, despite there being no growth in the child poverty rate between 2010 (22%) and 2011 (21.9%). The Census Bureau revealed that, in 2011, 16.1 million children were living in poverty in the United States, with the child poverty rate being 21.9%. Youth of color were more likely to be living in poverty. The poverty rate for

African American children was 37.4%, and the poverty rate for Hispanic children was 34.1%. The same rate for White, Non-Hispanic children was 12.5% (Department of Health and Human Services, 2012).

The impacts of racism and poverty, as well as underemployment and unemployment, intersect in poor communities to produce conditions in which youth have limited opportunities, including fewer economic and educational prospects, and greater involvement with the legal system due to discriminatory policing and sentencing practices (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Despite evidence of outside forces, especially those contributing to social and economic disinvestment, impacting communities, it is argued that the blame for the decaying conditions of communities fall to youth (Checkoway & Guitierrez, 2006; Finn, 2009; Checkoway, 1998).

2.5 MODELS FOR INTERVENTION

Two primary intervention models are currently being utilized in working with youth, in particular youth of color: the risk reduction model and the youth as community assets model. This section examines these intervention models and addresses their relevance to youth populations.

2.5.1 Risk reduction model

The risk reduction model is the primarily model employed with youth. It considers youth to be “at risk,” and has the goal to treat or prevent a wide range of problems associated with this population. This model is prevalent in many programs and institutions serving youth. These programs and institutions aim to reduce or prevent problems in order to facilitate youths’ successful transition to adulthood and to prepare youth for their future roles in society. This model views youth from a deficits perspective and focuses on changing what is identified to be

wrong with youth. Youth are seen as the problem to be “fixed” and programs and institutions as the “fixers.”

Criticism for programs and institutions operating from this model suggests that those intervening simply intend to fill idle time and keep youth off the streets rather than provide substantive activities for youth (Kohler, 1981). As a means of preventing involvement in deviant and criminal behavior, programs operating from this model do not address the issues impacting the lives of youth. They are designed in more of a containment and control fashion (Finn, 2009). These types of programs and institutions have interventions and activities developed “keeping youth in mind” (Checkoway, 1995, p. 134). When interventions and activities are created for youth rather than by youth, young people have either little or no input into the design of the program or the activities offered. In this way, adults assume to know what youth need and what is in their best interest, so their efforts simply attempt to transfer the skills and knowledge they deem necessary to benefit young people. Adults presume they hold the answers needed to improve the lives of youth, rather than enabling the youth to answer these questions themselves (Damon, 2004; Ginwright, 2003). Youth are not encouraged to have a voice or speak for themselves. This dis-empowering model aims for “participation without power” and grants youth no real power or authority in decision making or governance of programs that affect their lives (Checkoway, 1998). Because young people are only seen as recipients of services from this perspective, they are relegated to roles secondary to adults. This has been the dominant model of practice for large scale institutions serving youth, especially youth of color. Among others, these institutions include schools, juvenile justice, and child welfare; all institutions with policies, procedures and legal mandates that prevent them from operating outside of prescribed guidelines (O’Donoghue et al., 2002).

For programs and institutions utilizing this model, three barriers have been identified that prevent staff from working towards youth empowerment and ensuring their involvement in decision making. These barriers include: youth identified as uninformed, their legitimacy challenged, and opposition to the strengthening of youths' voices (Checkoway, 1998). When these barriers are deemed as truths, those in positions of power do not view youth as having an opinion or something of importance to contribute, instead youth are relegated to powerless positions. This type of model thwarts youths' participation and keeps them powerless, needing of adults, and in the position of recipients waiting to get what they need. When youth view themselves in these ways, they are unable to see themselves as competent beings capable of making changes in their own lives or in the larger community. From this place, youth will languish, maintaining the status quo while adults, society and policy makers continue to make decisions that affect their lives. Additionally, they will accept, without challenge, the idea that adults have control over them.

When operating from this model, adults do not recognize the capacity of youth nor do they recognize the power of change that can result from including or collaborating with youth. Based on community change projects implemented in cities around the world where youth were engaged in activities to positively change their communities, Chawla and Driskell (2006) discovered three important impressions of youth. First, they learned adult decision makers usually do not have an accurate understanding of young people's issues and priorities. Second, even young children can engage in a meaningful evaluation of their community and offer realistic recommendations for community change. Third, the most effective model for achieving change involves children, youth and adults *working together* to ensure young people's voices are heard and they have a role in influencing the decisions that affect their lives.

Youth of color living in poverty require more than risk reduction efforts if they are going to be resources to their communities. They need opportunities that prepare them for the challenges they face in their communities currently as well as afford them the prospect of becoming future leaders in community change efforts. Attention should be given to efforts that emphasize young people's strengths and skills.

2.5.2 Youth as community assets model

The Community Assets Model is predicated on a strengths perspective that values “youth as resources” to their community (Checkoway & Guitierrez, 2006). A strengths perspective counters the prevalence of intervention approaches based on “pathology, deficits, problems, abnormalities, victimization, and disorder (Saleebey, 1996, p. 296) that influence helping professions in the United States and cultural norms and mores. This model focuses on engaging youth in participation through community-based programs and projects in the community in which they reside. Additionally, the model aims to empower youth in creating positive and healthy environments for themselves and others in their community. Ideally, youth develop and gain skills in the context of their community or in the multiple community settings in which youth, their peers, and their families live and spend time. Villarruel and colleagues (2003) argue that development not occur in isolation, with youth secluded in an institution away from their community. This model, with the goal of improving the community and impacting the lives of youth, is intended to contribute to the positive well-being of youth by enabling them to gain skills, competencies, a sense of contribution, opportunities to develop positive relationships, and attitudes that will afford them the ability to make positive choices in their lives (Perkins et al., 2003). Additionally, by contributing to positive community change, youth recognize and appreciate the capacity they have to make positive changes in their environment.

For youth of color living in poverty, participation can focus on the preservation of their local communities, as well as making positive change in the broader community. Sustained community changes occur when interventions and policies result at the community level (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). In order to promote community change, community asset focused programs engage youth in discussions to illuminate the social problems and the disparities in poor communities. Youth are taught to develop critical awareness and reflection on social and political process and structures (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias & McLoughlin, 2006). The results of critical analysis on what impacts the community should result in transformation at multiple levels- organizations, institutional, and societal policies, structures, process, social values, norms, and images (Jennings et al., 2006). It also aims to bring about structural changes in the community that will have long term effects on young people, their families and fellow citizens. The Young Wisdom Program (2004) is one community-based organization that has helped youth analyze the impacts of structural oppression and encouraged youth to work toward systemic change. One of the ways they accomplish this is by informing youth of the connections between education and juvenile justice issues, gender, race, class, sexual orientation, economic survival and environment justice.

Youth, community-based organizations and society benefit from the participation of youth in community. Young people bring new energy and optimism to solving community problems (Pittman, 2000). Adults must recognize that young people have unique experiences and views of the world that have value and that can meaningfully contribute to problem-solving and change-making. Carlson (2006) found that young people brought fresh ideas that contributed to improved outcomes around community issues and when issues were important to

youth, they would actively participate. To support and empower youth in participation, adults need to hold high expectations for youth and a belief in young people's abilities.

Youth have contributed to their communities through a variety of venues. They have provided public policy consultations on youth issues to public leaders and policy governance bodies. They have served on community coalitions for youth development where they have provided a voice on youth issues to a broad range of groups. Youth have been involved in organizational decision-making as well as youth organizing where youth organize programs and initiatives. Through school-based service learning projects, youth have taken part in learning while concurrently addressing community needs (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway, 1998; Checkoway et al., 2003; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004; Checkoway, 2005; Maglajic & Tiffany, 2006; Moore, 2000).

As opposed to the risk reduction model which focuses on preparing youth for the future, this model prepares youth to meet the challenges and demands confronting them now as well as in the future (Checkoway, 1998). Kohler (1981) asserts that youth urgently need opportunities to be responsible, caring, and participating members of society. It simply is not enough to expect youth to prepare for the future without being able to participate in community in the present. Youth already have skills to offer the community. This strengths perspective promotes positive youth development and views youth as assets, thereby emphasizing the potentiality of youth and their abilities to eagerly explore the world, gain competence, and acquire capacity to contribute importantly to the world (Damon, 2004). Additionally, rather than viewing youth as problems needing to be managed, this model focuses on empowerment. Moving beyond the promotion of successful transition to adulthood, as this is not sufficient for youth to flourish, a focus on reliance, competence and connectedness moves to the forefront of the thinking about young

people (Saewyc & Tonkin, 2008). As we learn more about the capabilities and strengths of youth and we move away from a risk-reduction model, we are reminded of what Pittman (2000) offers “problem free is not fully prepared” (p.33). Youth need more opportunities to actively prepare themselves to face the challenges they encounter.

This model engages youth to take on decision-making opportunities and participate in the planning and implementation of community-based efforts. Youth are encouraged to select relevant community issues, those they deem as important, to address in their efforts (Checkoway, 1998). Besides taking active roles in decision making, youth need to be nurtured as leaders. Ultimately, when operating from an assets perspective, youth will obtain power and eventually decision-making control over their efforts. Leadership development is a critical component of the youth as community assets model. In order for youth to become leaders, they must be given real opportunities for active participation, including redesigning and recreating the institutions that influence their lives (O’Donoghue et al., 2002).

In the late 20th century, strength-based approaches that focused on youth assets were developed to support young people. Positive youth development was an early model. This model is defined as:

an effort to promote positive development of young people rather than only overcoming their deficits. It aims to create environments in which youth can strengthen their confidence and competencies to meet their needs, prepare for adulthood, and live productive lives. It recognizes the importance of family, friends, neighbors, schools, community groups, and other supports as important parts of the process (Checkoway, 1998, p 772).

Positive Youth Development appreciates youth as resources to be developed and supports and values them as assets and resources to their neighborhoods (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Further, it promotes the idea that youth can contribute to the social capital of their community and take part in building their own healthier

communities rather than being passive recipients of interventions (Checkoway et al., 2003). Youth are privileged as competent citizens with a right to participate and responsibility to serve their communities (Checkoway, 1998; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Proponents of the Positive Youth Development perspective encourage youth concurrently to build their individual strengths by making a difference in ways that provide them with tangible benefits and develop healthier communities (Checkoway, 1998; Checkoway et al., 2003). Rather than being viewed as powerless victims, problems in society, and as withdrawn from participation, youth move toward a future marked by positive contributions to self, family, community and civic society (Checkoway et al., 2003; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005).

Positive Youth Development evolved into the Youth Participation movement which is described as “a constellation of activities that empower adolescents to take part in and influence decision making that affects their lives and to take action on issues they care about” (O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 5). Checkoway and Gutierrez (2006) expand this definition by including the involvement of youth in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. They make reference to youth involvement in initiatives at the community level focusing on organizing groups for social action, planning programs at the community level, and developing community-based services and resources. This participation is not intended as a form of adult advocacy for local youth or of token representation of youth in meetings of agencies, but instead a process through which young people actually actively engage in solving problems and planning programs in the community (Checkoway, Pothukuchi, & Finn, 1995). Youth engage in authentic roles in projects and institutions where they have decision-making responsibilities and shared power with adults.

Given the inequities prevalent in poor communities and the continual governmental and private disinvestment which place youth and their families in poverty, empowering youth to address some of the key community concerns could strength communities. Through these efforts, youth could be active agents of social justice work. As Checkoway (2005) states, Youth Participation initiatives can:

strengthen social justice in the ways that improve conditions for all people while emphasizing resources and opportunities for those lacking in both, and expanding the mechanisms of representation and accountability of traditionally excluded people in the institutions that affect them. They have the potential to address poverty and racism as factors in society and to reduce disparities between rich and poor (p. 15).

The Youth Participation perspective recognizes that youth can analyze how complex social problems influence their lives and the lives of those in their community. It also prompts youth to engage in activities that will influence institutions to better serve their community. Additionally, this perspective privileges youth as it promotes the awareness that youth have of their community. Youth are seen as experts of their community and are known to be keenly aware of community problems and strengths. Their abilities to assess community needs and consider appropriate solutions are valued because adults understand that youth develop their knowledge about their community through their direct experience of community conditions (Checkoway et al., 2003; Nygreen, Kwon, & Sanchez, 2006). Pittman (2000) shares that youth know the needs of their community because young people: feel the effects of crime and violence in their communities; see the results of idleness and lack of supervision; frequently participate in structured activities as young teens but participation wanes with age; lack employment opportunities; want adult support; and want to help make things better. Youth know their communities in real ways because they live in them.

2.6 BARRIERS TO YOUTH PARTICIPATION

In the literature, several interrelated factors have been identified as barriers to youth participating in community life; these include societal perceptions, media representations, social research, adultism, and attitudes of helping professionals. While these factors impact all youth, youth of color living in poverty seem to be disproportionately affected by these factors.

Adolescence is regarded as a time fraught with problems including pregnancy, crime, violence, substance abuse, and truancy to name a few (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003; Damon, 2004). During this developmental stage, youth are believed to create more problems than possibilities and are described as incapable and as “incomplete adults” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Youth are seen as problems to be managed by society and their skills, abilities and contributions are not valued or respected. The prevailing thought is youth need to be “fixed” prior to their becoming productive adult citizens (Ginwright, 2003).

Social workers and other helping professionals contribute to the views of youth as “problems” when they intervene from the perspective of saving, protecting and defending young people from conditions that affect them (Checkoway & Guterrez, 2006). This de-emphasizes the ability of youth to help themselves and empowers the professional who is intervening on behalf of the youth or their family (Checkoway et al., 2003; Sarri & Finn, 1992). Reinforcing helplessness and a saving mentality discourages youth from taking a more active role in their own lives and perpetuates the belief that young people are unable to act in their own best interest.

Media representations associate youth with the problems in society by focusing on negative behaviors such as gang activity, involvement in criminal behavior, drug and alcohol use and violence: this focus creates images of youth as dangerous and evokes a sense of fear of youth

in society (Checkoway, 2005; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004; Damon, 2004; Delaney, Prodigalidad & Sanders, 2002; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Youth of color in particular are represented as a group to be feared:

Teenage super predators are out on the streets and out of control. Born to be criminals, they are black and brown and listen to gangster rap. They are jaded and antisocial-teenage crack babies. Together, these images spell fear in adult minds- fear for the future of democratic institutions and fear of chaos in the streets. Young people who were once the hope for the future are now its greatest enemy (Young Wisdom Project, 2004, p. 10).

This perspective drives public policies which are developed with the sole aim to control and contain youth so that communities are safer for others in society (Delaney et al, 2002; Staeheli & Thompson, 1997).

Social scientists perpetuate problem-centered views of youth with “studies of poverty, racism, and other forces that cause poor housing, broken families, and worsening social conditions, and result in youth violence, drug abuse, and other social pathologies that require intervention” (Checkoway & Guterrez, 2006, p. 2). Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) note that between 1985 and 1995 African American and Latino youth were represented in approximately 70% of research articles in leading youth and adolescent scholarly journals. These journals focused on youth problems, pathologies, as well as primary prevention efforts. Far fewer studies have focused on developing an understanding of positive youth behavior, values or attitudes (Delgado & Staples, 2008).

Adultism, behaviors and attitudes based on the assumption that adults are better than young people and therefore entitled to act upon young people without their agreement, is perpetuated in our society by social institutions, laws, customs, and attitudes (Bell, 2000). The inequality resulting from power imbalances as a result of adultism limits the legitimacy of all youth, but when intersecting with race, class, and gender, it significantly prohibits the prospect of

young people in taking part in civic life (Bell, 2000). Adultism prevents youth from holding power in society, as they are not recognized as possessing inherent value in their own right. Instead, they are regarded as in the process of “becoming” adults (Frankenberg, 1992). Youth are subjected to deprecating stereotypical descriptions, such as immature, impulsive, self-centered, naïve, reckless and silly, which are then accepted as truths by adults in our society. These attitudes and practices render youth silent and invisible and thereby unable to act in their own best interest (Roche, 1999).

Because youth are socialized to be subservient to adults, they question their own legitimacy and refrain from speaking out about their needs (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004). Subordinate roles have resulted in youth exhibiting: learned helplessness, an “adults know best” attitude; dependence; difficulty making decisions and not trusting their own judgment; cycles of powerlessness; and the inability to trust their own thinking (Love & Phillips, 2007). Youth learn to be passive and dependent. Stoneman (2002) found from years of experience in working with low-income youth that they are conditioned to believe that it does not matter what they do, that it makes no difference and that nobody cares. They come to believe they may have a negative effect in the world but not a positive one, and they largely view themselves as irrelevant. Additionally, they believe that society views them as irrelevant. When youth grow to accept these views, it can be hard for them to transition into roles of responsibility (Kohler, 1981). This leads to further alienation and being ostracized from the community (Checkoway, 1995).

These five factors - societal perceptions, media representations, social research, adultism, and attitudes of helping professions - provide insight into how youth are seen in society and the messages we receive about youth. This social construction of the meaning of youth and their

role in society is replicated and reinforced by the social structures created to intervene on behalf of young people. In order to better understand how youth view themselves in terms of the roles they can have in their community, youth need an opportunity to have their voices heard. Their views and opinions can illuminate the realities of youth people in our society and can challenge the current discourse. The critical theoretical framework used in this dissertation is intended to provide youth with a venue to share their thoughts, views, opinions and experiences.

2.7 CRITICAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This dissertation takes a critical perspective both in terms of the research process and the theoretical underpinning of the research. Given the nature of this project, a critical lens offers a point of view often left unexamined by traditional research on youth. A critical perspective views the social world as being constructed through ongoing meaning-making group interactions which are power-laden. These interactions then shape social reality and our study of it (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Those who ascribe to a critical approach do not assume a knowable reality with rules and patterns which can be predicted and possibly controlled, and believe that no absolute truth exists due to historic inequities based on rigid views of knowledge (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This epistemological stance differs from the positivist standpoint of traditional Western assumptions of knowledge, of who can be the knower, and of how knowledge is produced. In addition to examining power, critical perspectives have a social justice perspective (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The following section discusses the critical theories – intersectionality and empowerment theory, and the research process, community-based participatory research, which assumes a critical stance in research.

2.7.1 Critical Theory

Critical theory provides a basic critique of social structures and brings attention to inequities based on gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation as hidden subtexts of the knowledge produced by Western science which reinforces power differentials (Padgett, 2008). Critical theory is a cluster of theories which encompass a number of different specific theories that examine inequities and their consequences, and as well as having a component of action for change (Agger, 1998; Padgett, 2008). Seiler (n.d.) provides a description of the main features of critical theory. Critical theorists believe that it is necessary to understand the lived experience of real people in context. Critical theorists attempt to interpret the acts and the symbols of society in order to understand the ways in which various social groups are oppressed. Critical approaches examine social conditions in order to uncover hidden structures. Critical theory teaches that knowledge is power. This means that understanding the ways one is oppressed enables one to take action to change oppressive forces. Critical social science makes a conscious attempt to fuse theory and action. Critical theories serve to bring about change in the conditions that affect our lives.

2.7.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theory that describes how multiple aspects of an individual's identity intersect to influence that individual's experiences (Crenshaw, 2005). Knudsen (2006) defines intersectionality as a theory to analyze how social and cultural categories intertwine. It examines the relationships among gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class and nationality; "Identity is woven within a web of intersecting threats that include gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and age" (Ross-Sheriff, 2008, p. 309). These intersections are critical as they shape people's lived experiences. Thus, in order to gain an

appreciation of people's experiences in the world, we must be aware of the multiplicity of these intersections. Ross-Sheriff (2008) notes that this theory highlights the "limitations and risks of univariate analysis and argues for consideration of multiple factors..." (p. 309).

Intersectionality focuses on the complexity created by the relationship between socio-cultural categories and identities. Inherent to the theory of intersectionality is the issue of power and how power creates conditions for inclusion and exclusion in society. Because diverse and marginalized populations are the focus of this theory, the issue of power and how it influences their inclusion and exclusion in society is paramount.

The theory of intersectionality is applicable to understanding the experiences of youth of color living in poverty. The intersections of age, race, social class and, gender create unique lived experiences that stem from their particular social locations. While this theory is not explicitly cited in the field of youth development or participation, its essence is appreciated and applicable to some. The Young Wisdom Project (2004) addresses issues of intersectionality as follows:

By exploring the intersections of age with race, gender, class, disability and sexuality, many organizations have developed a sophisticated analysis for how issues interact to impact their communities. As a result, many youth groups not only work to create power for youth in their communities, they also have the broader goal of community empowerment (p. 11).

Others have discussed the importance of multiple intersections with age in understanding youth identities and in how to work respectfully and collaboratively with young people. This theory helps youth understand the social world in which they reside and must negotiate. Additionally, it provides them context for which they plan their community interventions. Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney and Villarruel (2003) discuss the critical need for programs and researchers to consider the role of diversity in youth and their development and to

understand that to make simple modifications to established programs and research created for majority youth is not enough. They argue that positive youth development, located within the community setting, needs to be based on contextual and cultural dimensions of development. More simply put, programs need to reflect and respond to the specific population of youth with whom they are working.

Nygreen, Kwon and Sanchez (2006) discuss the need for practitioners and researchers working with urban youth of color to integrate issues of relative power, privilege and position into to their work. With this population, social constructs of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability shape the ways in which adults collaborate with young people. Intersectionality has important implications for the work happening with young people in communities today, especially with populations of youth who have been marginalized and oppressed. This theory provides guidance for adults to be mindful in their work with youth. It is essential to reflect on the lived experiences of young people and this theory prompts adults to ask young people about their experiences. This theory speaks to the complexity of young people's lives. Assumptions about who young people are and what their lives are like can, not only be off target, but seriously jeopardize how youth view themselves.

2.7.3 Empowerment Theory

Numerous definitions of empowerment are used in research and practice today. Empowerment has been defined as a process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations (Gutierrez, 1990). Rappaport (1984) describes empowerment as a “mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives” (p. 3). Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, (1998) define empowerment as a “process by which individuals and groups gain power, access to resources

and control over their own lives. In doing so, they gain the ability to achieve their highest personal and collective aspirations and goals” (p.91). These definitions are similar in that people are able to, through a process, begin to direct their own lives and are able to seek the assets they need to be successful. This is ultimately the goal of youth participation. It is intended that youth will gain mastery and control over their own lives and be able to harness power to improve their lives and their community.

Rappaport (1998) suggests that empowerment is easier to define in its absence – alienation, powerlessness, and helplessness – but more challenging to define is its positive aspects because it is different in each individual and context. Youth are a heterogeneous group and will have different ideas about what empowerment means for them. Race, class, gender, abilities, and sexual orientation will greatly impact what empowerment means to a young person. Flexibility in programs and working with young people as unique individuals are ways to combat the challenges and to create empowerment. As Rappaport suggests, we know what alienation, powerlessness and helplessness look like, especially in youth of color living in poverty. How to work with youth in an empowering way and how to increase the number of empowered youth requires further investigation.

Empowerment can occur at the individual, organizational and community levels (Zimmerman, 1990). Zimmerman (1990) describes empowerment at the individual level as including participatory behavior, motivations to exert control, and feelings of efficacy and control. Organizational empowerment includes shared leadership, opportunities to develop skills, expansion, and effective community influence. Empowered communities allocate opportunities for citizen participation in community decision making, and allow for fair consideration of multiple perspectives during times of conflict. An important component noted

by Zimmerman (1990) is “empowerment embodies an interaction between individuals and environments that is culturally and contextually defined” (p. 170). A goal of youth participation is to move youth through empowerment at all three levels. The aim is to begin working at the individual level while then engaging youth in leadership roles in organizations and in the community which will increase their empowerment as individuals while also empowering agencies and the broader community.

The definition of empowerment put forth by the Cornell University Empowerment Group (1989) is well suited for the topic of youth participation in local communities: “An intentional, on-going process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources (p. 2).” Because much of the youth participation work will take place through a youth program, it is critical that the empowerment resides in the youth for whom the program is serving, not the program staff or other adult allies. The goal of empowerment in this context is to address the oppression, isolation and inequalities experienced by youth. For youth of color living in poverty, empowerment will need to address the multiple forces that create these inequalities and impact the lives and well-being of young people. From the perspective of empowerment, youth of color living in poverty are not blamed for their lack of resources and power; rather they will be encouraged and given the skills to gain access to resources and power to improve their own lives and their community. This model of empowerment rejects the idea that problems develop because of personal deficiencies. Instead, the realities of the social context are brought to light for the role they play in societal inequities. Intrapersonal, interpersonal and political power is addresses in this model which affords individuals the prospect of taking action to improve their own lives.

2.7.4 Community-Based Participatory Research

The research process, community-based participatory research (CBPR), is an epistemological shift from positivist research in that it offers an alternative approach to the traditional model of research where “experts” determine a research agenda and those participating in the research are given no voice or involvement in the research process. As Minkler and Wallerstein (2003, p. 3) state, many complex health and social problems of the 21st century have not been suited to traditional “outside expert” approaches to research, as well as the resulting interventions, which are often disappointing to those in the community. They go on to share that increased attention has been given to alternative orientations of inquiry that focus on community partnership, action for social change and reduction in inequities.

CBPR arose in response to the limitations of traditional research approaches in the communities where research occurred. More traditional approaches failed to attend to the needs and desires of the community, as well as to acknowledge the community as being able to contribute to the development of research agendas, as Wallerstein & Duran (2003) state:

In the past decades, a new paradigm of ‘participatory’ research has emerged, raising challenges to the positivist view of science, the construction and use of knowledge; the role of the researcher in engaging society, the role of agency and participation of the community, and the importance of power relations that permeate the research process and our capacity to become a just and more equitable society (p. 27).

Israel and colleagues (2003) define community-based participatory research as “a partnership approach to research that equitably involves community members, organizational representatives, and researchers in all aspects of the research process” (p. 54). Key principles of CBPR include recognizing community as a unit of identity; building on strengths and resources within the community; facilitating collaborative, equitable partnership in all phases of the research; promoting, co-learning and capacity building among all partners integrating and

achieving a balance between research and action for the mutual benefit of all partners; emphasizing local relevance of public health problems and ecological perspectives that recognize and attend to the multiple determinates of health and disease; involving systems developed through a cyclical and iterative process; disseminating findings and knowledge gained to all partners and involving all partners in the dissemination process; and finally involving a long-term process and commitment (Israel et al., 2003).

CBPR values community members as equal contributing members to the research process which helps to equalize power dynamics in relationships. It also aims to empower participants to take part and guide the research agenda in meaningful ways. Additionally, Minkler and Wallerstein (2003) describe CBPR as including attention to the centrality of issues of gender, race, class and culture, “as these interlock and influence every aspect of the research enterprise” (p. 6).

While CBPR has been a growing area of research with adults, there are far fewer studies that focus on youth. Many of those that do include youth as research partners are in the arena of public health. These studies explore youth perceptions on violence, wellness, school health programs, and tobacco regulation, among other health related topics (Coker-Appiah, Akers, Banks, Albritton, Leniek, Wynn, & Corbie-Smith, 2009; Ogneva-Himmelberger, Ross, Burdick & Simpson, 2010; Peterson, Dolan & Hanft, 2010; Ross, 2011; Soleimanpour, Brindis, Geierstanger Kandawalla, & Kurlaender, 2008; Teufel-Shone, Sivuvia, Watahomigie & Irwin, 2006; Yonas, Burke, Rak, Bennett, Kelly, & Gielen, 2009). CBPR is an ideal research paradigm for understanding youth participation in community development, as it gives those in the field a voice in the research process. Because CBPR allows for the active participation of a community in defining and addressing the strengths and needs of a community, privileges the views and

opinions of community members as experts, and enables communities to have a voice in solving problems rather than having those from outside the community assess conditions, it is an model orientation for research and practice in the field of social work, given its historical roots in social justice.

2.8 SUMMARY

Youth of color living in poverty reside in conditions where complex social and political forces, as well as multiple forms of oppression, impact their lives and limit the options and choices available to them. Because youth of color living in poverty are vulnerable to political decisions and economic conditions beyond their control, they must learn to create their own change. It is incumbent upon social work professionals and policy makers to recognize the impact of structural forces and to move beyond an individual level intervention focused on changing “at risk” youth. Interventions need to include an empowerment perspective where youth are involved in making real and tangible changes in their immediate communities and beyond. Youth have the ability to be active agents in shaping their own lives, the lives of those around them, and the society in which they live (James & Prout, 1990). Stoneman (2002) notes that while low-income disenfranchised youth may present an appearance of being cynical and passive, they in fact desire to make a difference. When the right conditions are presented, they will get involved. The following chapter outlines the research methods and describes the youth who participated in the study and the community organization with whom the partnership was made.

3.0 METHODS

While the literature on youth participation in community development is growing, there is still relatively little known on this topic from the perspective of youth. An in-depth understanding of youth participation in community development from young people successfully engaged in community development efforts is needed to better inform research and practice. Qualitative methods completed in a community-based participatory research framework are the logical choice to gain a comprehensive and rich understanding of this area. By providing youth the opportunity to share their views and opinions and to participate in the meaning-making process, a deeper understanding is gained. Thus, this study expands the current literature on youth participation.

Chapter 3 summarizes my research process. I begin by stating my research question and the aims of the study. I provide a rationale for utilizing a community-based participatory approach and a qualitative research design. I then outline the methods, describe the sample, and discuss the data collection and analysis. The procedures of the study around recruitment, informed consent, and interviews and focus groups are also detailed.

3.1 RESEARCH QUESTION

The overarching research question guiding this study is: How do youth conceptualize their role in community development? The major aims of this study are to understand why youth want to participate in creating positive change in their own communities, what motivates their participation, and how programs can support youth efforts. Additionally, discussions centered around the following questions: how young people perceive their roles in community, their understanding of community needs, why they are participating in a program that engages them in the community, what they learn and gain from their involvement in community projects, what

difference they are making in the community, what roles youth should play in the community and what they can do to make their community better, and feedback on how adults can effectively work with youth.

I was particularly interested in learning about this topic from young people who have actively engaged in community development efforts where they reside. The perceptions of these youth provide a unique perspective on the topic that expands the literature on youth in community development and the potential benefits of engaging youth as change agents in their communities. The research approach taken in this dissertation seeks to privilege the opinions and views of young people and to appreciate them as authorities on this topic, as well as experts on their own experiences. The following section describes the site for data collection.

3.2 SITE FOR DATA COLLECTION

3.2.1 The Community

The Braddock Youth Project (BYP), located in the borough of Braddock, Pennsylvania, served as the site for data collection. Braddock is a former industrial town situated on the Monongahela River in Allegheny County, near Pittsburgh. Braddock fell into economic decline in the 1980's with the collapse of the steel industry and, as a result, the buildings and infrastructure of the borough have fallen into disrepair. With the closure of the major economic industries, those with economic resources left Braddock, some abandoning their properties when the resale value plummeted. According to the Braddock website (2013), Braddock was once a flourishing city of 20,000 residents, with wealth, amenities and large shopping districts. It was home to Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill and free library. Numerous churches, schools, theaters, furniture stores, restaurants and breweries were part of the urban landscape. Because of the shopping and other amenities, people visited Braddock from all around the region.

The conditions in Braddock have not rebounded and the current state of the community can be defined as distressed. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the total population of Braddock is 2,159, with 353 of its population between the ages of 10 and 19 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The majority of the population is African American (73%). Braddock continues to struggle economically. The residents in the borough have an estimated median household income of \$21,042. When compared to the state estimated median income of \$49,520, it is considerably lower (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In terms of poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, 70.8% of those under 18 years are below the poverty level. For individuals below the poverty level, 293 are at the 50% of poverty level, 919 are at the 125% of poverty level, 1,053 are at the 150% of poverty level, 1,358 are at the 185% of poverty level, and 1,437 are at the 200% of poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Another indicator of the economic status of Braddock is found in the average housing costs, which are significantly lower in Braddock (\$38,066) than in the state (\$164,700) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This overview of the community highlights the needs in the Braddock community and what neighborhood conditions the youth face in their daily lives. While some of the youth participating in the Braddock Youth Project do not reside directly in the Braddock community, they live in adjacent communities plagued by similar conditions.

3.2.2 The Program

The Braddock Youth Project (BYP) began working with youth in July 2006. The Director of the KEYS Service Corps, an AmeriCorps program was approached by the Planning and Operations Manager of the Office of Community Services, Bureau of Employment and Training, Allegheny County Department of Human Services in June of 2006 regarding funds available for summer youth programs. The offer was accepted and the Director of AmeriCorps began the

process of developing a program. During the planning phase, the Director collaborated with the Mayor of Braddock, a former AmeriCorps alumnus, to determine his interest and suggestions for youth programming in Braddock. Given the large number of vacant lots in the Braddock community, the Mayor suggested an urban farm project. His recommendation was to hire 25 youth from the community to build the farm. He offered ideas for recruitment of the youth, community collaborations and community resources to engage. The Mayor secured land from a local resident for the project and a Letter of Agreement between the property owner and the KEYS Service Corps was signed. The Braddock Youth Project launched shortly thereafter (Schmid, J., 2013).

The program is well established in the Braddock community and has been successful in engaging youth in making positive changes in their local community by providing them with stipend job training positions in community development. The BYP offers both a summer and a school year after-school program for youth, ages 14 through 18, living in Braddock and surrounding non-City of Pittsburgh areas. The BYP program is housed under the Department of Human Services, Offices of Community Services, KEYS Service Corps AmeriCorps Program. BYP is coordinated by a full-time staff person, with AmeriCorps members mentoring and tutoring the BYP participants and serving as team leaders for the community development modules. Additionally, volunteers from universities tutor BYP participants in more advanced math and science subjects. AmeriCorps members serve with BYP both in the school year program and the summer program. They work closely with the youth and play integral roles in supporting the young people and the mission of the program. BYP staff and KEYS AmeriCorps members, in partnership with local leaders, assist youth in researching the needs of the community, designing service projects to address those needs, and then implementing those

projects (Braddock Youth Project, 2011, 2012). The BYP program is physically housed in the newly renovated Nyia Page Community Center, which is centrally located in borough of Braddock.

The BYP provides youth an opportunity to develop employment skills while contributing to the betterment of their community. The program operates from a strengths-based perspective by viewing young people as resources to their community. They are encouraged to take active roles in community development and are believed to have the knowledge and desire to improve their community. By offering skill development and leadership training, BYP empowers young people to participate in community change efforts. Their mission statement is:

The BYP is a youth work skills training program that seeks to foster skills that will aid youth in advancing towards positive life outcomes, by providing meaningful and sustainable community development projects, generated and maintained by the youth. These projects harness the energy and creativity of the youth to promote positive, culturally relevant change in their community.

The BYP program presents youth a variety of options in which to serve their community. Each project is intended to foster specific skill development, and employment preparedness is an overarching goal across the program. The BYP operates from a youth leadership perspective which assures youth take an active role in project decision making and serve as mentors to younger members of the Braddock Youth Project. Therefore, youth are encouraged to identify needs in the community and develop creative solutions to address the needs. Youth are not required to participate in activities they feel are unworthy of their time (Braddock Youth Project, 2011). Youth leadership and mentorship are crucial elements in the program's success. The BYP has created a process for growing young leaders. These leaders then go on to serve as mentors to newer BYP members. The process starts with youth in the summer program. Those youth who demonstrate a sincere commitment to the program and to doing community based work are

invited to apply to the school year program. During the school year, youth hone their leadership abilities, delve deeper into community development projects of their choosing and design, and help to develop programming for the subsequent summer. The school year participants then act as leaders to the new youth in the summer program. The leadership youth provide is in the area of mentorship to other community youth as well as in neighborhood projects to better the community. As stated on the BYP website, “Youth learn important workplace skills while applying their creativity to meaningful projects and exploring topics that are important to them and the community of Braddock” (Braddock Youth Project, 2012).

The projects youth have worked on have evolved over the years, but the main service areas have included:

Community News Letter: *Watz Up Doc* is a community newsletter produced, edited, and designed by BYP youth. Topics covered in the newsletter include those of importance to those who live and work in Braddock.

Entrepreneurship Training: Youth worked in the areas of screen printing, learning how to be entrepreneurs through art, and the development of a community café to be housed in the Braddock Community Center.

Mentoring Youth: BYP, Jr. is a mentoring program, in which the high school-aged BYP youth develop programming and provide homework help for younger youth. In 2008, BYP youth created this portion of the program after recognizing a need for mentors for the youngest of Braddock’s residents.

Service Learning: BYP youth learn to identify community assets and community needs. They then develop projects to help address these recognized needs using the available assets. Additionally, youth collaborate with other entities to implement their projects.

Video Production: Youth learn video production skills to create videos on topics important to them and relevant to Braddock. Youth plan, shoot, and edit all of the videos. In the past, videos have focused on the following: healthy habits, drug & alcohol prevention, violence in communities, teen pregnancy, and environmental conservation.

Gardening: BYP youth have been gardening since the program’s inception. Youth plant and maintain several gardens around the community. All sites were converted, by BYP youth, from vacant lots.

Healthy Practices: Healthy Practices is a workshop developed and led by BYP teens. Youth teach other BYP youth and community members about health related topics including the benefits of healthy foods and regular exercise, the effects of stress, bullying, and the practicing of other healthy behaviors (Braddock Youth Project, 2012).

The BYP provides stipends for youth in both the school year after-school program and the summer program. The school year program is a smaller entity, typically supporting 15 to 20 youth ages 14 through 18 enrolled in high school. Program staff and youth interns select youth for the school year program based upon their performance in the summer program and the quality of their application. Funding for the positions come from the Workforce Investment Act and private funds secured through grants. The main projects held during the school year include the Watz Up Doc newsletter, BYP, Jr. and Media Production. Youth also coordinate other community activities, including movie nights, screen printing collaborations, and community art collaborations. In addition to working on community projects, youth have mandatory homework time. Program staff assist youth with homework, SAT preparation and other academic related activities. Additionally, field trips are scheduled with the intent to expose youth to new perspectives and activities (Braddock Youth Project, 2011).

The summer program requires youth to complete an application and go through an interview process. Youth are given a choice to work in one of the several service areas. A detailed description of the community development work that youth provided to the Braddock community during the past two summers is shared here to document the scope and breadth of the service youth accomplish. As positive community development is the core of the program, the host of unique contributions youth made in their community is key to understanding their success.

For the 2011 summer program, youth worked in the following areas: Media Production, Healthy Practices, Gardening, BYP, Jr. Mentoring, and Grow Pittsburgh. Table 1 features the

accomplishments of youth in the 2011 six-week summer program (Braddock Youth Project, 2011).

Table 1: 2011 Summer Program Completed Projects

Media Production	Edited a series of videos for the nonprofit, Traveler’s Aid. Shoot and edited a promotional video for the Braddock Carnegie Library. Documented oral histories of Braddock through StoryCorps and in conjunction with WYEP radio station. Documented the progress of the Braddock Summer Youth Project.
Healthy Practices	Traveled around Allegheny County as health ambassadors educating youth at the Summer Food Program sites in nutrition and wellness, using FitWits, an innovative fitness curriculum. Educated local children on nutrition and wellness. Engaged in cooking healthy foods and created dances as a form of physical activity for their peers. Created simple dance routines and taught them to Braddock-area seniors at three local senior housing locations.
Gardening	Planted and maintained the Braddock Community Garden and the Braddock Flower Farm. Expanded a community garden site partnering with GTECH Strategies. Cleaned up and planted an abandoned site. Partnered with West Penn Conservancy to plant and maintain flowers at the entrance to Braddock. Planted pots of flowers and distributed them to local business. Cooked from recipes, using produce grown in the garden. Read articles and a book about the economic and health benefits of buying and eating locally grown food.
BYP, Jr. Mentoring	In collaboration with Braddock Borough and Braddock Redux, assisted staff at the playgrounds of Braddock to ensure safety and promote fun play for local children. Learned how to write detailed lesson plans and developed a book of their lesson plans for future BYP, Jr. mentors.
Grow Pittsburgh	Learned hands-on gardening skills on the Grow Pittsburgh Farm. Took multiple field trips to several area farms and food-related sites. Learned about the benefits of locally-grown foods and the American food system.

In the summer of 2012, youth were able to work in the following areas: Media, Gardening, Grow Pittsburgh, and Healthy Practices. Two new groups were introduced this summer, the T-shirt group and the Café group. Some of the youth also worked with BYP, Jr. but it did not constitute a formal group this summer. Due to significant funding cuts to the program, the 2012 summer program lasted 5 weeks. Table 2 details the activities of these summer groups (Braddock Youth Project, 2012).

Table 2: 2012 Summer Program Completed Projects

Media Production	Produced an anti-bullying video, You're Beautiful. Finished edits on the school-year documentary project, Voices of Braddock, which tells the story of the community through the experiences of area residents and stakeholders. Completed and distributed the Summer 2012 edition of BYP's community newsletter, Watz Up Doc.
BYP, Jr. Mentoring	Acted as mentors and tutors to younger area children taking part in summer camp program. Experienced daily workings of coordinating a Summer Camp, accompanied children on field trips, and coordinated programming partnerships with other BYP teams (Gardening and Healthy Practices). Provided support to the Braddock Borough playgrounds Team Leaders, helped lead swimming lessons with children and accompanied them on field trips. Coordinated BYP's 4th annual "Bring Your Sibling to Work" day.
Gardening	Expanded vegetable production at the Braddock Avenue Youth Garden site and flower production at the Flower Farm site. De-constructed a former garden site and re-constructed it.
Grow Pittsburgh	Assisted on the Braddock Farms, learning all of the skills needed to run a commercial, small-scale, organic farm. Assisted in running the Saturday Farm Stand, learning how to present fresh, local, organic produce.
Healthy Practices	Conducted dance and stretching sessions at Braddock's Avenue Apartments senior housing facility. Partnered with the HOST summer camp, leading fun nutrition lessons with children. Compiled a stress relief booklet.
Café Design	Planned the layout and the "look" of the Braddock Community Cafe, set to open in the Community Center later this fall. Designed menus and cafe signage, planned the layout, and designed and built furniture pieces from reclaimed materials.
T-Shirt Design	Learned how to build BYP Gear, our new clothing design social enterprise. Designed the "Build It Back Up" shirt. Designed a new logo for a Braddock-based church. Designed and made t-shirts for other groups and organizations.

As evidenced by the descriptions of the community contributions, the youth in BYP provide an array of important services to the community. They are responsible for a majority of the projects that happen in Braddock and work collaboratively with a number of other organizations to bring about development projects.

In supporting youth, the BYP staff utilize the Standards and Straight Talk program. Standards and Straight Talk was adapted by BYP from a successful youth program, the Food Project located in Boston, MA. The BYP appreciates the Standards and Straight Talk because it provides a solid foundation for youth to develop work readiness skills, allows teens and adults to be on the same page regarding behavior, and enables teens to feel safe so they can explore and hone their strengths and improve on their weaknesses. Standards and Straight Talk ensure that staff have a clear cut set of rules and expectations to focus on rather than devoting time solving disciplinary issues. Due to the standardization, staff should not inadvertently apply different “common sense” rules inconsistently and staff can give individualized attention to the needs of each youth on a biweekly basis. The Straight Talk time with youth allows staff to re-address problem areas when the situation has passed and emotions have settled. Disciplinary instructions can be written so that they relate to the standards and are clearly understood by the youth. This process ensures an individual process for each youth and that more attention is not paid to youth with behavior issues (Braddock Youth Project, 2011).

3.3 DATA COLLECTION

In order to gain a broad perspective of youth experiences and perceptions, several methods of data collection were used in this study. I conducted focus group interviews with youth participating in the summer program and individual interviews with young people previously involved in the program. The focus group interviews afforded me the opportunity to gather many opinions, ideas and key issues on youth participation in community development inductively at once and assisted in determining the key issues, ideas, and concerns. Breadth and depth can simultaneously be accomplished with using focus groups (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The individual interviews with older youth who completed the BYP program were used

to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of those being interviewed on this particular topic. The individual interview allowed for deep probing and follow-up to occur. As the focus groups were held prior to the individual interviews, I was able to follow up in the individual interviews on additional interesting discoveries made during the focus groups. Data from field notes taken over the course of the study were also used to inform the research. Each of these sources of data in the study is described in further detail below. The University of Pittsburgh's Institutional Review Board reviewed the research design and approved this research.

3.3.1 Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted with two different sets of youth, youth interns and youth participating in the 2012 summer program. Youth interns are those youth who participate in both the school year and summer program. These youth have had an opportunity to be immersed in the program and out in the community for extended periods of time and hold leadership roles at BYP. Additionally, these are the youth I have been collaborating with over the last several years. Many of these youth presented in my university class and I worked with them briefly for several summers either working in the gardens or during a Photovoice project conducted at BYP. Two focus groups were conducted with this population. The first focus group (youth interns 2011) concentrated on determining youth's perspective of the BYP program and what roles they play, how being in the BYP program impacts what youth do with their time, what youth like about the program and how the program impacts them, how the program can be improved, views of their impact in the community and how youth in general can impact the community, and opinions on how adults can work with youth. (See Appendix A for focus group discussion guide 1.)

The second focus group with youth interns (youth interns 2012) focused on youths' perceptions of state and county budget cuts for youth programming and how they thought these cuts would impact youth in this program as well as other youth programs. In addition to discussing their community work and its impacts on them and the community, youth were also asked to speak to the influences these budget cuts have for youth in their community and impact on the community. The director of the BYP requested this focus group discussion specifically on this topic since these policy changes directly impact youth working in community development. (See Appendix B for focus group discussion guide 2.)

The second set of focus groups was held with all youth taking part in the 2012 summer program. Many of these youth were first time members of BYP. These focus groups covered the same topics as explored with the 2012 youth interns. Again, the director of BYP requested the investigation of the impacts of the program on youth and the community as well as the opinions of youth on the impacts of state and local budget cuts to youth programs.

I conducted the focus groups in a semi-structured style, with the groups lasting approximately 30 to 90 minutes. They were conducted in the offices of the BYP program during the hours that youth were working. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary and youth could choose not to participate without penalty. If youth preferred not to participate, they continued their work on community projects. Youth were not compensated separately for their participation but, because they were interviewed during their work time, they were paid through their stipend.

Focus groups were digitally recorded and were transcribed verbatim. Both the digital recording and electronic copy of the transcription files were stored on a secure computer.

3.3.2 Individual interviews

Using purposeful sampling, I selected young people who graduated from the BYP program in the past 3 years for the sample of youth interviewed individually. BYP program staff compiled a list of recent graduates and their contact information. BYP staff contacted each recent graduate to determine their interest in participating in an interview. Once permission was granted, I contacted the youth to schedule the interview. All interviews, except for one, were conducted in-person at the Braddock Youth Project office. Each participant was able to select the location of the interview. The interviews covered the young person's history in the BYP program, their views of the impact of the program on their lives, their impressions of working in the community, how the program prepared them for the future, and their involvement in community work currently. (See Appendix C for the guide for individual interviews.)

I conducted the in-depth interviews using a semi-structured style. Interviews lasted from 20 to 60 minutes with the majority being around 40 minutes in length. No compensation was provided for participation. Each youth shared that they were motivated to participate because they wanted to give back to the program. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Both the digital recording and electronic copy of the transcription files were stored on a secure computer.

3.3.3 Fieldnotes

I wrote fieldnotes to document all of my interactions with the Braddock Youth Project for the duration of my dissertation. Notes were written after each focus group and individual interview and compiled in a field notebook. Additionally, all other interactions with the program were described in detail. My notes depict what I observed and heard and include "what does it

mean?” notes which contain my own thoughts, perceptions and feeling about the experiences and exchanges (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2011). To ensure anonymity, no names were used in the notes.

A section of the field notebook was dedicated to documenting my own reflexivity. My position as the researcher is portrayed in these notes. This process has allowed me to clarify my own feelings about the research, including the process and illuminate my own biases and assumptions. I also noted what I saw as emerging explanations and descriptions of youth’s realities. As issues of power are critical in terms of working with youth, I explored this in my reflexive notes. Notes were also used to explore how youths’ responses are embedded in broader physical, social, economic and political environments (Ulin, Robinson & Tolley, 2004)

3.4 SAMPLE

The sample of this study consisted of youth involved in the Braddock Youth Project summer program in 2011 and 2012 and youth who graduated from the Braddock Youth Project program. Table 3 provides an overview of sample.

Table 3. BYP Sample

Type of Interview	Participants	Number of Participants	Race	Gender
Focus Group	2011 Summer Youth Interns	13	11 African American 2 Bi-racial	6 Female 7 Male
Focus Group	2012 Summer Youth Interns and Summer Youth	34	23 African American 9 Bi-racial 2 Caucasian	15 Female 19 Male
Individual Interview	Graduated Youth	6	4 African American 2 Bi-racial	1 Female 5 Male

Youth interns involved in the 2011 summer program were eligible to participate in the first focus group interview. These youth ranged in age from 15 to 19, were in high school or just graduated, resided in either Braddock or a surrounding neighborhood, and had previously been enrolled in

the year-long after-school program. All youth had completed at least one school year in the program and some had been involved in the program for several years. Thirteen youth (all of the youth interns) participated in the focus group; eleven were African-American and two were Bi-racial. Seven of the youth were male and 6 were female. For the second set of focus groups, youth participating in the 2012 summer program were interviewed. This included the youth interns and younger youth involved in the summer program. Only one youth participated in both the 2011 and 2012 focus groups.

The 2012 focus groups involved both youth interns and youth participating in the BYP summer program. Youth in both of these groups ranged in age from 14 to 19, were in high school or just graduated, and resided in either Braddock or a surrounding neighborhood. The youth in the summer program include young people new to the program and some returning from previous summers. Youth interns had previously been enrolled in the year-long after-school program. Ten youth interns participated in a focus group; six were male and four were female. In terms of race, one youth was Caucasian, five were African American and four were Bi-racial. The remaining 5 focus groups were conducted with 24 youth participants from the community development working groups. Thirteen of the youth were male and 11 were female. There were 18 African American youth, 5 Bi-racial youth and 1 Caucasian.

The youth who graduated from the program were identified by the current BYP director with recommendations from her staff. The program compiled a list of program graduates and their contact information. I worked with the director to select youth for participation in the study. Because participants in qualitative research are selected based on their ability to answer the research questions, youth with extensive experience in the program were selected, as well as youth who were willing to talk about their experience. Six youth were selected for individual

interviews. Several of the youth participated in the program starting from the inception of BYP. Other youth started a couple of years later. One additional young woman was invited to participate. Initially, she responded to my invitation and agreed to participate in an interview. Unfortunately, her boyfriend was a victim in an accidental shooting. Because she was working full-time and trying to care for him, she reported being too busy to be involved despite her interest.

The youth involved in the BYP and young people who have completed the BYP program were ideal candidates to answer the research questions. They provided valuable insights on the topic of youth participation in community development. Because BYP youth are accustomed to taking active leadership roles in their community, they were competent and well positioned to be involved in participating in the research agenda. Their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives on youth participation in community development provided a valuable contribution to the research and promoted a robust understanding of youth programs and the experiences of young people working in their local community.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative analysis is an iterative process that begins at the start of data collection. As I completed focus groups and individual interviews and reviewed field notes, I noted themes and unexpected responses. I used these notes to refine the questions for further exploration in the next groups or individual interviews. New and surprising topics were explored with other participants to determine their meaning. This process of on-going analysis continued throughout data collection process to ensure a deep understanding on this topic area from participants. I completed this process by documenting notes for myself in my field notebook as well as some of my general impressions. In the spirit of community based participatory research, I worked

collaboratively with BYP on the analysis process. I formed a core research team consisting of BYP youth and AmeriCorps members. All BYP youth were given the opportunity to take part in the analysis. I met with youth to explain the basic analysis process and the responsibilities of being on the team. They were given a week to decide if they would like to participate and BYP staff put together a list of those who expressed interest. Two AmeriCorps members approached me about taking part in the group. Once the group was formed, the four interested BYP youth, the two AmeriCorps members and I began meeting on Monday afternoons.

A sequence of interrelated steps of data analysis was used. These steps included reading, coding, displaying, reducing and interpreting (Ulin, Robinson & Tolley, 2004). Some of the analysis process occurred prior to the participation of the research team. Because I transcribed most of the interviews (all but 2), I began the immersion process with the data early on. I listened to the interviews several times (including the interviews I did not transcribe) and read through all of the interviews several times. Fieldnotes were also reviewed at this time. I made notes on the interviews and highlighted what seemed like important text. This process helped me gain a basic understanding of the data. The research team took part in analyzing six of the focus group and individual interviews. The particular interviews were selected for analysis based on those having the most robust discussions. During the first meeting, I provided education on qualitative research and the analysis process and then we started with working on the first interview. Additional education on the research process was provided throughout our work together. The analysis team had no problems understanding the analysis process and we proceeded with no concerns to note.

Over the course of 10 meetings, we read the interviews and focus groups and discussed the important sections of the interviews. While the AmeriCorps members and I made

contributions to the discussions and suggested possible ideas, the center of the conversation was around youth opinions on the interviews. The AmeriCorps members and I often asked for clarity and interpretation on meanings from the youth. The analysis meetings were always productive, as we all took the work seriously, and the youth seemed to feel heard in the process and were talkative. Everyone participated and shared their views freely. The youth shared that they found the work rewarding and that they were taking part in something important. I took detailed notes during these sessions and compiled the major themes based on our discussion. During our discussions, we shared what we heard previously and what kinds of things were new. Listening and writing notes during this process helped identify emerging themes.

After reading three interviews, we began developing and attaching codes and labels to the particular data that represents each theme. We used these codes as guides when reading the remaining interviews and left the process open so that we could add or change codes as we read more. This flexible process allowed us to discuss the text deeply and feel confident about what we felt was important. Because there were interviews not analyzed by the youth, I reviewed the interviews and attached the developed codes to the text. There were no discrepancies between the codes and the data in the remaining interviews. After the coding was complete, a process of analyzing the data related to each thematic area occurred. I was in charge of creating a document that listed the relevant themes and had portions of text that supported each theme (based on our discussions). This allowed us to further reflect on the findings. The data was then distilled to the essential points and specific text illustrating those points was noted; this included text from all data. Core meanings of thoughts, feelings, and opinions from the text were written in memos and examined, and together we interpreted the data. The final stage in this process included giving an overall interpretation of the study findings, showing how the themes relate to one

another and how these interrelated themes answered the research question in addition to explaining what these findings mean beyond this specific research study. This process was completed by me and was then shared with the research team for their feedback. Much of this work was based on the discussions with the research team.

This method of analysis was flexible, which allowed for returning to earlier steps of rereading, refining codes and rethinking the analysis throughout the process. This was completed both with the research team and some efforts were done individually. The research team was consulted when work was completed individually. These insights and interpretations offered by the research team enhanced this research by bringing in multiple perspectives.

3.6 COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH WITH THE BRADDOCK YOUTH PROJECT

As discussed previously, I utilized a community based participatory research (CBPR) framework in this dissertation. In this section, I provide an overview of the nine major tenets of CBPR put forth by Israel and colleagues (2003) and how the principles guided this research.

1. *Recognizing community as a unit of identity.* The Braddock Youth Project (BYP) was recognized as the community of identity for this dissertation. The youth at the BYP consider themselves and the staff a community and describe a unique identity as a community. This is discussed in more detail in the results section of this dissertation. This particular community embraced a youth leadership environment and strived to empower youth in the areas of leadership, community development and skill development. I worked within the community model of the program by acknowledging and respecting the community established at BYP. Youth were included in decision making and took leadership roles on the research team. As part of the research team, each youth ran at least one research meeting and all were treated as equal team members.

Youth were consulted on many of the decisions concerning the analysis and dissemination of the results. I was cognizant of the role of skill building in the community; thus, I provided skill building opportunities for professional development. I taught youth on the research team about qualitative research and prepared them for presenting the research data.

In terms of geographic community, the Borough of Braddock was the community where youth participated in community development. Conversations with youth focused on their community development work within the community and their sense of citizenship within this community, as well as their sense of responsibility to the community.

2. *Building on strengths and resources within the community.* All of my work with the BYP attempted to build on the strengths and resources of the program and youth. Focus groups and interviews were determined to be the methods of data collection in recognition of how articulate the youth are, as well as recognizing the need to build on the concept of respecting and honoring youth voice. Additionally, the interviews focused on the strengths of youth in their geographic community and the resources they bring to bear on the community. Youth were given the opportunity to share their views of their impact on the community as well as their hopes and dreams for their community. Again, because the BYP program utilizes a youth leadership model, youth were actively engaged as part of the research analysis team and held leadership roles on the team.

3. *Facilitating collaborative, equitable partnership in all phases of the research.* Both the youth and the staff collaborated on this research project in multiple ways. Every attempt was made to make this research process collaborative and to ensure equitable partnerships. All meeting times were selected based on the best times for the youth and

staff. All decisions pertaining to the data collection were made with the program (with input in some phases from youth) and data analysis was completed with a research team consisting of four interested youth and two AmeriCorps members.

In terms of the actual research process, Braddock Youth Project staff were involved from the initial conceptualization of the research and youth were involved shortly after the conceptualization. When conceptualizing this research, I had several meetings with the current director of the BYP and the incoming director to discuss ideas and determine their needs. At that time, the Braddock Youth Project was planning to host a conference for other youth-serving organizations on youth-led programming, and I was asked to participate on the planning committee. We discussed the possible areas for presentations, which included a youth-led presentation that I would organize with some of the youth from BYP. The initial focus group questions were formed based the discussions we had during those meetings and in preparation for the conference presentation. After the first couple of planning meetings, I shared the focus group questions I developed with the two directors to determine if I covered all of the topic areas of interest to them and that I highlighted the strengths of the youth in BYP. Suggestions were offered and the questions revised.

In the end, the presentation and the planned discussions with youth were exactly what I was interested in exploring in my dissertation. The directors presented the opportunity to the youth who agreed to participate in the conference presentation and to meet with me for a series of discussions and planning sessions. When meeting with the youth, I reiterated the intent of our time together. The youth involved in the discussion were youth interns. These youth had been involved in the program for many years including both

several summer programs and the school year program, so they had much to share on the topic. They were excited to participate in and prepare for the conference after the initial confusion about the intent was elucidated. After clarification, they were actively involved in the process.

I told the youth about my dissertation idea and the possibility of the interviews being used for my project. They were eager to share their stories and experiences in BYP and felt it was a worthwhile area of study. The youth appreciated my rationale for doing this work and agreed that youth voices deserve a presence in the literature on youth participation and programming. The discussion questions were shared with the youth and their feedback and suggestions were requested. The youth determined the best time for me to meet with them for discussions and to put together the conference presentation. Meetings were always held at times they suggested and I provided snacks. The goal of each meeting was to have as much youth input on the process as possible. My role was mainly to serve as a facilitator.

After the focus group was completed, I brought back to the group the main ideas of the discussion for their consideration. I confirmed the major themes with them. Once they were confirmed, we discussed how to best share these findings at the conference. The youth were active in designing the laying out the structure of the presentation and divided the areas for presentation based on their own expertise on topic areas. They assigned me the role of introducing the presentation. In my role, they asked that I specify that this was their presentation based on their experiences and views. We had discussions about the presentation, set the time limits for each section, practiced the talk and determined the dress code. Several of the students wanted to wear professional attire while others

wanted to dress in the BYP t-shirts. The youth determined that I should wear a BYP t-shirt and requested one for me. The BYP staff remained informed of our progress throughout, and I continued to meet with them as part of the planning committee. The presentation was successful and the youth were happy with the results. I held a final meeting with them after the presentation to celebrate their success. I brought pizza and drinks and we had a party.

The second round of focus group data collection was requested by the BYP staff. The director of the program shared that the youth enjoyed the process the prior year, especially having the opportunity to share their views, and asked that I return that summer to meet with youth. The program staff also felt that the data obtained the previous two summers was useful to them and they wanted to have additional data to support their grant applications and to be used for their advocacy work in response to budget cuts to youth programs. The director and another staff member met with me to talk about some information that would be helpful to them. I drew up possible questions and shared them with the staff. Suggested changes were made and times for focus groups were scheduled. In addition to meeting with the youth interns as done the previous year, the director asked if focus groups could be held with all youth involved in the BYP summer program. In total, six focus groups were conducted. One group was held with youth interns. Many of these youth had been involved with BYP for a number of years and some participated in the school year group. This group held a strong working knowledge of the program and has had time to develop an understanding of how the program has impacted them. The remaining five groups consisted of young youth, many of whom were involved for the first time in the BYP program. The youth were

interviewed during the last week of the summer program and were grouped based on the projects they worked on during the summer. The youth were informed by BYP leadership of the meetings, and I explained the purpose of the interviews. Youth were informed that their participation was voluntary. Most of the youth participated and two groups of youth thanked me for giving them a chance to articulate their thoughts and views. Several youth said that it was nice to be asked about their opinions and to have someone who recognized and appreciated what they were doing for their community. In the analysis phase, youth in the BYP were given the opportunity to partner on the analysis of the data. We formed a research team and the youth took the lead in discussing the pertinent themes from individual and focus group interviews and played leadership roles in the research meetings. The research team worked together to come up with a dissemination of results plan.

In the collaborative relationships at all phases, I attended to my own positionality and spent time reflecting on power issues. I remained mindful during all of my interactions with BYP staff and youth. I continually asked myself if I was acting as a partner in this process and asked on several occasions if others felt like the process was collaborative.

4. *Promoting co-learning and capacity building among all partners.* As stated earlier, the BYP had specific needs for information about the program. Research data benefits the program as it can be used in grant proposals and well as for program improvement. The youth involved on the analysis team echoed the need for quality data for grant proposals. Some of the youth had been involved in writing grant proposals for the BYP and many of the youth were invested in the program continuing. Many of the youth were interested in participating in focus groups and individual interviews because they were

invested in the program. The youth on the analysis team had a specific interest in the research process and wanted to learn about how others viewed the program. This research provided youth with education on qualitative research and experience carrying out data analysis. Aside from the knowledge gained, youth can add this experience to their resumes and college applications. Youth were also informed that I will provide them with letters of recommendation. BYP staff were interested reflecting on program improvement. I met with the staff after the 2011 and the 2012 interviews to provide feedback on areas of improvement. The program staff were instrumental in the design of research questions and some questions were included to provide the program with feedback. As an example, youth who graduated from the program were asked, “Are there some things you wish the program would have prepared you for?”

5. Disseminating findings and knowledge gained to all partners and involving all partners in the dissemination process. Prior to the completion of the dissertation, I created a document for the program with distinct categories and quotes from youth for their grant writing purposes. As stated earlier, the youth and I presented some of the findings from the first focus group completed at a conference sponsored by BYP. The research team started developing a plan for dissemination of the results early in the analysis process, and I asked youth to think about ways to utilize the findings from this research. Youth wanted the results to be used by the program for grant writing. Youth also suggested using some of the quotes from interviews on story boards used by the program when potential funders and other officials visit the BYP. This is in the process of being developed. The research team is interested in writing an op-ed article for one of the local newspapers on the topic of the benefits of youth programs that use a youth-led

community development model. The youth and I will begin drafting the article in the summer of 2013. All youth participating in the study will be provided with an overview of the results. Additionally, the analysis team will present the findings to all youth at BYP. They also will present some of the results during my dissertation defense. Other opportunities to share the findings are being considered. I have made a commitment to the program to share the results at their request in the future.

6. Emphasizing local relevance of public health problems and ecological perspectives that recognize and attend to the multiple determinates of health and disease. In the interviews and focus groups, youth had an opportunity to discuss the community of Braddock. For those living in adjacent impoverished communities, they articulated similar characteristics resulting from poverty. Several youth reflected on the impacts of poverty on their neighborhood and the structural barriers that impact the lives of citizens in the community- violence, child neglect and abuse, selling drugs, lack of businesses and amenities. Much of this is discussed in the findings section of the dissertation. Youth were aware of the importance of the BYP program for their own lives and the lives of other youth in the community (jobs for youth, financial assistance to their families, and preparation for future careers and college). They also see the significant positive impact the program makes on the community. For this reason, youth are invested in maintaining and growing the BYP.

7. Involving systems developed through a cyclical and iterative process. According to Burke and colleagues (in press), building flexibility, feedback and compromise is essential to the process of CBPR. All visits with staff and youth were scheduled according to the needs and demands of the program and the schedules of the youth. On

several occasions, BYP had to change previously scheduled meeting times or cancel planned visits. While this sometimes interfered with my timeline, it was the reality of working in a partnership. When we developed the analysis team, time from regular activities had to be renegotiated. The staff and the youth were willing to reschedule some program activities to secure a regular time for the analysis team to meet. This was only possible because both the staff and the youth were committed to this research.

Feedback was provided on my part by sharing updates of the process with staff and youth. This usually occurred during meetings or through phone calls, text messages and email. The youth who graduated from the program were also provided with updates on the process and the findings. The program staff provided me feedback on how the process was going with the youth based on their conversations with the youth.

Additionally, I asked youth at different phases of my involvement for the feedback. All in all the collaborative process went smoothly, with no major concerns noted. In fact, future projects are being considered.

8. *Integrate and achieve a balance between research and action for the mutual benefit of all partners.* When starting this process, the goal was to develop a project that would be of benefit to all involved. BYP staff were aware of my interest in the program and had agreed to allow me to conduct my dissertation research at BYP before this specific project was conceived. This research was influenced by previous volunteer work with the program. The focus group conducted during the summer of 2011 was designed for a youth-led presentation at a conference sponsored by BYP on youth-led programming. So from the inception, this research was designed to benefit all partners and intended to

inform action and practice. This remained the prevailing attitude throughout the process. Plans are being made for future action as a result of the research findings.

9. *Involving a long-term process and commitment.* A relationship with the BYP program was established in years prior to this dissertation research. I initially became involved with the BYP because my former colleague was hired to develop and run this program. She and I previously worked together on a youth gardening program. At that time, I was interested in understanding the impacts of urban gardening on youth and began to develop an interest in working with young people. Because I was working full-time and taking classes towards a Ph.D., I was only able to volunteer intermittingly with the program. First, I had volunteered with BYP for several years in the youth summer program before this research started. Several summers I volunteered with youth and staff in the gardens and attended the community block parties. One summer, I was involved in the youth summer program by leading youth in a Photovoice project related to the strengths and needs of their community. Youth, in their respective groups, were asked to take pictures of their community that represented both the strengths they saw in the community and areas where needs were present. The results of the Photovoice project were used as the starting point for youth to develop community-based projects. The data were also available to inform the Braddock Youth Project staff of youth perceptions of their community and how to target the program's future efforts for community development. This work was formative in developing my thinking about my dissertation research and solidified my relationship with the youth and staff of the BYP. Additionally, I participated in a video project developed by the media team. This project documented people's views of the Braddock Community. For several years, I invited

youth in the school year program to serve as guest lecturers in a university class I taught at the University of Pittsburgh in the Graduate School of Public Health. This long-term relationship over the course of four years created a trusting partnership which made this research possible. I will remain involved with the BYP after the completion of my dissertation. In fact, I will serve as an AmeriCorps member in the summer of 2013. This will allow me to work on several new projects with BYP and provide me time to work with youth on the dissemination of research results. Additionally, the youth involved have been informed that they can call on me at any time.

3.7 REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity is a necessary and critical process in both qualitative research and community-based participatory work. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) define reflexivity as “the process through which a researcher recognizes, examines and understands how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process” (p. 141). Recognizing that assumptions, bias and prejudice are part of the human conditions, Agar (1980, in Padgett, 2008) states, “the problem is not whether the researcher is biased; the problem is what kinds of biases exist and how can their operation be documented.” My goal here is to address how my identity and experiences might be reflected in the research process and findings. First, I reflect on how I came to the research question. Next, I discuss my relationship with the organization and how this may have impacted relationships with the youth.

I selected the topic of youth participation in community development based on my previous work with youth living in poverty. Approximately eight years ago, colleagues and I developed a summer gardening program for a group of high school youth. We had ten students from an urban school and involved them on an urban farm in a neighborhood near their school. I

was employed at the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh at the time and was assigned to work as the Project Director with a particular faculty member to plan and implement his projects. This was my first experience working with young people in any significant way. My prior research experience and social work practice involved adults. In truth, I had no real interest in working with teenagers and no experience in the field of community development. The knowledge I had about youth stemmed from public discourse, media, and my relevantly limited involvement with youth in community settings. This knowledge made youth an unappealing group; one to be avoided rather than engaged.

Ultimately, I enjoyed the gardening project with the youth, although I found it challenging. Luckily, my colleagues had a little more experience and had read some of the literature on working with youth. Because of the positive changes I saw in the youth, I did leave that summer with an interest in knowing more about how to use gardening as an intervention tool with young people. Shortly after completing the gardening project, I entered the doctoral program and, thus, began to think about research interests. Two areas, hands-on learning with youth and engaging urban youth in the environment, were of interest to me. Researching these areas led me to my academic interest in the following areas: youth gardening, understanding the need for youth spaces, and engaging youth in their own communities. Most of this work was conceptual and academic, except for some volunteer experiences at the Braddock Youth Project. In the end, the gardening experience, the volunteer work with the BYP, and watching young people in my own neighborhood informed my decision to do this work.

I have lived in what is considered a poor urban neighborhood for the past 10 years. The neighborhood suffers from blight, poor schools and ongoing violence and drug activity. When I moved to the neighborhood, there were few White residents in the area. I am a middle-aged,

White, single, heterosexual woman, with no children. I am also educated and currently middle class, although I grew up poor in a rural community. I began interacting with young people in my neighborhood as soon as I moved in. At that time, even after having worked with the youth on the gardening project, I bought into the dominant discourse about youth. I saw most youth in my neighborhood as trouble and believed they had no interest in the community. The youth who were doing well were the exceptions; these were some of the youth I knew because they were my immediate neighbors.

After taking a class on youth and family policy and reading more, I began to think differently about young people, especially youth of color living in poverty. I had many enlightening conversations with a friend, the former director of the BYP. As she told me more about what the youth were doing at BYP and their roles in leadership, I began to understand some of the progressive academic literature on youth in a real way. While this was a time of great shifting in my thinking about youth, their abilities, and youth empowerment and leadership, I am aware of the continued influences of societal conceptualizations of young people and my own historical beliefs about youth. Some of these biases, opinions and beliefs continue to play an underlying role in how I see youth. The old thoughts about youth and my newer understanding continue to be in conflict. Despite my best attempts to remain aware, mindful and address my biases as they arise, I know there are some that I am not cognizant of and that they influence my perceptions and actions. These biases are likely to have influenced the questions I chose to ask young people, my relationships with the youth and the analysis.

My entrée into the BYP was initially through the former director. Coming to the organization through an adult in a position of power affected how I was viewed by the youth. In more recent years, I was introduced to the youth by the current director. In both cases, when I

was introduced I was described by my association to the University of Pittsburgh, either in my professional role or as a doctoral student. Almost always, I was described as a researcher. Additionally, I was presented as someone with an interest in youth and youth programs, the BYP program and someone who has worked with BYP in the past. Some of the youth knew me from coming to present in the class I taught at a local university and others from my previous involvement at BYP. The way I was described to the youth influenced how I was viewed by the youth. It was never clear to me what those perceptions were or how they specifically impacted my relationship with the youth. I do know that most of the youth do not have negative associations with those coming from the University. To the best of my knowledge, they have had good experiences previously with those they interfaced with from the University.

My relationship with some of the older youth may have prompted other youth to view me in a certain light. Again, I do have explicit details. While I always attempted to downplay, but not negate, my status as educated and my association with the University, it did impact the way I was perceived. I attempted to diminish power relationships by being genuine and by making youth feel comfortable by smiling, chatting, asking questions, showing interest and letting the youth know I appreciated and respected the work they are doing in the community. My race and class, which differed from youth at the BYP, also had a bearing on how I was perceived. It should be noted that youth were accustomed to having relationships with diverse groups of people. The AmeriCorps members, other volunteers, and representatives from collaborating organizations hail from a range of backgrounds.

As a way to connect with youth, I did talk about living in my neighborhood. I do, however, acknowledge that my experience living in a poor community is not the same in any way to their lived experience. I benefit from the privilege of being White, educated, upwardly

mobile and from being an adult. Being an adult put me in a position of power. The power difference between being a young person and an adult can have a profound effect on one's experiences in the world. In our current adultist society, adults hold the majority of power and have a say over youths' actions.

Again in an attempt to balance power dynamics, I was careful to not control the conversations I had with youth. When I talked with youth on the research team about adultism and the practice of censoring youth voice, they confirmed this based on their own experiences. They also shared experiences of other young people occurring at their school. As I interacted with youth during interviews and focus groups, had informal conversations, and collaborated with youth on the research team, I held the notion of power differences in the forefront of my mind. I attempted to treat youth as partners and equals. I listened when they spoke, was careful not to interrupt someone when they were speaking, and tried not contradict or correct anything said to the best of my ability. My goal in relationships was equality: Yet, I am aware that my understanding of equality and that of the youth may have differed. Another challenge to equality was that, ultimately, this project was my research, with my deadlines, and I benefited the most from its completion. These realities were evident to the youth, the BYP staff and to me.

3.8 CONCLUSION

By including youth from the Braddock Youth Project in the conversation about youth participation in community development and including them in the research process, the understanding of the topic has been expanded. Youth voice, which is often absent in this discussion, has been given a place at the proverbial table. This exploratory qualitative research provided youth the opportunity to talk in-depth about their unique experiences, beliefs and

opinions on the topic. Because youth also participated in the analysis of the findings, this research is grounded in the understanding of youth on this topic.

The next four chapters detail the findings from the individual interviews, focus group discussions and observations of the program. The chapters are organized around the mission statement of the BYP. Each chapter represents a section of the mission statement. The decision to organize the data in this fashion grew organically out of data analysis meetings with the research team. In the course of analysis, one of the research team members pulled up the mission statement to compare how some of the major themes identified fit with the mission statement. I later came back to this idea when organizing the findings into chapters. The title of each of the four Findings chapters offers a description of what is in the chapter. Chapter 4, “Harness the Energy and Creativity of Youth” speaks to the development of the youth as a result of participating in BYP. Chapter 5, “Seeks to Foster Skills That Will Aid Youth in Advancing Toward Positive Life Outcomes,” discusses the skills youth gain in the BYP program. In Chapter 6, “Promote Positive Culturally Relevant Change in the Community”, youth share why the BYP is a relevant and worthwhile way to spend their time. Chapter 7, “Providing Meaningful and Sustainable Community Development Projects,” details the impacts youth have on the community.

4.0 FINDINGS

“HARNESS THE ENERGY AND CREATIVITY OF YOUTH”

This chapter focuses on the development of youth as a result of participating in the BYP. In this chapter, BYP members discuss the opportunities they have to grow and learn from their participation in the BYP, the physical and emotional safety they feel at the BYP, the development of youth voice, and the desire for, and pride youth have in, earning their own money. BYP harnesses the energy and creativity of youth by first providing opportunities for youth to gain knowledge and competencies in a variety of areas. Because the BYP provides youth with a safe setting to explore and try new things, they can be creative and use their energy in making community change. They also are encouraged to develop and exert their voice. This allows youth to voice their opinions about community needs and offer and implement creative solutions to improve the community. Because BYP provides stipends to youth for their work, youth are able to take part in community development work, rather than spending their time in other ways. Youth, especially those with limited financial resources, need to earn money, and BYP provides them a setting where they are valued for their contributions.

4.1 “A POSITIVE IMPACT ON PEOPLE WORKING HERE.”

It is clear the BYP has a positive impact on BYP members in numerous ways. Youth have the opportunity to grow and learn at the BYP, as well as gain a multitude of practical and interpersonal competencies that help in daily life and prepare them for the future.

Youth expressed learning a myriad of new things while working at the BYP. Exemplifying the range of knowledge and competencies youth amass, one youth shared his personal experience:

I mean, it's just everything that they teach you. As far as like we always used to have like, work etiquette, etiquette classes, like how to set up a dinner table ... or safe sex. We had something on that... The classes that they teach you - Get up and Move, how to be healthy... They teach you how to be more personable, if you're a little out of our shell, like, the whole thing with like, icebreakers, like that first day where everybody doesn't know each other. Teach you how to be more outgoing. Get what you want to get. Work hard, work hard.

Another youth discussed his experience: "BYP made me responsible and independent for real, for real. I mean 'cause like I got my first job at 14 ...It was just a positive impact on people working here. They help you with everything you need help with. School, grades ..." It was said the BYP provides youth opportunities that "most adults [in their community] never even had." BYP members learned "stuff to get them on the right track like. It can help you figure out what you want to be in life and what career, what you want to go to college to major in, whatever." One of the graduated youth discussed gaining a strong knowledge base as a result of being in the program. Additionally, he felt he could still call both the past director and current director of the BYP if he needed help:

I definitely wouldn't know a lot of things that I know. Like, as far as being more – having more knowledge. Like a general knowledge aspect of everything that I know, or how to go about certain things, or even like, as far as like, I know I could call [previous director], even if I needed something she'll, if she can help, she'll help; same thing with [current director].

This young man went on to talk about how the program provided youth with assistance they would not be able to gain elsewhere. He said the BYP can support young people in areas their parents may not have the knowledge or resources to do so:

There's some people, like I said, where their parents might not even know where, hey, you know, how to get this, like, the networking aspect, or something. Like, how can this go? How do you do this? Or how do you fill out your taxes? Like they, they help with that also. There's a lot of things where, like, you learn from the program, that not even your parents or people around you might not be able to help you with. The BYP has resources that are not readily available to people in the community. The

BYP grants young people access to these resources:

BYP has resources that most people don't have. Like, I don't have a computer. I had a computer whenever I was that age, but I didn't have the expensive video production equipment on it, so even if I wanted to do it, I would have never had that – I would have never had that opportunity.

As stated above, youth are aware that the BYP continues to assist and support them even after they complete the program. During visits to the BYP, I observed one former BYP member returning for assistance from the program staff. A young woman, who recently graduated from high school and finished her time at the BYP, returned for assistance with job applications. The staff helped her complete her applications and assisted her with obtaining documents she needed to complete the applications. I saw her two consecutive weeks working to get her applications out to employers. I later learned she was offered a job at a regional hospital.

In terms of learning, youth expressed openness to new ideas, feeling prepared for the next phase in life and inspired to learn and grow. One youth explained, “Also, I think BYP makes you more open to trying new things, like food, other people's cultures, different races. It really makes you diverse. It really helps you become more prepared for your next level in life.” Sharing his experience, another youth offered, “Things people should know about BYP is that BYP inspires people to do stuff, and BYP makes people think and takes us, we are 15 and 14, and teaches us responsibility. It's like going to school but getting paid for it, and you actually learn something out of it.” One youth said the program impacted his life in the following ways: “being outspoken, working hard, [and] going to school.” He went on to say:

Like I said, man, it's just made me a better person, in all. I just think that I have better morals within myself than I did before I joined the program. I think that one of the biggest things that I had trouble with, like I said, was my language, and ... not thinking before I talk. I don't know what BYP did to me, but they just, like, I thought before I said everything. And started doing things a certain way. And I started ... just being, like, just more aware of, 'oh that's good what I'm doing.' 'Oh, that's bad.' 'Oh, I should change this up,' or something like that. It just, I don't know, it just gave me a better feel of how to live life and how to do something. And some people might not say it changed them like that, but for me, it was just like a big weight lifted off my shoulders whenever I was – whenever I had my foot in the door, it was just like, I gotta get all the way in, and once I got all the way in, and it was just like, a huge weight lifted off my shoulders, and like, yeah, I'm here to stay, until my years are up, or whatever.

When talking about how the BYP impacted them, one youth expounded on her experience:

I think it makes them gain more respect for themselves and gain more knowledge; many more knowledge about like, life in general. Like because I know before BYP like, I thought that graduating high school was the biggest accomplishment. But now I see that going to college and picking a career and making something of yourself, that's the biggest accomplishment, not just graduating high school. That's when your life just begins.

Youth described a host of new competencies acquired as a result of their involvement at the BYP. While these competencies vary widely, BYP members reported them to be relevant and useful. The competencies will be discussed in terms of practical and interpersonal knowledge.

4.1.1 Practical knowledge

The practical knowledge youth reported attaining, while working at the BYP, are detailed in Table 4. Among other things, youth recounted learning about gardening, interviewing others, using computers, cooking, editing videos, and job readiness.

Table 4. Practical Knowledge

Knowledge Areas	Youth Responses
Gardening, Nutrition and Cooking	The garden, I never really gardened before (many youth)
	I've learned a lot about growing things
	Learned about different plants
	This is my first time actually eating vegetables and stuff from a garden. I never did that
	I learned how to cook
	Cook healthy things
Computer	Using Apple computers
Teaching	I learned how to plan and build a class, lessons plans and do the shopping list
Video Production	Learned how to interview people
	I learned how to make videos
	Edit videos
	We learn how to try new things
Writing	How to write better
	How to write letters
Health	Oral hygiene, tooth brushing
	Different exercises
Job Skills	Fill out applications
	Job experience
	Prepare for future jobs
	Work readiness skills
	How to present yourself at a job
	Interview skills
	Networking
	I designed t-shirts
Creativity	Arts and crafts
	Build furniture

As for practical knowledge, many youth talked about the impacts of gardening. Most youth never gardened prior to coming to the BYP but were glad to build their knowledge in this area. One of the youth involved in the BYP for years in a range of capacities said he gained enough gardening knowledge to build a back yard garden for himself: “Well, let me turn this side into a vegetable garden, I know how to do it from BYP.” Other youth said they would use

the gardening skill they gained throughout their life, with one of the newer youth admitting to already starting a garden at home. Youth saw gardening as an important life skill. A youth said, “I think so because everyone is going green and stuff and that might be a useful life skill to grow different things.”

Youth discussed the importance of the practical knowledge they learned at the BYP. One youth said, “Yeah, I learned tons of things from here. Especially like, the video production, the PSAs. I think it was the first winter we did a PSA that aired on like, ESPN, BET, stuff like that. I mean that teaches you all the little skills.” In terms of health and prevention, one youth talked about some of the information he learned: “They tell you about smoking and bullying. [They] prevent us from doing the things we are not supposed to do.” Youth are exposed to knowledge and experiences they would not learn elsewhere. One youth shared, “It opens kids up to new things too, like different things. Like a kid will come in and will know nothing about organic farming or nothing about how to use a camera and nothing about entrepreneurship but throughout the programs they get different [experiences].” Youth also reported gaining knowledge in writing, self-expression, presenting information, professional knowledge, and developing a genuine interest in learning:

I learned about cameras and stuff. And like at the beginning, I was like writing little short paragraphs... but now my paragraphs be longer, longer, longer because I have more ideas.

I’ve gained a lot of skills that might not be so refined, like my writing. Like the writing I’ve done for the Watz Up Doc off and on, writing Straight Talk for the staff and now for my youth...I feel like BYP’s definitely made me more interested in learning... when I first joined in the 8th grade, I was just like I can’t wait to finish high school and just like get done with it, and as the years went on, I know that I still want to learn things. Like I want to be an EMT and learn about gardening and plants and biology, stuff like that.

I've gotten better at presenting stuff. Presenting information, 'cause in 9th grade I'd have a heart attack if I went up in front of the class and had to present something. You could see me visibly shaking, but like now I still get nervous but I can get through it. I know I'm probably going to do okay and stuff.

Developing knowledge was important to youth. One of the graduated youth talked about the photography and videography knowledge he gained from his work at the BYP. He was so proud of what he learned. "I did all of that. I was the best." This was important because this young man struggled in school and talked about his challenges with learning. The things he learned in the BYP bolstered his self-esteem. Additionally, he was able to work with a local artist on projects. He said, "Those were the best times." He said he enjoyed the work he did at the BYP. He enjoyed learning.

4.1.2 Interpersonal knowledge

Youth reported gaining critical interpersonal knowledge while at the BYP. Table 5 documents the interpersonal knowledge youth talked about in the context of interview and focus group discussions.

Table 5. Interpersonal Knowledge

I think it kind of helps us mature too.
Just talking to people.
How to be more responsible.
How to work together as a team.
Develop a better attitude.
To be more respectful.
To act better.
To be a more positive person.
You got to be well-mannered.
How to be more of a grown-up.
How to be more of a man.

Youth expressed developing as positive people as a result of being at the BYP. Several youth said the overall goal of the BYP is "to make us a better person." As seen above, youth mentioned growing into being "a more positive person" and developing "a better attitude." One

youth added, “I wasn’t positive before I came here.” Being involved in the BYP also seems to help youth maintain this positivity. As a BYP member shared, “Yeah, it definitely helps you stay out of trouble and keep your mind off of other things; keeps your mind on a positive attitude.” This sense of positivity extends beyond the physical structure of the BYP setting and into everyday life. As stated directly above and by other young people, BYP improves the home lives of youth. BYP members also talked about maintaining the positive attitudes and positive behaviors promoted and expected at BYP in the community. One youth shared this experience: “They told us, that even when we are not working at BYP, we are still representing them even during off hours. So whatever you do affects the people at BYP. So I stay positive even when I’m not working.” Youth further discussed the BYP’s role in prevention. Several youth in a focus group agreed that the BYP prevents youth from getting into trouble. Another youth said the BYP does not prevent things, that rather, youth are influenced to do better: “To me it’s just basically, it’s not preventing anything ‘cause there’s not much it can stop. But it can influence them to do better things...Influence to do the right thing.”

Personal responsibility was cited as another important area where youth developed, as a result of being at the BYP. One youth shared, “I think it helps me be more responsible. Now that I have a job, my mom and dad let me do just about anything I want, because they know I’m doing good. They don’t have to really worry about me that much either, you know.” Another youth shared:

I’m more responsible, like going on to college. I do my work and my homework by myself. Like back then I won’t have did it. BYP helped me understand how important it was, so it helped me that way. I want to go to school. I want to have a job. I want to make the community better. Things like that.

Youth credited the program for introducing them to new people and expanding their social networks. One youth shared, “You get to meet people too. Normally, I would be shut up

in my room all summer trying to avoid my family.” Another youth said, “Yeah. It was a lot of fun. I made a lot of friends. I can say that I made a lot of friends.” BYP members have a chance to interact with other youth they may not have known if it were not for the BYP:

I think meeting new people is also really important, ‘cause I know like the people I’m with now besides [name of youth] probably I wouldn’t get to spend time with them before. When you come here, it doesn’t matter what grade you’re in, what type of classes you’re in. People just all come together... You also get to speak to people outside of your school; that go to other schools.

Other youth talked about how the BYP exposed them to a diverse group of people. As one youth shared, “BYP can bring different groups of close people together, ‘cause like everybody staying around here is different nationalities and different groups and everything. But I feel like we all have connection to each other.” New ideas are explored when working within a diverse group. One youth said:

As far as like, working with people, you learn, you learn a lot from working with different people. You learn what they’re thinking. Or sometimes if they’re thinking something that you’re not, like, “hey, I hadn’t thought of it like that.” And now you have that aspect of thinking.

Youth talked about the importance of working as part of a team and noted they enjoyed working in a group. One youth, who felt the BYP makes them “a better person,” because they learned how to work in a team, shared, “I usually do things on my own, but now I learned how to work with a team.” One youth shared not really enjoying listening to other people’s ideas. But through her work at the BYP, she is trying to be more open and receptive. She said, “I’m trying to learn how to compromise and work with other people.” Another youth said the opportunity to work in close collaboration with other youth makes them “more open to being with other people, for real.” One of the graduated youth shared being “glad” she participated in the program, saying “It was very beneficial. It helped me grow as an individual. It helped me grow in my skills in the community. It helped me learn how to deal with people. It was very beneficial for me.” In

talking about the transition from working alone to working with others, she said: “I’m so used to doing things on my own, so I’m trying to take charge and trying to help. I remember doing that [working as part of a team] and that was important.” This youth discussed how being a BYP member taught her team building, communication and value the perspectives of others:

BYP, it was a really good program. I was there... from 10th grade to 12th and the program itself, I learned a lot. It helped me learn team building and communication. I believe the program actually helped me to mature because of the years in the program I matured like learning stuff, learning not to act childish, while at the same time I was learning things in the community...It was nice to meet different people and to see different people’s, you know, perspectives.

In terms of improving their communication skills, one youth said, “It’s [BYP] helping me communicate better with people.” Another youth added:

It’s like social too ... I know it really affected me a lot. I have okay conversations but, at BYP, I learn a lot. We watch a lot of documentaries, and I go home and I sit there and talk to my step-dad about stuff I learned. I feel like I’m grown talking with him and actually know what he’s talking about. BYP helps a lot because it teaches you so much. Like, when you go out there and speak to other people and actually know what you are talking about. And I love that.

4.2 “YOU CAN DEFINITELY FEEL SAFE HERE.”

The concept of safety was discussed in terms of both emotional and physical safety. One youth shared the general sentiment of many BYP youth when saying, “you can definitely feel safe here.” When discussing this topic, one of the youth remembered a 2009 BYP survey where BYP participants were asked about safety; this youth said the results of the survey were: “Out of 100 kids, 100 kids say they feel safe coming to BYP.” Her interpretation of the results was, “so, I think this is a safe place and a caring place for kids that don’t have anybody and feel like they are not nothing.” She also talked about how the BYP is a good place for young people, especially those “kids that don’t have a family that cares.” She felt that young people were cared for at the

BYP. Based on interview and focus group discussions, BYP members seem to continue to feel safe there.

In terms of emotional safety, several youth talked about how the BYP program is a positive place that makes individuals feel happy. The positive attitude becomes contagious and engenders a new way of experiencing the world. The positivity and openness creates a safe emotional environment for youth. BYP members shared:

And one thing that I like too is it's so positive. It's like you can come in here on your worst day and everybody is so smiley and happy. You don't got no choice but to be happy too. So I think that's a good thing too. It's so positive.

It's just positive. They give you a positive attitude [agreement from others in the group].

It goes back to the positivity thing that [name of youth] was saying. Once you get it, it sticks with you for real. You know how to keep a positive attitude. You know some people might know you. Keep a positive attitude ... It just... it grows on you. I don't know everybody has a positive attitude and it changes people. I don't even know how but everybody... It changes you.

Youth described people smiling frequently as creating the positive environment at the BYP. One youth said, "Just being around like everyone's smiling." Other youth agreed that the smiling and positivity at the BYP impacts young people in meaningful ways. One youth, in a focus group, shared "if you come to work mad you will definitely be happy" after spending time at the BYP. There was agreement by other focus group members and someone reiterated it is "always happy" at the BYP. If you are feeling down or sad, many youth agreed that "someone always tries to make you smile or laugh." I witnessed this behavior on several occasions when visiting. Both staff and other youth would approach someone when it appeared they were sad or upset. Someone would do something silly, like make a joke or bump the person in a playful way, to make them smile. I also observed both youth and adults ask others if they were ok or if something was wrong. The gestures always seemed sincere and offered in a caring and gentle

way. During the school year program, when I was meeting with the research team, I also observed a young person coming to work seemingly upset and saw their mood change as a result of being at the BYP. The youth talked with other youth and started doing their work and seemed to be in a better place after a short period of time.

The positive environment of the BYP was noted to be a preferable environment to being in the streets and possibly getting involved in illicit activities. One youth said, “Yeah, it beats like, everyone smiling in here, beats like just standing on the block with your boys every day. Not making no money. I mean you can make money on the block but you got to have clean cash, you know.” While the BYP provides a safe place for young people to be in the community, it also offers youth a safe alternative for earning money.

The BYP provides a setting for youth to be silly, playful and take emotional risks in a safe space. One of the youth said that “the silly games” they play are fun and make people laugh. This youth also said, “our staff members are pretty funny, so we laugh. It definitely makes your day.” One of the young people who graduated from the program talked about how the games and ice breakers played in the program helped him develop confidence in himself. He shared, “I’m not scared to be myself like getting up in front of people.” He talked about how when youth first start the program, they shy away from playing the games so as to not be embarrassed, and because they want to look cool. The games are intended to reveal information about yourself and to “make yourself look stupid.” However, as youth acculturate to the program, it no longer matters. He said, “You just, everyday you are just waiting for the next game. You are ready to play and you play it full-heart[ed].” Attributing his involvement at the BYP, this young man expressed feeling more willing to put himself in situations where he felt uncomfortable and

more vulnerable. The example he provided was taking part in a flash mob where he posed for five minutes on the main avenue in Braddock. He shared, “I would never have did that.”

Confirming the idea that the BYP encourages youth to move beyond their comfort zone, a youth talked about how the BYP promotes “getting you stepping out of your box.” This youth mentioned a team building activity at a local camp. He said, “I was afraid of heights. I’m up there, I’m on a tightrope ...I’m on this tight rope, shakin’, but I was up there. I mean... it just helps you grow.” These kinds of experiences happen as a result of the trust and security that the BYP affords to young people. It allows them to take risks and try new things. This young man, as well as several other youth, indicated they would not have participated in an interview with me if not for their experience at the BYP. He said, “Yeah, even now like before I was never a big talker so an interview like this. I never would have said too much. Now I’m more comfortable with talking.”

Participation in the BYP helps youth build trusting relationships and provides young people with opportunities to create meaningful relationships. One youth shared, “I would say BYP helped me for real. Usually, I don’t trust people but like now, I don’t know, I trust these people more than I would trust other people.” Describing the BYP, another youth commented, “everybody’s not against you.” Another young person shared that some of the youth were sad as the summer program was coming to a close, because they received support from people at the program. She said, “... some of the kids like really be sad that it’s over because like we are all that they got, for real like. I know like especially one we got in my group he’s like, he doesn’t want to go home sometimes. It’s like really sad, you know.” She believed the program has “a dramatic impact” on this young person by providing a positive environment. Other youth discussed how she and her BYP colleagues have “a real bond with each other.” She considers

people in the program to be “like a big happy family.” Other youth shared similar feelings. One youth described the BYP as “a second home.” Another youth shared, “It’s kind of like a home away from home, if you think about it.” At the 2013 BYP Project Showcase, an area was designated for folks to leave messages for the Braddock Youth Project. Two BYP members left messages on the board, along with their names. The messages said, “I love my family at BYP” and “I love it here. BYP is my family.” During this event, I was impressed by the interactions between the youth. While I have seen them spend time together in the past and appear to enjoy each other, they really were having fun together this evening. Youth walked around talking, smiling, joking and, just generally, seeming to have fun together. Later in the evening, they sat around together chatting and laughing. They looked natural and comfortable together, and there was a closeness about them.

Because the BYP promoted a safe environment, several youth discussed how it served as a place where young people can transform. In one of the focus groups, a youth shared, “I feel like you could get the worst kid in the program, like a kid constantly in trouble, constantly doing something. If you put them in BYP, I guarantee at the end they have changed. And they’ll have something that they learned about themselves, and they’ll have way more respect for themselves. I think this is a *GOOD* program. Like, it works.” Another youth spoke the word “truth” in response to this statement, thereby acknowledging their agreement. A different youth then shared this in response to the discussion: “It’s more than work”; suggesting that the BYP offers young people more than a work opportunity. Another youth (one of the graduated youth) talked about how both the staff and other youth at the BYP were like a big family and how these close relationships helped him in his life. When he came to the BYP, he was able to disengage from a negative social circle and develop strong friendships with youth in the program. He said, “it was

just a whole bunch of people that was just there for me. We was all like a big family, that how I always pictured it, like especially in the wintertime. It was just like a big family; just a small group of 17, 20 of us, and we all knew each other pretty well.” He explained “that always helped me out.”

As part of their community outreach and service, the BYP offers community events and other activities to Braddock residents. These events ensure a safe place for people to gather and enjoy the company of others. One youth talked about how young people living in the community can come to the community events and bring their younger siblings. This young person shared:

And I think a lot of parents in Braddock work. A lot. And like, say if they got a 13 year old kid, they’re just old enough to babysit their little sibling or whatever. They could bring them to BYP and have a good time, and they won’t really have to worry about their little siblings, ‘cause it will be in a safe environment and stuff like that. So, it helps in a lot of ways, and it provides a lot of safety for the community.

As evidenced by the statement above, the BYP provides a safe haven for the community. It is more than solely a safe place for young people. It was described as a safe place for “basically anybody that comes here.” As “there’s really not a lot of safe places” in the community, the BYP allows people to retreat from the realities of the community. One youth talked about the zero tolerance attitude established at the BYP, which makes people in the community reluctant to commit crimes around the BYP.

Youth talked about how having young people out in the neighborhood provided an added layer of safety in the community. During an informal conversation with one of the youth, I learned that BYP members worked on the playgrounds in the summer to allow younger children an opportunity to come out and play. They made sure the playgrounds were safe quarters, as well as provided fun activities for the kids. On another note, one youth talked about how when

he and some other youth were out working in the neighborhood they came upon a gun. He shared, “[this] could have been dangerous if it got in the hands of a little kid or something. So, I just think it’s just, provide safety.” He also stated how meaningful it is to feel secure while at the BYP. “I mean, you know that when you’re at BYP, no one’s gonna ‘cause you harm. So, that’s just a gift. That’s just a nice comfort feeling to have.”

4.3 “IT TAUGHT ME NOT TO BE SHY AND JUST LET MY VOICE BE HEARD.”

In interview and focus group discussions, youth talked about how the BYP provides a safe and supportive space for young people to develop their voice. It was said the BYP helped folks “break out of their shells” and encouraged youth to be “less shy.” Youth, new and more seasoned, described how their involvement helped them to develop their voice. One youth said, “Yes, I feel like BYP has made me a lot more outgoing and less shy.” Another youth shared, “I used to be shy. When I first came here, I was like I am not going to be able speak to everybody. Yeah, it taught me not to be shy and just let my voice be heard.” Youth talked about being more open, having a willingness to communicate more, and being able to talk in front of people:

I think it made me more open.

So I can learn how to communicate more, ‘cause I never used to talk but now I talk more.

When I first started, it’s not like I’ve been doing this for a long time. When I first started, I definitely be shy. I don’t like talking in front of people, and now I share with people.

The process of moving from being shy to coming out their shell seemed to signify that youth gain confidence and knowledge in communication. I noticed a marked difference between youth new to the program and those with more experience. This was evident in the focus groups discussions. Older youth appeared, for the most part, to feel more confident in talking and answering questions than those new to the program. In one of the focus groups, a young woman new to the BYP appeared awkward and nervous when she spoke. She could not maintain eye

contact, was constantly moving, and put her hands directly in front of her mouth as she spoke. Even after I built rapport with the group, she continued this way of communicating. I saw her during the end of the summer Project Showcase, where she and her group shared their work on the Café. During the presentation of her work, she exhibited the same behaviors while talking. While she exemplified an extreme case, especially with putting her hands in front of her mouth while talking, her lack of confidence in her voice was similar to other younger youth, (but not all), who displayed less confident communication as well. They usually spoke in lower voices, answered in shorter sentences, maintained limited eye contact, and talked in the direction of the floor. The youth, who have previously participated in the program, generally spoke with more confidence, maintained eye contact, and spoke in more depth.

As older BYP members serve as mentors and role models to the younger youth, they play an instrumental role in helping them develop their voice. I observed older youth supporting younger BYP members in developing their voice during the 2012 summer program. At the end of the program, all youth sat in the “highs and lows” circle and were asked to share their opinions on the best part of the summer and the worse part of the summer. The younger members often spoke quietly and sometimes with their head’s lowered. The older youth would ask them to speak up by saying things, such as “Talk louder. We want to hear what you have to say.” The older youth were encouraging and would prompt youth to share their views by reminding them that they had something important to say. Prior to this observation, one of the youth interns shared the following about the younger youth coming to the BYP:

I think it’s going to break them out of their shell, ‘cause they’re real shy like. Especially when they first get here, they’re real shy and we start trying to open them up like and make them speak they mind. Let them know their opinions, they really count. They really matter, so whatever they got to say, you really want to listen. Hear it out.

The BYP provides youth a sense of security to be able to express themselves and interact with people in new ways. One youth said, “If you are a shy person, you really won’t be shy after this.” Other young people discussed how their involvement in the program expanded their abilities and willingness to use their voice. As stated by one youth, “This program, it helped me a lot. It was the same as with [name of youth]. I was real shy. I wouldn’t talk to nobody and now, like this morning, I gave a tour. I would never have did that on my own. I did most of it [the tour].” A similar view was shared by a young person who graduated from the program. “I’m a pretty quiet person, and I feel like BYP it’s kind of forced me to meet new people and stuff, which is a good thing.” Another youth reiterated how the BYP helped overcome being shy and how this contributed to their professional development:

This program just made me so much more professional like when I first came in here I was so like shy. I didn’t want to talk to nobody. I was in my own little zone. Now I’m just open to everybody like and anybody can ask me anything about the program, and I’ll do the best I can to answer like. I just learn so much from this too.

In the Safety section of the findings, I discussed how youth felt emotionally safe in the program which allowed them to take risks. I provided an example of a youth being comfortable talking with me in an interview. This concept is also discussed in this section on Voice. Youth were able to gain their voice after being in the BYP and felt comfortable talking with me in an interview. This would not have been true several years prior. Another youth confirmed this when saying, “Like four years ago, it would be kind of hard to talk just you and me in this room and stuff. Now I feel like I know a lot about BYP, and I’ve been here so long I feel like an expert here.” Young people realized the need to be able to speak up in the work they are doing. “Yeah, definitely and made me more involved in the other stuff and voicing my opinion, because the garden is not just about the plants.” This youth talked about needing to communicate and

collaborate with colleagues to share ideas about how to run the gardens. Using their voice and speaking with others is essential to professional development.

When youth develop and utilize their voice, they are capable of developing into leaders. Several of the youth who graduated from the BYP presented examples of how they used their voice. In one instance, the youth intern position was created by a group of BYP members who lobbied for young people taking on leadership roles in the program. He said “our voices came up” and:

Where we were like, ‘hey, we should have these interns’ or ‘hey, we should have this.’ Like, these returning people, they kept coming back, we’re like, ‘well, why are we keeping these returning people at the same level as the new people? They could teach... the new people how to do stuff.’ Once they started with the interns, I became one for video production, so, for like, the next three summers, three years, I was – I had to lead. I was teaching... leading by example... now I’m a supervisor at [Name of International Business]. So, they – I mean, it teaches you a lot. It teaches you a lot, prepares you.

Several youth talked about the development of new programs at the BYP based on the suggestions of BYP members. Youth felt comfortable voicing their ideas and opinions in the setting and had enough confidence as well as security in the program to know that they would be listened to and taken seriously. A second example given by a graduated youth involved this youth responding to a situation where a staff person “wasn’t taking enough authority and was kinda letting the team leaders run [a particular program].” After conspiring with another BYP member, this youth approached the program coordinator about applying for this staff position. He “announced” his idea to the director and in the end became the coordinator of that program. This is another example of a youth having the confidence, knowledge and leadership ability to be able to speak up and put their idea forth.

One of the youth talked about the importance of youth voice and in youth having an active role in the program. They said, “Let us get our views out.” Some of the youth articulated

having innovative ideas about how to make positive changes in their communities and in the lives of those around them. They said youth simply need adults to listen to them and help them in achieving their goals.

4.4 “WANTED MY OWN MONEY IN MY OWN POCKETS.”

BYP members discussed the importance of having paid work and feeling proud to have earned their own money. A focus group discussion revealed the sense of pride. One youth commented, “You get your check and you see your name on it, and you get to buy your own stuff.” A response to this statement was “that feels good.” In agreement another answered, “Yeah, it does.”

Not having to ask parents for money was a benefit to having paid work and important to youth. One youth shared, “You don’t have to keep asking your parents for money. You know you actually did something this summer.” In agreement another youth offered, “Feels good. It feels like I don’t have to beg to my mom and ask her for money. I don’t like that.”

Some youth expressed feeling compelled to have a job at a young age, so they could earn their own pocket money. One youth said, “I was like 16, 15 and kinda wanted my own money in my own pockets. There was really no other spot that would hire you. No other place in Pittsburgh that would hire you at the age, so I started with BYP.” In other circumstances, youth needed to earn money to help their family with expenses. In one of the early focus groups, youth talked about needing to have paid work to support their family. This concept was unexpected, as I had not considered the importance of youth having paid work in my early thoughts about youth and community development. This concept was confirmed in future focus groups. The money youth earned from their work at the BYP impact their families in many ways. Some youth used

their money to purchase their own school clothes and supplies, because some parents have limited financial resources to make such purchases:

For me, I have to buy my clothes. My mom can't buy me school clothes. I help out my mother a lot and my uncles, too. She only has to buy my little brother's school clothes and shoes. I put more money in her pocket for her to pay bills and stuff.

Yeah, it can really help their parents out. 'Cause I got this job at 14 and my mom ain't never really have to buy me nothing like. 'Cause I had my own stuff, so it was one less kid she had to worry about.

Like all these summers that I had to go to school like, I bought all my school clothes. And my mom, she was really like crying like I'm sorry you had to do that, but at the end that's what has to happen like. If your age working limit then you got to work. You got to go bring some income in the house.

These statements were made during focus group discussions, with other youth in the groups affirmed these experiences. The youth serving on the analysis team talked a lot about this category, and how important the income youth earn is to their families. They spoke both from personal experience as well as from those of their co-workers and youth in the summer program.

Several young people discussed the lack of jobs for youth in the community, and how young people need to help support their families. One youth said, "It's like there's no jobs for youth and there's no income they can have. They can't help their families like. What other options that's good that they can do?" As mentioned in the Safety section, the BYP provides youth with a safe environment to earn money. In response to being asked about policy changes and budget cuts to youth programs, BYP members felt policy makers need to understand how this impacts families:

And I feel like they don't know how much by cutting the funds affected like people and their families. I know like another reason in 2009, I joined to help my mom pay for bills. And I know a lot of kids out there, they are struggling with their moms, you know what I mean. It's like do we pay the electricity bill or do we eat? And I know a lot of kids that do that too and it's sad. A lot of kids can't help they mom's no more.

That's how it affects your family, 'cause if the youth don't have a job because they cut, they completely cut BYP all these youth don't have a job. All these youth can't provide for themselves, so they got to rely on their parents again and that's like more stress on the parents. I know my mom was happy when my little brother went to Virginia, and got him a summer job, and I got mine so all she's got to worry about is my step-brother. She's so happy she only has to worry about one. I know all three of us, that's really stressful on her. She had to work overtime because she's the only one working. So I know it's more stress on the parents if they cut back.

One youth shared an interesting perspective on the concept of paid work, believing that community work is valuable, people should be paid to do the work. He said, "I feel like if you really want to see your community do better, as a young kid, truthfully I can see why no one wants to do it for free." He relayed what he learned from the former program director which was one of the best ways to motivate people to change the community is to pay them for their work. He said a valuable lesson he learned as a young person is "money's power."

4.5 CONCLUSION

Youth articulated that the BYP had a positive impact on the development of youth who participated in the program. When youth have a safe setting to spend time with adults and other youth who care about and support them, they feel comfortable learning, trying out new experiences and voicing their opinions. Have a paid experiences make a youth-based program accessible to young people who want and need to earn money. These factors increase the likelihood that youth can successfully offer their energy and creativity to the community.

5.0 Findings

“SEEKS TO FOSTER SKILLS THAT WILL AID YOUTH IN ADVANCING TOWARD POSTIVE LIFE OUTCOMES”

This chapter of the findings highlights the skills youth developed through their involvement in the BYP program. Youth affirmed learning work skills, school support and college preparation, networking, and leadership. These skills not only prepared youth for a successful future but also improved the quality of their lives in the present.

5.1 “IT IS GETTING YOU PREPARED FOR A REAL JOB.”

BYP is a work skills training program which, according to youth, provides them with valuable job training and experience. For many youth, the opportunity to gain work experience while they are young was appreciated. As many of the youth need to earn money to help their families or want to earn “clean money” (money earned in a legal way), the program provides youth a chance to take part in a supportive environment where they can earn money from their work in community development. Many youth felt this environment helps prepare young people for the job market. “This is considered a job. How easy it is. It is getting you prepared for a real job, the real deal. It’s a good start.” Another youth agreed they and their colleagues are obtaining “a lot of work experience” and it prepared them “to be better for a job or college or things like that.” This youth also shared, “It teaches you things you might need to know. It prepares you for what you might want to do.” A young woman who participated in the Café group and was learning entrepreneurial skills was happy to be learning about how to build and sustain a business. She felt these skills were relevant to her future; “So I can make a lot of money when I’m older. I’m going to have my own business.”

In a focus group conversation, youth shared that the BYP summer program was their first job and confirmed the importance of having access to work. In a different focus group, I asked

youth why they chose BYP employment over other possible jobs. A wide range of reasons for working at BYP were specified. Many youth asserted BYP provided young people an opportunity to work at a young age. Because youth have relatively few work skills coming into the program, the fact that “it’s easier” and “not that strict” is appealing to young people. Additionally, as youth are young and live in a somewhat isolated area, the fact that “it’s close to home” is a bonus. More substantive reasons were also posed. In terms of personal benefits, a BYP member said, “It makes you a more rounded off person.” A colleague added, “It gives you more people experience.” Another youth exclaimed, “You are doing something with your life.” One of the youth appreciated being able to have a job that encouraged thinking over rote activity. “You get to think and not do a simple thing over and over.” Quality of life seemed to be a consideration when one youth shared: “If you were to work at McDonalds, they are so grouchy. We’re cool. We’re nice.” Finally, to the agreement of many colleagues, a BYP member said, “You are doing a good thing for your community.”

Since finding a job for young people is challenging, especially when they have no prior work experience, it was noted that the value of this program is that it provides skills and practical considerations, such as job history and references. As stated by one youth, “So you fill out a job application and they [prospective employers] see a different job on your resume and you put down your references and stuff. Like that would be pretty good. It will help you get a different job.” Another youth shared that BYP prepares you for the future, in terms of other jobs and school: “It helps you get other jobs. You can put, you do so many different things here. You can put it on your resume. It looks good for jobs, school applications, whatever.”

Numerous skills were developed as a result of being in the BYP program. These skills range from obtaining employment to serving others to professionalism. Youth shared their

experiences learning how to obtain employment and how to keep a job. In terms of job preparedness, a youth learned to “show up on time.” A focus group member added learning that “you have consequences when you like show up late.” A third youth added learning to get “along with people that surround you and don’t be shy for real.” Youth discussed developing patience and building their concentration. On this topic one youth said, “This actually taught me patience too, ‘cause I was always doing stop motion and that takes a lot of hard work and concentration to do it. It taught me how to focus and concentrate.” Agreeing a colleague added, “Yeah, cause I get distracted easily. But this helped me, I stay on task.” Adding the final comment, one youth explained, “Yeah, they helped because they teach you how to get to work, when to get to work and I want to get to work. I don’t always have to be fooling around like when you get distracted. Yeah, get serious like at work.” Several youth commented on professional development. One youth said specifically, “This program just made me so much more professional.” Speaking about skills learned from participating in the BYP, two graduated youth reflected on the expertise they developed:

I make sure I’m on time. Make sure I’m reliable. Make sure my main focus is not on me, it’s not on making money, it’s on how can I help somebody else. At like BYP, it wasn’t about us. It was about ‘how do we help this community?’ So now I use this same mindset in my work now.

It teaches you a lot of good things you need to know growing up to be successful and to be independent and all of that. It teaches you a lot. Help you work better at a job so you can keep the job.

One of the youth who is now out in the workforce shared this thought about what he learned in the program: “About work, I understand the rules and why they are in place. If I try to ease myself up, they would dock pay from here so even at [place of current employment]. If I use my cell phone, it will be a write up, but I don’t even try to use it because I already know.

And more responsibility that's the big part." Another graduated youth presently employed as a nurse shared:

In some ways, yes, it helped. I know it can help me in my career. I can become a nurse in the community, but I feel like as far as my maturity and communication, like BYP, Jr.; learning to be a leader. I feel like it wasn't necessarily the community work that prepared me for work, but I believe it was more so the communication, talking to people, learning to be a leader, the skills I learned in that program when I was in school.

One of the youth who graduated from BYP recounted how what she learned during the 3 years in the program impacted her future:

It actually helped me, BYP, it was a job, cause we were getting paid but at the same time, it wasn't like a full blown job like being a cashier but those skills that I learned in that program helped me when I went into my actual real full blown job. It helped me learn you have to be there on time, you weren't allowed to be late, you weren't allow to leave early. It helped me learn when you are at work you have to be quiet, get your work done, do this, do that and I really enjoyed it. I really had a good experience with BYP overall. I really did.

In terms of skills, young people involved in the program long term were able to articulate multiple skills learned from their employment at BYP. This is evidenced from the statements above where youth mention maturity, communication, leadership, and work ethic. Another youth talked about the tangible skills of leadership, responsibility and accountability. He stated, "So the biggest thing is probably leadership. I know I can lead a group of youth and I know how to act when I'm at work. What to do and what not to do. And I know how to hold myself responsible and accountable."

Some of the youth who had been in the program longer than just one summer indicated feeling prepared to be on the job market. "Yeah, I feel like I'm definitely ready. I know how to do a resume and things like that." This particular youth felt prepared as a result of exposure to reading materials and workshops hosted by BYP, as well as from feedback he received on his work and from participating in mock interviews. He said, "My writing skills, I've improved.

Just articulating. We went over that for a while. How to articulate better.” The mock interviews prepared him for what to expect during a real interview and thereby decreased his sense of being nervous.

One of the youth who graduated said he felt the job readiness training prepared him for work and that being a part of BYP exposed him to different career options:

I’ve been through like, three or four job readiness trainings, so like, that helped me out a lot. And, yeah, I been working since I was like 13. I been doing a lot of carpentry; carpentry with my stepdad. And painting and stuff like that with my real dad, so I have a lot of skills. I just don’t wanna bang nails all my life. I want a regular paying job. I don’t want to harm myself more than I already have. (He talked about banging up his body a lot in his younger years and already experiencing a lot of pain and problems as a result.)

In this interview, I asked this young man if he would have considered other careers if he had not participated in BYP and he responded no. He, like other youth involved in the program for multiple years, shared that he definitely felt prepared to move forward in his career.

5.2 “BYP REALLY HELPS YOU GET TO COLLEGE.”

Youth asserted that BYP supported them in school and prepared them for college. A young person who graduated from the program reflected upon how BYP supported him in school. He said, “I did better. I didn’t do great, but I did better. And I’m going to college so that was definitely different [than] if I didn’t start BYP.” College was not looking like a reality for this young person before he started at BYP. He, however, started college and plans to complete a degree program. Another youth shared that BYP was “really helpful” in regards to school. This youth said, “I got a lot of homework help. It improves your grades a little like.” This youth argued for expansion of the school year program so more youth can benefit from what the program offers.

Several youth noted one of the benefits of the school year program is the assistance with home work. They noted that the time allotted for getting home work done was important, as was

the tutoring they received to assist with homework. One youth said, “So we can be better in school.” Home work time was not optional. As a youth commented, “You had the half an hour that you had to study, you couldn’t leave, you couldn’t –You had to study.” This youth expressed his appreciation for the support he received and acknowledged that this designated time helps youth learn and study. Another youth discussed how the tutoring and having “staff members to look up to and help me with homework” made it possible for them to finish high school. This youth shared, “It helped me get through school, ‘cause I didn’t really do homework either, but we basically got paid to do the homework so might as well do it.” A young person who graduated talked about how BYP supported him in getting his homework done and supported him with his individual learning needs. He attended an alternative education program and reported needing additional assistance in school. He appreciated the home work time because he got to focus. He said he would get to work at BYP, and get his homework done so he could move on to his other work. The previous director also helped support him in learning. He described her as “the bomb” because she was supportive of him. He described himself as requiring “a lot of attention” and “BYP gave me a lot of attention.” This made a big difference in his education.

Another youth who graduated from BYP reflected on the importance of homework time and mentorship around school:

I think homework time – one of my difficulties in BYP. Just because, like, I was definitely never a fan of homework, but BYP definitely helped me out; because my senior year, I think I had a 67 in my... Economics and Government class. I had a 69. And one of my biggest problems was my homework grade. And basically, one of my mentors [name of mentor at BYP] told me that wasn’t acceptable, and he cracked the whip on me because he was not only a mentor, but he was a friend... I brung my grade up and I graduated high school. And that was the best feeling. I was the first one on my mom’s children to graduate.

Some of the younger youth shared knowing older youth who went off to college after being in BYP. These young people served as role models for the younger youth who are preparing for their future. Many of the young people in BYP, past and present, are the first generation to go to college. Some of the youth talked about how BYP takes trips to college fairs and college visits; when I asked youth if they would be able to attend these functions on their own, several youth said no. One graduated youth talked about his brother and his brother's friends who also recently graduated from BYP and are now away at college. He felt BYP prepared them to be successful. "They wasn't even in BYP as long as me, so really BYP has done a lot. Because BYP really helps you get to college by going to college settings... So BYP really does pull through. It pulls through." It was stated that BYP helps with preparing for school by "teaching you things you might need to know." This youth also shared that BYP "prepares you for what you might want to do" by exposing youth to a variety of career opportunities and providing youth with relevant skills.

BYP was also credited with encouraging young people to think about their future. One youth who recently graduated shared, "Yes, since I've been in 9th grade, they've like, they really push you to do things after high school, whether it's education or some type of training to get a better job or something." BYP also introduced a number of youth to AmeriCorps. One of the youth said she would not have heard about AmeriCorps otherwise. One of the reasons the AmeriCorps experience was important to her was because she was able to "get good money for school." The AmeriCorps positions provided a number of youth with money for college in the form of educational awards upon completing service. In informal conversations with graduated youth, several mentioned using their educational stipends to pay for college.

A young woman who graduated from BYP and went on to graduate from nursing school attributed BYP for preparing her for school. She said, “It helped you learn a lot of different stuff you can use in school and it helps you get ready for your life.” Another graduate, who is currently in college, shared that BYP prepared him for the SAT. Moreover, the program taught him many important things that prepared him for school. A third recent graduate is preparing to start college. He felt BYP “definitely” prepared him for school. He indicated needing to get back into the routine of “staying on top of everything and being able to multitask” and then added, “but I think it’ll be rough for a month or so, but I think I’ll be able to get through it, because BYP has trained me.” Yet, another recent graduate who is preparing to start college discussed the skills he learned while at BYP:

I think one skill BYP has really helped me to refine is to not procrastinate. I still do that, but I do it a lot less and know how to meet deadlines. I feel like that’s really the biggest thing. I barely ever did my homework in high school. It made my grades suffer in high school, and I don’t want that to happen in college.

The youth, who above mentioned being the first of his mother’s children to graduate, talked about his pride at having graduated. In his estimation, this may not have been a reality if not for BYP:

The road I was going, like, so I was fine all the way up until the 6th grade. In the 6th grade, my environment that I was living in really got the best of me, and I started doing things that I shouldn’t have been doing, acting crazy and I failed the 7th grade. I think that was one of my biggest moments, is well, when I failed the 7th grade. It was either I go to summer school and have my mom pay a bunch of money to send me to summer school, or do 7th grade again. And I just really thought to myself, like, did I learn what a 7th grader should have learned, and I decided that I would go back for my 7th grade year. And then after, after I got in the program, and I think I got in my summer, the summer going into my freshman year of high school, and it’s just been good ever since then. Like I just got on a roll, and it worked out for me.

This youth shared how when he first joined the program, he thought “it was a job.” Luckily for him, it happened to be a program that turned his life around. He described being a young kid at the time and having a rough time in his life:

I had just been evicted for the first time, and we had to move down to Tennessee. And it was a whole new thing for me, but right before we got evicted I had got shot in my leg. Just fooling around with the wrong crowd and just doing some things I shouldn't. And then when I joined BYP, I have to give on thanks, and all thank yous to my friend [name of friend in BYP]. He's the one that really got me involved in BYP. He was just telling me, I mean, 'we gotta graduate high school, we gotta basically just get our money. So when he got me in there, I was just like real happy to be there.

This young man is currently working, planning to go to college in the near future, and actively involved in parenting his young daughter.

5.3 “IT’S A GOOD WAY TO NETWORK.”

Several youth talked about the benefits of being able to network and collaborate with people whom they might not have had the opportunity to meet, if not for their involvement in BYP. The youth understood the importance of networking and getting to know “people in interesting places.” They also understood the significance of expanding their social networks. One youth said, “that’s a skill that’s always going to help you.” Another youth shared, “working here in the community center, people like come in and see BYP, and they want to know about it and stuff. It’s a good way to network.” Youth see these connections as opportunities to advance themselves and secure their futures.

The idea of meeting new people was echoed by another youth who referenced being able to partake in a discussion with me. This youth stated, “I think like in a situation like this where we get to sit down and talk to people. We get to talk to a lot of people.” In a different discussion, a youth talked about being able to partner with a specific organization, GTEC, last summer. These collaborations with people outside the community expose BYP members to new

ideas, experiences and skills. The youth get numerous opportunities to collaborate with others in the community and those from the greater local region.

At times, youth work in collaboration with the Mayor of Braddock and the Braddock library staff to create community events. These collaborations help youth anchor themselves in the local community and youth valued meeting people within their community as part of their networking efforts. One youth talked about the “good feeling” he gets from meeting local community members as part of the community gardening work. “Just like if I’m outside at the garden, somebody walks past and they ask about the garden, and I offer them some vegetables and they take them. We have a half hour conversation and they say ‘I’ll be back. Nice meeting you.’ It’s just a good feeling.” Networking was deemed as an important practice for a variety of reasons, including affecting other people. As one youth articulated, “Even just meeting people and talking to them. I feel like that impacted people because we got to spend time saying what we were doing, why we were doing it. I feel like that touched people.”

5.4 “IT HELPED ME BECOME A LEADER.”

As evidenced from the discussions above and as seen embedded in other chapters of this dissertation are elements of how BYP members are leaders and view themselves as both leaders in the program and in their community. Youth talked about leadership in the context of the work they do and what they learn at the BYP. Youth were also asked explicitly about leadership. In one of the focus groups with youth interns, a discussion ensued regarding the goal of leadership development and how BYP aims to support young leaders. When talking about leadership, youth provided direct examples of their own agency. One youth in the summer program talked about leading the “whole BYP in a stress relief exercise.” Supervising other youth and projects and directing activities seemed to be a major means for youth to exercise their leadership. As

discussed in the youth voices section, youth expressed the desire to have more leadership in the program and thus created the internship program. The internship program provides young people the opportunity to build their skills and confidence in leadership and ensures they have a say in the direction of the program. Young people also are engaged in other leadership endeavors in the community, such as BYP, Jr, leading gardening tours and coordinating work days, leading tours of the BYP program, creating the Café, leading printmaking workshops, and organizing and hosting collaborations with other organizations. Youth also created programming to provide friendship and support to seniors living in the Braddock community. Among other activities, youth developed an exercise program for the seniors. As one youth said, “the seniors, we got them to stretch out and get loosened up, cause they get stuck in their little house all the time. Well, often.” When asked what the seniors thought of the exercise program, one youth declared, “Yeah, they loved it!” A second youth exclaimed, “Yeah, they adore us.”

Several young people have extended their leadership at the BYP. After completing their terms as youth, a couple of young men have stepped into coordinator positions. One reflected on how having a coordinator position has challenged him by placing him in a leadership position where he is “force to take charge.” He went on to share: “some of the time I’m with half of the gardeners by myself, and I have to lead them and keep them on task, make sure there is stuff for us to do all of the time.” He believed BYP has helped him embody what it means to be a leader. “BYP really pushes you to take a leadership role and to take initiative to do things without being asked and stuff like that. Now that I’m an AmeriCorps member; even when I was still a youth like they wanted you to like, we would give tours of the garden, and I’d be in charge of telling people about all the different plants and those kind of things.” He admits to not being naturally inclined to taking charge, but because of his many leadership roles at BYP, he “can do it.”

Another former BYP member, who later moved into a coordinator position, talked about the impact of being an intern and being allowed to lead all of the youth and later moving to the coordinator of BYP, Jr. and being able to teach kids in his group. He said these were profound and formative experiences for him, because “young kids ... really looked up to me” and because he realized he could make a real difference in Braddock. In his leadership role at BYP, this young man recognized that the kids responded to him in a different way. “I was always good with kids, but I don’t think the message would have been as good. I think they would have been able to look up to me, but it would not have been the same thing they look up to me for now.” From my observations, young people continue to look up to him. In the summer of 2012, I attended the BYP final summer presentation event. This young man took time away from his two jobs and college classes to attend the presentations as well. When the younger members of BYP saw him, they went rushing over to talk with him. He was greeted by many youth and he spent time talking with him. Young people surrounded him the entire time. It was apparent that he had a connection with many of the youth. In interviews with other graduated youth, they talked about him specifically, and how he supported them. They said he played an influential role in their lives. This young man continues to take his role as a leader seriously and serves as a mentor in many ways to others. He attributes his leadership to the work he did at BYP, where as an intern he had to lead, teach and learn the importance of leading by example. Currently, this young man is employed in a supervisory role at an international company. He said this of BYP, in terms of leadership, “It teaches you a lot, prepares you.”

One of the young people, who participated in BYP in the early years, talked about what leadership meant to her. This included learning to complete a job, even when others fail to do their share of the work. This is how she felt about leadership:

In working with BYP, Jr., we all had to work together. We had to make a stance that everyone do this. It was hard because I had people who didn't want to help, [and some] who did want to help. You had to learn that all and all when people don't want to do their part you have to pick up the slack, because a job still has to be done and that's what's important. That's how it helped me become a leader, because I had people who would be like I don't want to help. I don't want to do this. I don't want to do that. I had to say okay, well despite all of that, I want [to do this], because I personally believe that this needs to be changed, and this is the work that we need to do. So, it really did prepare me.

Finally, one youth talked about coming to BYP already having some leadership skills.

He explained that he was able to hone and refine his leadership skills through mentorship and practice at BYP.

5.5 CONCLUSION

Youth gained skills that promoted their current work in community development and set them up for positive life outcomes. When youth are armed with strong work skills, a solid education, networking proficiency, and leadership abilities, they feel empowered and capable members of the community.

6.0 FINDINGS

“PROMOTE POSITIVE CULTURALLY RELEVANT CHANGE IN THE COMMUNITY”

This chapter presents youths’ perceptions on what brought them to the BYP and why they chose to stay. The interrelated concepts of their work being more than a job, participating in meaningful work, and viewing their involvement at the BYP as a productive use of time are presented. Youth discuss how being involved in work that is empowering and important keeps them from “running the streets.” In the final section, youth discuss how adults can support their leadership.

6.1 “IT’S JUST SO LIFE-CHANGING, BECAUSE YOU GOT SO MANY PEOPLE THAT CARE ABOUT YOU.”

While BYP is a work skills training program and youth acknowledge the benefits of having a job, they talked about their experience at BYP as being more than a job. One youth verbalized the sentiments of many youth in this statement: “Everybody ... they’re happy to see you, miss you. Everybody’s caring down here. It’s not like, where a job, you’re just a number or something...I like it.” One youth explained when he was hired at BYP he thought it was “a normal job,” but quickly learned that it was so much more. In fact, it became an experience, as he describes, that changed his life. This youth was going through a hard time when he started at the BYP. He was spending time with the “wrong crowd”, had been shot in the leg, and his family had to move out of state after being evicted (story shared in the skills chapter, under school). He described being happy to have joined the program, at the time. He fit right in at the BYP, where he learned things beyond work skills valuable to his everyday life, including his home life. The example he gave was a simple lesson of picking things up from the floor when they fell. Additionally, he began to “watch my language.” He said, “That’s one of the biggest

things BYP helped me do, is watch my language. Because I kinda had a potty mouth, and as soon as I started having to have these people cracking the whip on me, telling me this is not acceptable and stuff. I just started to take it into my own morals.” Because he perceived the program to be so transformative for him, he encouraged his younger sister to join. He shared, now “she’s changing her life around.” He added, “She’s still struggling, but she’s a hard fighter and a hard worker.” This young man feels BYP helped them both in multiple ways. He shared with pride that he also encouraged other younger siblings to join BYP. In describing the magnitude of BYP’s presence in his life he said, “it’s just so life-changing, because you got so many people that care about you, and so many things to do other than go up on the street corner and hang out with your pals like you got, you got fliers to hang – hand out, you got events to plan, you got people to be around, people to talk to. Assignments to have and then they give you homework [time].” In addition to the benefits recounted above, meeting new people and being ensconced in a supportive environment were also heralded as improving this young man’s life:

When I got to BYP, I thought it would just be people in my community, but there were so many new people that the program attracted. It was just a great experience, as far as, just being around people and the skills that I learned. We been through a whole lot of the skill sets and trainings stuff, and it was just a good experience all around. Just having everybody there for me and being able to – if I’m having a problem at home, to come in to BYP and drop it at the door or have somebody listen to me if the problem’s that bad, so, it was a good experience.

Other youth talked about the shift that occurs in the meaning of work when involved with the BYP. A long term BYP member shared his experience of securing employment in order to have a job, but then deciding the program was something he cared so it became more than just a job to him about because the work was meaningful and worthwhile. He shared this regarding his commitment to community work: “Just because it’s so fulfilling and you are helping people all the time, and people appreciate the work you do, and people tell you that. [It’s] just a good

feeling.” Affirming this idea, another youth talked about how youth feel about their work.

“They realize that they are making positive impacts to their community and that their time is well spent. You are doing more positive things in the neighborhood.” Feeling similarly about the work, another youth expressed enjoying the work at BYP because “[I] make an impact on somebody’s life in this community.” She explained the work was not always easy or appreciated but she did deem worthwhile. Community work has “its ups and downs” and you have “good days, some bad.” She also said sometimes people appreciated it and sometimes they did not. In the end though, she declared the work to be worth the effort because she made a difference and was proud to have taken part in the early BYP movement:

I was young. I knew I was making a change. I knew I was helping somebody. I knew that I would grow and, if people appreciate it, they do. If not, it was still going to be there regardless. So I enjoyed being a youth working in my community, and I talk to people about BYP all the time. When they ask me, ‘did you work there?’ [She responds,] ‘Yeah, we did a lot of community work.’ You know, we helped a lot of people, and it was like I was the first one, so it was like the bottom of what it grew to, and what it’s going to grow to, and beyond.

A number of youth, mainly those who graduated from BYP, took the job at BYP either because they were told by a family member to get the job or because they wanted a job to earn their own money. They clarified that the initial rationale for seeking employment was rapidly replaced by a feeling of doing something important and working towards a greater mission. One young man originally took the job because his mom “made me.” After meeting a cohort of new friends and tremendously enjoying the work, he ended up staying for years. One of his brothers joined the program after him and has contributed significantly to the community. When talking about his experience of getting a job at BYP, he described the promise of a job as the “trap” that captures young people:

That's the trap. That's how it got me, 'cause you find stuff you really like to do. So really, what other kind of job do that. Any other job you sign up for is what do you really want to do- clean up after somebody, or clean up after somebody, or make fast food, or clean up after somebody...

Another youth shared her experience of getting involved at the suggestion of their mother and then discovering the importance of community development work:

I actually got involved with BYP because my mom worked at the Employment Training Center and she told me about it. So I got involved and I started. At first, I was like 'oh, it's a job, it's money', but the more I was in it the more serious I got, got more involved, and like I said I matured a lot and so I got more serious about it. It was more so I got involved because it was a job, but as it went on it became less of, 'oh this is my job' and became 'I'm helping something, I'm helping somebody.'

Youth reasoned the mentorship they receive contributes to their feeling that BYP is more than just a job. Instead, they feel cared about and inspired to succeed. On this topic, one youth shared:

I first got involved with BYP, 'cause I just turned 14 and I wanted a job and money. I guess people really liked me over the summer. I feel like I connected more with the adult AmeriCorps members sometimes, and they were pretty interesting to me. So I really wanted to be in the school year program. So I just really tried.

Many of the graduated youth talked about the former director of the program and the mentorship and caring she provided. She made a profound impact on their lives. In informal conversations with youth, they praised her and talked about all the ways she touched them. The following are what youth said more formally in the context of interviews:

[Name of former director], life time friend, mentor, whatever you wanna say that she is – Like I know, if I ever need anything or, if I have a question, or, 'how do I do this?' Like she, she cares.

I just want to thank everybody, including [Name of former director]. She showed me a lot.

I would just say a big person is [Name of former director]. [Name of former director] was just always there for me. Like, anything that anybody needed, she's a great multi-tasker... anything anybody needed, she would help them out with ...She's like real – she's – I don't wanna say very firm, but she's like real firm, but still gentle enough to be a boss ... But it was just great having her, and like, going to work and you're just like 'oh, man, my boss is real crazy' and not with [Name of former director]. 'It's like, yeah, I can't wait to go to work.' I used to always come in, we started work at 3:15, we got out of school at 2:45, and then when I got to high school it was 2:10. Yeah, so it was 2:10. I used to be at BYP 2:45, 2:50, trying to make it as early as I can...

Youth consider their experience at BYP as being more than a job for numerous reasons.

Youth feel cared about and received mentorship. They, also, helped other people and had the opportunity to change the community. Their experience at BYP is considered life changing.

6.2 “IT’S JUST REALLY FULFILLING”

Not only did youth view their experience at BYP as more than a job, they also described their work as meaningful. In talking about youth experiences, one youth said BYP “gives them something meaningful to do over the summer.” Another youth advanced this idea when saying “[BYP] inspires people to do stuff.” Beyond being meaningful, this work enables young people to learn skills to ensure they are doing interesting work. A youth explained how what they learn in the program allows them to “do something better with their life, instead of just sitting around and like, just doing nothing- working at a lazy job, because you are doing something big. You're doing ... something with your life, exotic or something like.” This youth went on to talk about how learning media skills specifically positions youth to be able to take interesting jobs in a media field, such as being a photographer. This experience provides youth with interesting and creative career options; options that would not be available to them otherwise.

The following discussion passionately argues for opportunities for young people to participate in meaningful work. It was noted that when working in their community creating

change, youth are less likely to be involved in violence or other behaviors leading to trouble. An added bonus is feeling better about themselves and their community:

I think that that's the most important thing because the youth is the future, so I think that by having a place where the young, the kids, like the teenagers could come and instead of being out there doing like violence and doing the wrong thing. They're like doing something positive and like we teach them [as interns] how to care, 'cause I know like a lot of kids get started coming, working here for the money and stuff like that but once they start working here, they see what a difference we make on the community and then they feel better about themselves and they feel better about the community. They have more respect, so I think that's the most important thing.

One of the graduated youth talked about how he immediately asked to return to the BYP when his family moved back to Braddock because of the type of work and experiences the BYP provides to young people. When his family moved, this youth worked at a fast food restaurant for awhile. He was happy to go back to BYP upon returning. He appreciated the fun atmosphere as well as working at a job where learning was privileged:

Because, I like it! It was a lot of good summers in my life. I know what the BYP did for me as far as growing up in Braddock and not really knowing what to do. Not a lot of places to go and [I] came here and it was so fun. I'm a good worker. I can keep a job and before that I didn't know too much about work. BYP taught me a lot about work.

Echoing the learning aspect as meaningful, one youth talked about how the work challenges him to grow:

I don't know. It's just really fulfilling. Like, I could be working at Giant Eagle or McDonalds or something, and not really getting anything out of it, and just be doing the same stuff all the time. Like, being here, I do different things everyday and like I challenge myself. I'm improving all of my work skills and stuff. Like writing and leadership skill and stuff like that.

BYP youth discussed concrete examples of community improvement projects as evidence of meaningful work. One youth credited the improvements to the community center to the efforts of youth. "That came from us, really, really showing our stuff off." He felt the youth were able to encourage involvement in community efforts because "they see that somebody

started making an effort.” Another youth talked about other projects that were meaningful, including the events organized by youth and the flowers planted in pots along Braddock Avenue. He said, “I thought that the plants would have been destroyed or something, but the pots are still up and down Braddock Avenue.” This signified to the young man that people in the community appreciated the beautification effort. The mosaic *Welcome to Braddock* sign was also distinguished as being a “big benefit to the community.” Many of the youth talked about the importance both of creating the sign and having it displayed in the community. As discussed in the Community chapter, these projects, among others, improved the look of the neighborhood. Because these improvements were noticed by others, they were considered meaningful to BYP members. One youth shared this reflection:

Just the plants and stuff that I grew, and stuff, I think that everybody’s so used to riding through Braddock and seeing eyesores and stuff like that. But when they come down the avenue, they see green and flowers and stuff like that. So that’s always nice to see. And I always see people looking, so that always makes me happy.

Another testimony of the work being meaningful is the expression of appreciation by community members. One group of youth said they felt their efforts were appreciated by others in the community and this made them feel like their work is meaningful. One said, “It makes me feel good that people know what I did.” All of their community improvement efforts made youth feel like they were contributing members of the community. Explaining this, one youth said, the community began “knowing that we are not doing bad in the community.” Grasping the magnitude of their work, one youth expressed the impressions of many when saying, “we’re actually doing something.”

The unique aspect of the community work completed by youth is they determine the needs in the community and craft interventions to address the identified needs. “They liked doing projects that were more relevant to Braddock, not just doing a project where someone

came in and said, ‘do this project.’” Having control over the way they spend their time makes the work meaningful to youth. One of the graduated youth discussed walking around the community to determine what the needs were when he first started at the BYP. He was able to recall the many projects he contributed to during his time in Braddock. Thinking back he said, “What didn’t I put my thumb print on?” Another of the graduated youth shared his experience of being able to create programs and interventions to help the community. He said the decisions were based on what the youth wanted to do. “We got to do what we wanted to do, as far as like, helping through the community ... I was here when all them programs got started, like BYP Jr. or Get Up and Move.” The prevailing attitude of BYP staff was to encourage youth to determine how they wanted to intervene in the community; “‘What do you want to do to help your community?’ Once you feel like you have your hand in it, like you’re helping, you’re like, ‘I like this.’ That’s some power, pride, you know, and I just – that brings anybody back.” He said youth did not have to wish they could have done things, because they had the opportunity to do things. He felt the staff responded to the desires of the youth in the program. Due to his positive experience in the program, he talked about wanting to come back to BYP at some point in some capacity to help. He added, “You want to work in your community, because that’s your community!”

Another graduated youth spoke with pride about starting BYP, Jr. with other young people. She explained why they started the project:

Because we figured there needed to be more opportunities for kids to get tutored, for kids to have somewhere safe to go after school, instead of being out on the streets. Because there is a lot of violence in the world in general and if you get kids in the right environment, it helps. It makes it easier like even if they are there for 2 hours a day, one hour a day, a positive influence is going to have good impact on that child.

She was thankful that the program “actually took off” and has continued to serve younger kids. She was glad to have created something that was meaningful long term.

6.3 “YOU ARE DOING SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE WITH YOUR SUMMERS...”

The BYP was portrayed by the youth as a productive use of their time, therefore a desirable place to be. One youth said, “This is an opportunity to have something to do in the summer.” A second youth noted, “We’re giving people something to do. We are staying out of trouble.” Asking a group of youth specifically if they were glad to have participated in the BYP summer program, they answered a resounding yes. A youth offered, “It was something to do, keep me occupied, and I’m bettering the community.” One of the graduated youth shared, “Over the years, I’ve heard adults saying ‘If they didn’t have a job here, they might be out on the streets and stuff.’ And even some of the youth say that too. They might be out in the streets if they didn’t have a job in the summer; so, it’s usually all positive things, because you are doing something productive with your summers and you’re helping people in your community.” Because he deemed BYP as productive and worthwhile, one youth said, “I worked, I worked my butt off, man, that first summer, I did everything I could of, to get elected to the school year, ‘cause I just thought it was a big achievement and it was.” In formal and informal conversations with youth during the 2012 summer focus groups, a number of young folks in the summer program said they were working towards getting into the school year program. One youth offered, “I hope to get into the school year so I can stay here.” In order to determine if youth felt the BYP was a productive use of time, I asked directly in another focus group. Again, the response was overwhelmingly yes. Youth articulated some of the benefits to them: “You get paid.”, “You learn a lot of things.”, “You get to meet new people.”, and “You get connections.”

Youth shared one of the reasons the BYP is a productive use of their time is because BYP “inspire[s] us to do better.” Inspiration came in many forms. One youth shared this, “I learn something new every day. I’m more active. I’m like when I’m at home I be lying around and don’t want to walk. When I come to work I walk more.” Another youth said, “I like gardening because it expanded my food variety and I learned a lot of vegetables. And it’s helping me be more, meet new people and like not be shy for real. Getting me involved in the games before we start working helps me get more active with other people.” Youth were also inspired to do something other than hanging out:

Really, it’s not about the money all the time. It’s actually about what you’re actually doing. ‘Cause if we’re just sitting here just chillin’ and playin’ all the time, it would be lookin’ like what did I do this summer?’ And like the money doesn’t matter. It’s like it’s giving us something to do other than just being at home sleeping, eating, on the computer playing games.

In a focus group, youth articulated the importance of spending time “helping the community out,” while simultaneously having fun. One of the youth added, “Also, it’s a lot of fun working here.” Reinforcing the idea of working and having fun, a youth shared, “I like being here every morning and working in the garden, helping out; like, meeting people, and I just like getting my hands dirty.” Another youth said, “I like taking care of the plants like watching them grow. Like living things, like watching after a pet something. Got to feed it, water it, make sure it’s in great soil, watch the sunlight and I like how it brings everyone together like a big family. Everyone gets to know each other.” Summing up how the BYP is an all around productive use of time, one youth said, “The program’s good for the community.” One of the group members added with agreement from other youth, “And the kids.” A third youth finished with, “It’s good for me.” Building on the idea that being in the BYP is good for youth, one young person provided an example of how her home life improved after joining the BYP. “I was at home with

an attitude ... like around the house being annoying. So I feel like its better that I get to come here after school and stuff and in the summer. It makes your home life better knowing that you get to look forward to this.”

Because the youth do value the BYP as a productive use of their time, they refer others to the program, whether they are siblings or friends. Youth talked about getting their siblings involved. Examples of this are scattered throughout the findings of this dissertation. One youth provided her story as well. She said she tells her sister “all about” the program. “When I come home she be asking me what did we do. I tell her about it.” She also tells her sister, “Yeah, I like it.” One of the graduated youth, who became involved in the program at the encouragement of a friend, said that once he got into the program, he realized it was fun. He, then, encouraged some of his friends to get involved. “Yeah, I got a couple of friends down here. I probably got 4 of my friends to work in the program.” I asked him about these friends and he reported they are doing well, one is in college and the others are working.

Another indicator of the program being viewed as a productive use of time is that of the six older youth interviewed, five are still involved to varying levels with the BYP. One young person continues to work for the program and the remaining youth serve as volunteers when called upon. I observed one of the graduated youth volunteering at the Collard Greens Cook Off. He was helping with a number of the activities and appeared to be happy during this time volunteering - laughing, joking, and talking with others. In an interview with him, I mentioned seeing him there. He said, “Yeah. Just anything that I can help out with, and they give me a call or whatever.” I asked, “Do you think that you’ll do community work in the future?” The youth responded, “Yeah. As much as BYP needs me, and as free as I am, I’ll do anything I can to help them out, and to do whatever I can for them.” Further responding, “It’s just been great years, I

mean, it's just been great. Like, BYP's just been so good to me, man, not just – it's just good to give back to them any way I can.” Another youth returns as often as he can to help the youth and program. This young man works two jobs and goes to college, yet still finds time for the BYP. When I called to invite him to participate in an interview, he agreed without hesitation and scheduled the visit immediately. When I asked him about this, he said that he was willing to do anything to support the program. Due to his dedication to the program, we met in the morning after he finished a night shift at work and before he started studying for his class. During the interview, this young man indicated he would like to spend more time volunteering at BYP, but his schedule prohibited him from doing more. He feels inclined to give back to the program because of what BYP gave him. “It gives you that sense of pride. Or, hey, I came from BYP, they taught me all these great things. And you just want more people to know about it that can help it out, ‘cause it’s a great program.” At the end of the interview, I asked if he had any final remarks and he said, “BYP, thanks for all the good times; hope we have some more.”

Other former youth expressed their appreciation for everything they learned and experienced at BYP and said “thank you” to the program at the end of an interview with me. One of the youth, in a focus group discussion, said she could be the “spokesperson” for the program. She is grateful for how the BYP changed her life. She shared her history and discussed how the program reshaped her life and prepared her for a successful future:

This program, it really changed my whole life around. In 2009, I was such a bad kid, like I was like really bad. I was so angry inside. I don't know why, but I was like a hotheaded kid. You couldn't tell me nothing. I always had an attitude, always in fights and stuff. Since 2009 and stuff, it taught me like. The most gain that I got out of it is self-respect. Because before I really didn't care what happened to me. I didn't care where my life was going so it really taught me self-respect, and I just feel like somebody cares about me.

She went on to explain that, despite her life being changed by her involvement in the program, she left the program in 2010 because her friend was killed that year. She shared, “He was murdered, and I was like, I didn’t know how to deal with it, so I was doing a lot of bad things and then I ended up getting pregnant.” She explained in the one year she did not come to BYP, “I got into all this trouble and ended up having a baby at 17 years old, you know.” She eventually returned to BYP in 2011. She said, “and look at me, graduated high school, about to go to college. Yeah, it’s [community college] but trust me, it’s a big step for me.”

6.4 “SO LIKE WHEN YOU’RE BORED OVER THE SUMMER AND YOU WILL FIND SOMETHING ENTERTANING TO DO WHETHER IT’S GOOD OR BAD.”

The concept of “running the streets” came up in multiple focus group and interview conversations. I had an idea of what it meant, basically, that youth were out in the streets with nothing to do. Realizing I may not share the same definition as the youth, I asked the BYP members of the research team to define what “running the streets” meant. This is how it was described: “being bad, not coming home, selling drugs, breaking into places, just hanging around, having nothing to do, nowhere to go.” Youth shared that one might be running the street and not looking for trouble, but might end up getting into trouble because something illegal sounds fun or interesting to do (in the absence of something better), or they are influenced by other people to do something that, at the time, does not seem like a bad idea.

In many interviews and focus groups, youth alleged there was little to do in the Braddock community or surrounding areas where youth reside to occupy their time. A couple of activities were noted by a few youth. The basketball court was mentioned. A youth said he would be at the basketball court all day if he were not at the BYP. “I wouldn’t say on the streets, but like just being outside at the basketball court all day just kind of loitering there.” One youth claimed there was, “nothing at all [to do] except for hanging out on the corner.” BYP members expressed

concern that youth were at risk for involvement in negative activities when not having something to do with their time. They described the importance of being involved in the BYP program because it, “keeps them occupied”, and “keeps them off the streets.” One youth said directly, BYP “got me off the streets.” Youth hypothesized an increase in the number of young people who would be susceptible to getting into trouble or actually getting into trouble if they were not affiliated with BYP. Per one youth, “If you don’t have this job, because you have more free time on your hands, and you’ll see what people around you are doing and probably try doing it.” Another person shared youth “might be up to no good, getting into trouble.” One youth stated he would “be outside hanging with my friends. I might be getting into trouble.” Another said they would be “bored just trying to find something to do.” One youth articulated that young people may not be able to be discriminating when they are bored:

I feel like the youth who are not involved in BYP, I’m not going to say they are all going to do something bad. You don’t know what they are doing. They could be out there doing anything. So like when you’re bored over the summer and you will find something entertaining to do whether it’s good or bad. If it’s entertaining, you are going to do it. It sucks that we can’t help everybody.

In an interview with a youth who graduated from the program, I asked if he thought he would be in the same place now if he did not participate in BYP. He responded, “No! No, I don’t.” I asked him what he thought his life might look like if he would not have attended BYP. He shared, “I know that when I was younger, my first year in the program, I did, I had a lot of friends who were in the streets and growing up. Being young, for some reason, that’s what I wanted. I wanted to be in the streets. I’d probably be in the streets.” When asked what he thought that would lead to in Braddock, he said “jail or death.” He went on to share that he knows some people in jail but none are close friends. He made long lasting friends while at BYP, and those friends made a difference in keeping him off the streets. “A lot of my friends

were coming here too so their lives are changing as well. So it wasn't peer pressure for me to get into the street, because my friends were also getting out of the streets and go to school, so it was easier that way as well."

To better understand how youth spend their free time, in the absence of things to do in the community, I asked BYP youth directly. While a couple of youth mentioned doing productive things with their time, like volunteering, doing community project, completing homework, and playing games, most youth felt they had little to occupy their time. Common pastimes included sleeping, eating, being at home inside the house, and just being bored. One youth said, "Like honestly on the weekend when I'm not working sometimes, if I don't do nothing, or if I don't go nowhere like to the movie or something, I'm at the house. I be bored." Even youth involved in extra-curricular activities said they still needed something else productive to do with their time. One youth who plays a sport said the team only practices twice a week, "so, if I didn't have a job and stuff what would I do those other five days?" A couple of youth mentioned in the context of this conversation, the possibility of "running the streets" and "hanging out with the wrong crowd of people." In the focus group where these ideas were mentioned, youth talked further about how youth would be more inclined to get into fights when they have little else to fill their time. One youth proclaimed, "Then people will fight like. I think if they are going to BYP, people won't at BYP. Half of the days taken up anyway, so they really won't do that." Following up on this idea, other youth said, "And other thing it just takes up your time to do that type of thing. You come to work and you got all your time here at the BYP, so you don't have the time to go out and do something negative." Because the day is filled with productive activities, youth have little time to involve themselves in situations that place them in vulnerable positions. In the same conversation a youth added, "It teaches you responsibility. Youth, you learn to be

responsible and not go out and do negative stuff.” This was followed by this comment, “It prevents us from doing bad things.” The final statement in this conversation was very powerful: Being at BYP “prevents you from making a decision that you have to live with for the rest of your life.”

I asked a group of BYP youth their opinions on why young people are not involved in their communities. The responses varied from youth being shy, being self-conscious to “thinking they are too cool.” An additional comment was “Some people scared to step up because they might get judged.” Another youth added, “Because they think [others] are going to judge them. Not seeing anyone else like teenagers older than them, like a role model.” To gauge what youth in the community were doing with their time, I asked youth in the 2011 focus group how their friends were spending the summer. With the agreement of many youth, one said “smoking.” Others responses included “hanging out”, “sleeping”, “being lazy”, “being bad”, “lazy”, “just lounge”, and “on the streets, not being bad but just not having much to do.” One of the graduated youth expressed feeling like “most of the kids in Braddock just got their mind on straight.” This is mainly because many of them have been involved in BYP. “It’s just some kids that don’t have their head on straight, or don’t have a mentor.” These are the youth who are more vulnerable to getting into trouble. “And with those type of kids, they should just join the program.”

One of the young people, who graduated from the program, believed that youth at the BYP were committed to creating opportunities for themselves and for the next generation of young people. They aspire to see the community “move forward.” He went on to share, “I know growing up one of the reasons I wanted to be in the streets. There was nothing to do. No place to play basketball. All the parks were shut down for some reason. So the only thing to do was hang

in the streets.” Youth recognize that for the community to move forward they need to prevent young people from being lost to the streets. Youth believed that the BYP could help youth avoid this. The following are several youths’ opinions on the BYP as an alternative to life in the streets:

Like it’s just better when more kids come here ‘cause whether they came here with a positive outlook [or] a bad outlook. We still influence everybody to do the right thing. The good thing and like the people who don’t get the opportunity to come here and - I’m not going to say they are all going to do something bad - but it’s like we are not there to help them.

Yeah, BYP kinda helps you with that ‘cause none of [us] here, we’re not like bad people so we’re not going to tell you to do something outrageous. So I think it helps put you around the right people too.

Yeah, it’s like who you hang around. I know I was raised kinda how to do the right thing. I knew right from wrong basically is what I’m saying, but I would definitely say that the people I hung around definitely influenced me to do some things like you know. Every kid, every teenager ‘cause like that’s the part where you have the devil and the angel on your shoulder. It’s like they are fighting against you. Like which way are you going to do? I don’t know like, I think it helps you pick the right side.

Youth believe that participation in the BYP influence young people to do the right thing, puts them around other youth who can serve as mentors, helps them make good decisions and provides them with structure.

6.5 “SO REALLY GET TO KNOW THEM. SEE WHAT THEY ARE INTERESTED IN.”

Collaborative relationships between youth and adults were noted to be important. Youth talked about learning new things from adults working at BYP. In interviews and focus groups, youth were asked to talk about the adults working with them. One of the graduated youth said it was helpful to connect with staff who were close to the age of youth and who are committed to the community:

They weren't too far from our age, or, did what we did, as far as, youth-wise. So, they could relate, or they felt it wasn't like a bothersome thing for them. Or like, most of the people that they hired, they wanted to be part of the community. Or they had that community effort mindset that they liked helping out. And they all wanted to have a hand in it. I mean as far – I didn't really have any bosses, or anything I didn't like. So, ... however they pick them, they pick them right.

A well-rounded set of interpersonal skills are also required when working with youth.

Another of the graduated youth reflected the following in response to what staff need to work successfully with youth:

They need to be kind of strong because the kids, these kids are rough. They can say something to you and it can get you down. I guess they are used to having people walk out on them, so they don't care about hurting your feelings. Be flexible. Be fun. Don't try to be too strict. Be down to earth, let the kids talk, let them share ideas, stuff like that.

Youth advised adults to get to know youth in real and meaningful ways. They promoted having conversations with young people, allowing adults to get to know about the lives and experiences of young people. Interacting in caring and supportive ways was touted as important, as were reciprocal relationships in which adults share some of their history and experiences with the youth. They shared:

You got to separate all of your separate feelings and things about different people, different personalities, different genders, different religions all that and separate all that you know. You can't be like "I only want to work with these type of people or these type of people. I don't want these type of people to come." You got to work with all changes.

Be kind and nice. You don't want nobody to be rude to you. You want to help them.

Interact with them.

Ask them what they want to do after high school and stuff like that.

Ask them about their hobbies. What do they do outside of school?

So really get to know them. See what they are interested in.

And not stick to the statistics. Like oh. I know some adults who think all kids should go to college or all kids should go to high school. Dadadada. I mean they may have their own plan, their own way of doing it and just go with it. Even if you not like it or approve of it but being able to talk about it. You might have to do this and that and then explain that they might have the option to do something different.

Give them options.

Tell them problems you had in school, like ‘there was a time that I almost dropped out but a friend talked to me and told me that school will be the best thing for me.’

Other guidance offered to adults included: “Let the kids speak their mind and don’t try to change their minds.” A youth replied that adults should try to help youth make their ideas realities by helping them “make thing happen” and carry out their projects. “Try to help them succeed” was added. A youth finished this conversation by saying, “When we envision something, help us do it.” Youth wanted adults to respect them and their ideas and work as allies to help them bring their ideas to fruition.

Youth also need adults to move beyond old practices and help them with innovative ideas. One young person shared, “I feel like some people just need to get out of their ways; their old ways. It’s a new generation, new things are happening. You can’t be stuck in the past. Yeah, we understand you did this when you were a kid, but we’re kids now in the future and it’s different, totally different. Entirely different!” In response, to this statement, a youth claimed, “Some people are afraid of that, afraid of change.” Another advised, “You got to adapt to it. You can’t just be stuck in the past.” Youth need adults to both allow them to try out new ideas and help them to be productive. They need to both “let them roam free with their talents, but [know] how to curb it.” A youth suggested there needs to be a give and take when working together with youth. “Find a happy medium. You can’t be on it’s my way or the highway.”

Youth suggested that adults attempt to understand the experiences of young people: “Just try to put yourself in their shoes and see how you would do it if you were them...understanding.”

Another suggestion was “be a role model to them.” An older youth shared these reflections:

Patience. Diligent. You gotta be diligent. You gotta have a tough skin sometimes, ‘cause everything’s not gonna go your way. Or you feel as though you put in all this effort, and it might not come out as you like it. There’s a lot of stuff. You can’t be selfish here. You can’t be selfish. You gotta be able to put up at time commitment. That’s the one thing. I’ll say personable. Personable.

One of the youth leaders shared his technique for relating to younger people:

That’s what I do. When I talk to younger kids I try to...when I see them arguing or something. [I say] ‘Man I used to be just like you. Oh my goodness, sitting in the same chair in the principal’s office for fighting and stuff. It’s not even cool like. You shouldn’t have been doing that, you should do this.’ You got to relate on the same level, especially when you are talking to somebody, you have to take into consideration, be considerate of their attitude, mood, their space. They may not be wanting to talk too much about certain things but you got to.

In helping adults understand what youth are capable of contributing to both the community and to a youth-led organization, BYP members explained young people should be involved in making major decisions and all aspects of running the program. One youth said, “Like every task that needs to be done, like when you go to write a program and create a task list. It shouldn’t be you can do this, this and this, but we’ll do the rest. We should do it all.” Another youth suggested the inclusion of young people in the hiring process, especially for those staff working directly with youth. It was also suggested that youth determine the hours they work and “how much we get paid.” Enabling youth to select projects and activities was noted as a priority. One youth offered, “I think they should base some of those things on what we want to do. Regardless, we are going to do what we want to do, not run wild like. Do more of what we want to do. So we would be more willing.” In agreement, one youth acknowledged that

organizations working with youth would have greater success if youth were engaged in the leadership of the program. “If it were more our way, we would be more willing.”

6.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, youth explained how their work at the BYP is considered to be more than a job. The supportive and caring environment helps them to change their lives, while they are making impacts on the lives of others. Youth found their work to be meaningful. There projects improve the community and are deemed to be so when the community acknowledges their efforts. Youth feel that the BYP is a productive use of their time and refer other young people to the program. The BYP offers youth positive alternatives of their choosing so that they have something to do other than “running the streets.” Young people are committed to helping other youth either avoid the streets or get off the streets. For programs to successfully engage youth, they must have a staff committed to youth participation and leadership.

7.0 FINDINGS

“PROVIDING MEANINGFUL AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS”

This chapter covers the opinions, thoughts, and beliefs youth hold specifically about their community and the contributions they make to improve it. The topics covered include the youths’ understanding of the historical context of Braddock and their commitment to rebuilding the neighborhood, the changes they have already made in Braddock, and that youth have changed how adults perceived young people due largely to their commitment and hard work in the community.

7.1 “BUILD IT BACK UP”

Youth described knowing the rich history of the Braddock neighborhood and expressed a strong desire to rebuild the community. The youth talked a lot about the importance of working in Braddock and changing their community. They focused on the idea of bringing Braddock back to its former state as a vibrant and thriving town. The 2012 BYP t-shirt design promoted the concept of “Building It Back Up” which signified the youths’ commitment to restoring Braddock.

As part of being in the BYP, youth learn the history of Braddock through documents and archives, such as articles, reports and videos. They also gain the historical context from their families and neighbors. In informal conversations with youth, I learned about the historical knowledge youth gain when working with older residents through the intergenerational program at the BYP. Interviews youth completed with adults in the community as part of their projects, especially in the media group, also provide valuable information about Braddock’s past. One youth talked about this more formally in a focus group: “...we hear all the old people talk, not the old people but like the older people like how they talk about like, ‘I used to walk up and

down Braddock Avenue and every store was alive.’ I want that to be back. There’s only like three stores in Braddock.” Understanding the history spurs work towards restoration, which guides the efforts of youth in Braddock. In a focus group, one youth shared, “A long time ago, there used to be a lot of shopping stores up [here].” One of their colleagues said, “Wouldn’t you like to see that again?” There was agreement from other youth in the group. The first youth went on to say, “But now it all changed. It’s all violence and stuff, so I guess BYP and we’re helping the community by like building it back together. Making it how it used to be, better. Better and better.” I responded to her by asking, “It’s nice to be part of it?” and she said, “That’s the best feeling about it to me.” In the context of this conversation, another youth shared, “I want to see Braddock change... I want to see it change because everybody’s always talking about how it used to be back in the day and I just [want] to see all those stores open, and Braddock being a lively place like. I think it would be a fun place.”

Reiterating the commitment to rebuilding efforts, a BYP member who lived in an adjacent neighborhood conveyed her rationale for working to transform Braddock:

It was important for me because [I] mean I didn’t see Braddock when it was up, and you know, but I hear so many stories about how it used to be, you know, this great community. And it slowly started going downhill, and I seen all the abandoned buildings, and, you know, buildings and stores closing and nothing seems to be sustaining in there. I felt that Braddock is a good place to start it. It’s one of many communities that can use help such as that. So it was fun to help a community that’s not in a good place, ‘cause you can help any community really but it’s not going to benefit or make a difference whenever you are doing for communities who are doing well. So when you are doing it for the poorer communities, it helps... something to look forward to, like we were once here but we can go back to where it used to be.

Many youth shared knowing the history of Braddock makes them “really want to strive to get that back.” Youth shared their frustration with having no amenities in Braddock. Echoing what was stated above, one youth said, “There’s no store down here.” A second youth shared, “That’s so sad. Like, there’s nowhere where you can go to get a bite to eat, for real. It’s sad

like. I want it to come alive like. I don't want to have to tell my daughter like this is how it was. I want her to see it for herself like [alive and thriving], not how it is now." A resonating theme was a sense of responsibility to the community and wanting to play a role in making it better. One youth shared, "Yeah, I just love everything about it. I just want to stay here, the whole time. I just want to help rebuild it as quick as possible. And anything I can do to help, I'm here." Another person credits his bond to community to his involvement with the BYP. He said, "I don't think I'd be so involved in the community if I hadn't joined BYP. I wouldn't really care. I'd still think of Braddock as the place that I live and want to get out of eventually, 'cause there's nothing to do. But I feel committed to changing it, being here to see the good things happen."

While spending time in Braddock completing focus groups and interviews, I heard others (staff and community members) articulate how much young people cared about their community. I also witnessed their dedication during my visits to the program. Youth always seemed to take their work seriously and were working on their projects and planning activities for future projects. During one visit, I observed youth taking part in the summer planning process. Youth gathered together and were writing down their ideas for the 2013 summer program. They were writing on note cards and talking with one another about necessary projects. They provided updates on the status of school-year projects and discussed project feasibility, given the number of summer youth and financial resources. The brainstorming and decision-making process was active with lots of talking. Youth spent time talking about their opinions and listen to their peers share their thoughts. It was evident that BYP members took the process seriously. They had faith in the process knowing their voices would to be heard. Project planning was in the purview of their responsibilities, as they are leaders and respected members of the BYP team. In informal conversations, youth also expressed their commitment to the community and their desire to make

it better. I decided to ask one of the graduated youth his opinion on whether young people do actually care about their community. He said:

Yeah. I do. I mean, I see it all the time, yeah. I mean, everybody loves Braddock, it's historic. I think everybody loves it... I mean, it's just the fact that there's some – there's a group of people that's given up on it completely. Not the young people, the young people like it.

For some, this love for the community is believed to stem from a sense of pride:

I mean it's where you come from, a sense of pride, like, no matter where you're at ... where you came from... I'm from Braddock. You want people to have that. You know where you're from, you have that pride in where you're from and like, and that's the thing about, you know, having landmarks or having places to go.

Some youth felt the work of the BYP has positively affected the state of the community.

“If BYP wasn't here, the Braddock community would... probably still go downhill... It's like BYP had a real big impact on Braddock. I don't know how but out of nowhere this came.” One youth confirmed this idea when sharing, “It made everyone want to be part of the community. Everybody wants to help change it.”

Countering the idea that everyone wants to be involved in the change efforts, the 2011 youth interns shared a desire to have the community be *more* involved in transforming Braddock. “We can't do it by ourselves. If we had more people, we could do it.” Addressing the idea of partnering with the community, one BYP member talked about youth being a significant asset to Braddock and the necessity of the community and youth working together to bring about greater change:

Well, I think one of the biggest things in Braddock is that that's what the kids *are* all about...And so I think the community already has, like a strong hold on what they want, and the love that we have for our community. We just need to find a way to bring it all together, and just everybody have peace and go about your way. But I think we, I think everyone has the love for the community already because, they already seen, like, what it once was, and I'm sure that everyone, even the toughest guy on the street, will say that he wants to see Braddock be the way it once used to be.

The same young person talked further about how some youth are engaged in making Braddock a better place, while other youth would benefit from having a chance to offer their ideas and talents to the community:

I think that like every poster that's hanging up on telephone poles, every new thing that's going down, everyone knows about the free store on Braddock Avenue that's getting a lot of interest. I just think that in this community, everyone's interested in something. They just don't know what they wanna do or how they can do it. So they take it out in different ways. And go about it different ways, and that's why they end up getting into trouble or something. And I just think that if more kids get involved in BYP, or a program like it, they can see what they can actually do, and how strong they are together.

As one youth said, being engaged in an environment where young people are able to make changes in the community allows youth to "improve their community." The sense of pride in the community discussed earlier extends to pride youth feel when they see the fruits of their labor. Youth said they feel proud when they see some of the projects they worked on:

And it's funny, but, like I said, you had that sense of pride, you walk past it, and even if you're not at work. Like, you drive past it, or you're talking to somebody – hey, 'you know that new sign in Braddock? I helped do that.'

I know my older brothers and sisters they did this [BYP] a couple of years ago and that sign down by the Rankin Bridge, Welcome to Historic Braddock: they helped build that and every time they ride by it they have that little proud moment, like we helped with that. And I like that I can ride through Braddock and that garden right there I helped with that. I helped. I helped make a difference in Braddock.

Even youth who reside outside of Braddock, see the value in rebuilding the community. One youth said, "I don't live in Braddock, but I live in North Braddock, and I still associate myself with people from Braddock. I be down here most days normally. I can do it without living here. Even if you're not from here, you still see a reason why you should fix it up." Another youth shared, "I'm not from here either. I'm not from Braddock, but that's the thing about BYP it can help other youth and other communities get better, and doing things. We should help our community out."

Youth described some success in building the community back up. One youth said when he drives through the neighborhood, he sees all the changes made in recent years. While the changes are impressive, he hopes for more to come. He talked about the challenge of seeing the current success in the context of the once vibrancy of Braddock's past. As he said, "When you look at what Braddock used to be, that's a lot," meaning there is so much more to do to bring the community back.

A few youth discussed how the reputation of Braddock is beginning to change. They believe this to be a reflection of what has been happening in the community. One youth explained:

It's important to be involved, because it's my community. Everyone, not recently, everyone used to think of Braddock as a really bad place and stuff. My cousin wouldn't come over or she wouldn't be allowed to be out in the streets with me because her mom told her that Braddock is a bad place and stuff. Now I think a lot of people's opinions are changing and it's for the better.

Reflecting on the changes in the community, one youth said he noticed how things have improved since he was younger:

When I [was growing] up, I [was] just always looking out the car window, driving through Braddock with my mom and dad, and we're just like, looking at things. And I'm just like, looking at the community and stuff, and just, now that I'm older seeing how much has changed ... As I'm working in the community, I'm really noticing how much is changing and how different it is.

Several of the youth in the café group felt the café was going to have a positive impact on the development and revitalization of the community. As one youth said, "We are going to be serving food. It will give people a place to eat." She noted the food will be healthy, providing an added benefit to the community.

7.2 “WE ARE GOOD FOR THE WHOLE COMMUNITY”

Youth recognized, and were proud of, the impacts they had on the community of Braddock. Their work improved the neighborhood in multiple ways. BYP youth were keenly aware of the community needs, expressed a sense of responsibility to respond to those needs, and *have* responded through improving the physical landscape, providing healthy food, mentoring younger children, producing relevant videos, and creating community events. One youth summed up how many youth described their efforts: “We are good for the whole community, ‘cause like it’s much cleaner than it used to be. There’s more gardens, you can go and pick fruits and stuff. It’s more organized.” Another youth shared – with agreement from other focus group members – that their goal is “to make Braddock a better place, to make the community better and safe.”

The following sections address each of the ways – knowing the community, improving the physical landscape, providing healthy food, mentoring younger children, producing relevant videos, and creating community events – that youth interface with the community to make it a better place.

7.2.1 Knowing community needs

Young people described understanding the challenges and needs in the Braddock community. As one youth, among several with similar perspectives, said, “I would say that I do know what the community needs.” Expanding on this idea, one youth talked about how and why young people understand what is happening in the community:

Yeah, ‘cause they live in it. They know what happens. They know every crime that happens. They know every story that goes through. They hear people talk. Every day, it’s always going to be the same. Not really, it’s not always going to be the same. Somehow, somewhere, it’s going to click one day.

Responding to the belief by many adults that young people lack the knowledge and experience to understand what a community needs, one of the graduated youth shared:

I feel like they think that kids don't understand, because they are kids. They are younger and they haven't been there. You know they say 'a child has to stay in a child's place and a child doesn't know.' If you haven't been through it, you don't know. But I believe you don't have to be a genius to see that the community's not doing well. You go to other communities and you say, 'this community's nice, that community's nice,' and then you go back to your community and you're like, 'this isn't doing as good as other ones.' So I don't believe that is a valid argument. I don't believe that, because you know, everyone can see when a community is not doing well.

When asked if young people should be involved in the community, a youth shared, "There's a lot of young people who can change this community." Another youth shared, "Youth are an important voice in the community, 'cause they are going to be there for the rest of their lives hopefully; around that area, at least. And they should contribute to their community if they can and want to." Acknowledging that Braddock is "a poor community" with a lack of economy and a place where "wrong decisions" were made, he noted that youth have made considerable changes in the community and anticipates more to come. "That's why BYP, basically, was here and actually it's done a lot, but I bet there's going to be a lot more that happens too." Other youth agree that young people should be involved in the community. The rationale for the youths' inclusion in the community varies widely and includes these thoughts:

So you can feel like you did something.

You have a real sense of pride when you know you did something in the community.

It's just like before the program, I used to think we didn't make an effect on the community. Now that we work here, I feel like we can.

We get around. We have friends in the community and we spread what we do.

We work.

Speaking further on the topic of youth engagement in the community, one youth said, “I think people our age should be setting the standards for the younger kids.” Another youth discussed the necessity of having young people in the community making positive changes. This youth described things in the community as “horrible, just plain bad,” and “it just keeps on bringing on different generations of the bad things.” This young person believed BYP youth are helping break the cycle of people doing negative things because they are “step[ping] up to more responsibility.” BYP members encourage and influence other young people to do better; as another youth added, “and the kids see other kids doing it and they are going to want to do it too.” BYP youth help other kids by modeling how to do positive things in the community. “So we look like leaders to them.” Youth reported feeling respected by other kids and youth for their efforts in the community.

One youth said the BYP has given him a sense of community that previously did not exist. He explained:

I feel like BYP has given me a real sense of community ‘cause before, before I got this job, it was my first job and I just kind of lived in Braddock. I moved from McKeesport two years earlier, and then once I joined BYP and got into the school year program like we were doing all of these different events and meeting community members and different people and it just really got me connected to the community.

In terms of participation in community development, one BYP member talked about youth being the future of the community but wanting and needing to be engaged in community development efforts before they reach adulthood. This young person articulated what has been argued in the literature; youth have the interest and energy to create change in the community:

I feel like they do. I feel like they do. Like I said before and seeing what we did at BYP I believe, I’m a firm believer that children can do it. As kids and youth, we have so much more energy to do things than older adults. People get older, they don’t have as much energy to do things anymore. So I feel like it is up to the kids to get a chance because we are the future. The youth are going to be the future and if we don’t start doing little things in the community now, then when we get older in our communities like that we are

going to be the same way some of these older adults are concerning the community [speaking to the disinterest in community affairs].

Other youth shared a similar position. One youth stated, “I just think it’s important because, like, it’s like kinda cliché, but the youth are the future to every community...People are only gonna live so long, and they’re only gonna be around so long. Only gonna be healthy for so long.” This youth went on to share that youth often do not realize their potential or capacity to make a big change. He stated:

Just kinda make a statement every day, and learn something new every day. And just let yourself be known, because you’re young, you’re healthy. If someone’s going to pay attention to you if, that’s what some youth have trouble with. No one pays attention to them at home, so whenever they’re out in the community, they think, like, ‘oh, it doesn’t matter, I don’t matter,’ and stuff like that when they really do matter, and they really can make a big change. So, just, I just think that it’s real big and real important for youth these days.

On this topic, another youth said young people should be involved in the community because “it is their community, and they are young so they are going to be around to see it for years.” In a focus group, when young people were asked why they were invested in making their community better one responded, “because we live here.” Exploring this further, it was stated by one BYP member:

I’ve been here all my life. This is all I know. I don’t know nothing about the city like Braddock and the Mon Valley, that’s all I know. If you put me on the Northside, I’d be so scared. I don’t know nothing...I’m here all my life. Since like 2008, there hasn’t been a murder and stuff, and I think like I’m not saying that BYP got something to do with that, but it’s like more positive stuff. Like the mayor is doing more project things like so I guess. I don’t know. That’s why I care because I’m from here. BYP youth are committed to addressing the needs of the community.

BYP youth are committed to addressing the needs of the community.

7.2.2 Improving the physical landscape

Physical changes in the community were noted to be an important way youth have altered Braddock. Articulating the sentiments of many, one youth said, “I think we are just making it

look better.” Youth in the 2011 Intern focus group said they made the community look good to other people, but, as stated earlier, there is a lack of commitment from others in the community. As one youth described, we “don’t have the movement in Braddock.” Adding to this, a couple of youth in this group said they would like to have others living in Braddock participate more in maintaining the community. There was also some discussion in the 2011 Intern group about youth not getting enough credit for the work they do. One youth in particular alleged that others in the community get credit for their efforts. Because they have not seen others assuming roles in the community, youth in the 2011 Intern group shared feeling like they were not seeing things change in the community. Youth in other focus groups disagreed with this statement, adding they have witnessed much change. They noted the presence of “benches everywhere.” They also mentioned the flowers and the four different gardens, the raised beds built in people’s yards, and the picnic tables. The community murals and the Welcome to Braddock sign were also credited to youth efforts (in collaboration with others). One youth exclaimed, “We’ve added a lot of physical things to make the community look better.”

Young people also talked about “picking up garbage” and the impact that has on improving the appearance of the community. Youth said they see people in the community throwing trash on the ground while standing next to a garbage can. This seemed to be a predominant problem in the community because clean-ups were an ongoing project for the youth. Their efforts to keep the neighborhood clean, along with using vacant lots to make gardens, were considered important steps in improving the community. A youth noted, “It makes the place look nicer.” Another youth explained the community can look “so junkie.” Therefore, she advocated for “cleaning it up, talking to people more, and gardening, and finding

ways to make these empty lots be used.” These efforts, she noted, make people in the community take notice, and they prompt others to start cleaning up the community.

7.2.3 Providing healthy food

In addition to beautifying the neighborhood, youth provide food to the community through their gardening efforts. Youth work in the gardens created by the BYP and also with another local non-profit organization, Grow Pittsburgh. These gardens provide organic produce either free or at low cost to residents. Youth see this as an essential way of helping their community. One youth shared:

I feel like it not only helped the kids, like give them something to do during their summer, but like we all said Grow Pittsburgh and gardening specifically like they impact the community, because like I know Grow Pittsburgh offers the community fresh grown, organically grown vegetables. So that’s a really good thing and they sell it on Saturdays. I feel like that’s a good thing, because it’s less store bought and pesticides. It’s healthier.

A number of youth talked about being able to provide organic food to the community. This seemed to be an important contribution. Youth also talked about how food was specifically grown for the community and this was important to note. They respond to the desires and demands of the local residents. A young person talked about how community members “love the stuff we grow. So it has to make them healthier, happier as well.” This same youth talked further:

The actual health and that’s what’s good to see. Like, the older people in Braddock from the senior home down there, they come down to the farm stand and get their vegetables and stuff, and, like, they don’t really know what benefit they’re getting off of buying and eating these vegetables, but, it’s actually a big benefit.

He also shared this about vegetables promoting health: “I mean it had to make people eat healthier, because all our stuff is organic and, we gave all our stuff away for free. And Braddock Farms sold theirs for dirt cheap, so our community has to be eating healthier.”

The idea that food can be purchased or obtained for free in the neighborhood was a source of pride for some youth. They were pleased to be able to supply their community with food, “so they’re not going all the way to [the chain grocery store outside of their community].” Providing food, especially healthy food, was also important because there is no grocery store in Braddock and few places to purchase any type of food. Youth were grateful to contribute to the health of their community by helping people “eat the right way.”

Some of the youth who graduated from BYP talked about providing food to the community through a raised bed garden project. During this project several years ago, youth built gardens at the homes of community members, so they could grow their own food.

7.2.4 Mentoring younger children

The area in which youth believed they made the largest impact is in mentoring the younger youth and kids in the community. Discussions about mentoring fell into two categories; one was interns mentoring the younger BYP members and the second was BYP youth in general, formally and informally mentoring younger kids living in Braddock.

Youth interns serve as mentors to the younger generation of BYP members. The interns believed they play an important role in the program by providing younger people an example of a leader. One youth shared, “I think better role models to look up to, like with the staff and the interns.” A critical reason for having interns is to provide young people positive role models who are closer in age:

I think us working with them teaches responsibility. ‘Cause I know they don’t take teachers that seriously and they may not take the team leaders that seriously. But when they see other people their age, for real, is doing the same thing, and they’re like being responsible about it and not always joking around and not always thinking everything’s a big joke like. I think that’s helping them a lot to mature some and to take this seriously.

The graduated youth discussed developing the intern position for two reasons; one so that younger youth had other youth to look up to and second to provide youth positions of leadership at BYP. I observed interns working in leadership positions mentoring younger BYP youth. The interns seemed to take their roles seriously. Among other things, I watched them spending time teaching youth new skills. The couple of times I was able to observe, the interns seemed patient and conveyed information in ways the younger BYP members could understand. The interns were also supportive. In one of the focus group interviews with youth in the summer program, the youth seemed shy and were initially quiet and offered short answers. The intern stepped in and suggested they talk about how they feel and told the youth that their experiences were important. The interview became a rich discussion after the intern's intervention.

Youth at BYP, interns and program participants, reached out to younger kids in the community in a myriad of ways. BYP youth were extremely dedicated to this work and were proud of their connection with the younger generation. One youth explained that they "tutor the kids, mentor them [so they] have someone to look up." A different youth confirmed:

There's more role models for younger ones, so they can keep their head on straight, stay out of trouble. Like when people from BYP be around, they be picking up stuff and don't litter. They pick stuff up and put it in the garbage. Little kids see that they are going to do the same thing that you are doing 'cause they are working with the BYP kids. They are positive role models.

Many of the youth (male and female) said the best thing they do is work with the younger kids. There was much agreement in a focus group when one youth said, "I like the kids. They are fun to play with." Another group of BYP youth reiterated this when I asked them what they enjoyed about their work at BYP: "It's all about the kids. I'm going with the kids too... and I really love kids too. And I'm really good with kids. It's all about the kids!" This is also an area where they feel they are making a difference in the community. "Yes, with the kids we are

making a big difference.” Talking about their own experience working with kids, one person shared, “I think I made an impact with a child I was working with. I helped him with his homework a lot.” A youth in the Healthy Practices group was proud to announce, “Yeah, I was even able to teach some kids how to swim.” This work was gratifying for him and he took his role extremely seriously. He was pleased with being able to help kids be successful. He said, “In fact, some of the kids I taught are thinking about going out for swim team.” He shared this with enthusiasm and a great sense of satisfaction.

The BYP, Jr. group worked with kids at a local child care organization. Their mentoring with kids in the center is extensive. They offer a wide range of activities for the kids, including teaching about healthy eating, bullying and other health related topics. The gardening group engages with the kids around planting and tending to the garden. One youth said, “They love planting.” Another said, “They like seeing things grow.” The youth articulated that the kids appreciate them and are glad to have them around. One youth said, “When you go to [name of child care center], the kids get so happy to see us like. They all want to hug us.” During the summer of 2012, I went on a garden tour of the BYP garden. While the group was walking from the community center to the garden, we caught up to a group of the young kids from the child care center who were out for a walk. When they saw some of the young men from BYP, the kids ran over and threw the arms around the young men in big hugs. The kids were smiling and talking. It was clear that the kids cared about the BYP team members. I could see the faces of the youth during all of this, and they were smiling at the children while hugging all of them. BYP youth said goodbye to the kids, hugged them again and told them they would be down to see them soon. From this interaction, a caring and kind reciprocal relationship seemed evident.

Additionally, in all of the interview and focus group discussions when BYP members talked about the children in the community they would smile and their faces would light up.

In one of the focus group discussions, BYP members talked about a social experiment they conducted in the summer of 2012. They gave away free hugs around Braddock. As part of this experiment, youth from the BYP went to the child care center to give hugs to the children and staff. One youth said of the experience, “The kids were so happy people were giving them hugs.” Providing tenderness, attention, and affection, as well as teaching and playing, are an important components of the mentoring they provide to the younger citizens of Braddock.

Reflecting on mentoring, one of the graduated youth shared his experience with teaching younger kids in the community how to play basketball. He and some other BYP youth would teach younger kids how to play basketball and then would spend time practicing with them. He said whenever he saw the kids around the neighborhood they would ask him, “hey, when are we gonna have those practices again?” He said the kids really liked playing and would come back to the courts often to spend time with other youth and BYP youth leaders.

As stated previously, youth inspire other young people, whether it is family members or youth in the community, to consider changing their community by working at BYP. In a focus group discussion, a youth talked about the curiosity of one of the younger kids involved in BYP, Jr, “Yeah. There’s a girl down at BYP, Jr. She always asks questions about ‘how can you get into it?’ ‘How does it work?’ ‘How many years have you been in it?’ It’s a lot of questions.”

Youth in the 2011 focus group had the following conversation regarding inspiring others:

Youth 1: I think we’ve made an impact; we’ve inspired other people to come here.

Youth 2: Like youth

Youth 3: The last few years a whole bunch of people coming here.

In response to this conversation, one youth said the feedback he received was that youth only come to BYP to get paid. He said “That’s like half the people I know that have worked here.” One youth in the focus group responded to this by retorting, “I don’t think so.” He added the reason youth participated is because they care about the community. The idea that youth participate in the BYP simply for the money was not found in other interviews. Although many youth did share initially joining the program to make money or to have a job, they discovered more important reasons for staying and participating in the community (see the section on BYP being more than a job).

In discussing mentors and role models with one of the graduated youth, I asked about male role models for kids in Braddock. He said, “I don’t think there are any male role models. I see kids now... These kids now they are getting younger and more grown. It’s hard. I don’t see too much male role models, though I see a couple.” BYP youth are changing this dynamic in the community. The young men in BYP are serving as male role models for younger kids.

7.2.5 Producing relevant videos

Youth believed the videos and PSAs they create have a positive impact on the community. Over the years, youth have created videos on a variety of topics, including but not limited to, drinking and driving, pollution, violence, gun violence, healthy eating, and pregnancy. One youth also mentioned a video on “Braddock’s thoughts about how to make the community better.” Speaking to the importance of their media work, one of the youth said, “I think our videos send out a message.” Another youth explained the videos also bring visibility to BYP and the Braddock neighborhood, as some of the video are posted on various websites. Greenearth.com was one of the mentioned sites.

7.2.6 Creating community events

Youth asserted the community events they create play an important role in the community. “If BYP weren’t here, there wouldn’t be ... activities for us to do, things that we can come see. And I think if BYP wasn’t here half of the community would not be like this.” One of the youth who has been with BYP for years shared this perspective:

I think that the events, a lot of events that they plan and stuff are very good for the community, as far as getting kids to come out, getting people more involved in the communities. I mean I seen some people at their lowest points and, out of nowhere, they’re working at one of the BYP’s events, just volunteering or something. And it just seems like, every time I see them after that, they just seem like they’re getting better and better and better. And looking better and it seems like they’re feeling better, and so I’m just like, BYP is helping a lot of people. I mean we hold movies night, karaoke night, just anything to bring the community closer. And stuff like that. And it’s good to see people come in and, just, eating and having a good time, at whatever event we’re having.

A common statement expressed by BYP youth regarding the events was “we do a lot of things.” Some of the community events mentioned during interviews included block parties, basketball tournaments, community days, bowling, karaoke nights, and movie events. One summer, youth organized a march against violence. The basketball tournament organized a few years back was reported to be a big hit in the community. Talking about this event, one youth said, “There were like 100 kids there. It was really, really hot that day but a lot of people still came out.” Youth felt the events are a means to getting people together; allowing for community members to meet new people, enjoy each other, and just do little things. One youth shared, “We need more community events so that people can be friends instead of enemies when you live two streets away or whatever.”

The community seems to be responding to these efforts to connect community members. One youth shared:

I've noticed a lot more people coming to events within the past few years. Like whenever BYP would have our block party, there was like there would barely be anybody. Or some of our events there would be like no more than 10 people coming, but now like most of our events I feel like there's always a good turnout.

In 2013, I attending the Collard Greens Cook Off, a community event organized by the BYP. I observed a robust affair, with what seemed to be a good community turnout.

Community members were competitors in the cook off and attendants of the event. Former AmeriCorps members and former youth also attended the event. Everyone seemed to have an enjoyable time, laughing, talking and eating. People seemed to stay at the event most of the afternoon, even after eating. I watched people sitting and chatting with those around them and others milling about the room conversing with other attendees. I introduced myself to several community members and spoke with them about the event. Several said they really enjoyed the Cook Off and have come to this event in the past. In one conversation, a long time community member talked about how it was nice to have events in Braddock, and that she enjoyed seeing her neighbors because she rarely sees them in passing. A resident who recently moved into the neighborhood talked about how fun it was to participate in the event.

BYP members are aware they are doing good work in the community and several expressed a desire for the program to be expanded in Braddock and replicated in other communities. Youth indicated the BYP should be expanded to include more young people in the program; "more people our age" should be hired. Also, efforts should include expanding into other communities. In a focus group with BYP Interns, one youth stated, "You know what would be good, if we had different branches; like this program in Rankin, Swissvale, East Pittsburgh, North Braddock. If we all got together one day." Support this idea, another group member said, "That would be cool." Further championing the idea, someone exclaimed, "Wouldn't that be amazing." Youth liked the idea of the different groups getting together to

have a group cleanup in different neighborhoods and “clean up those neighborhoods.” Many youth agreed that this would be a great idea. One said, “Yeah, that would be way fun.” The research team agreed with this concept and discussed the idea for some time during one of the analysis meetings. They believed that many other poor neighborhoods could be improved by having their own BYP. One of the youth in a focus group discussion said her mother’s friends are always asking her questions about the program and what she does. They want programs for their own communities. They say to her, “Oh, my community needs something like that for the kids.” The youth said she responds, “Yes, it a great thing in our community.”

7.3 “HEY, THOSE ARE TEENAGERS AND THEY ARE DOING STUFF”

A common topic discussed among youth was that adults look at youth differently because of their work at BYP. Those youth interviewed understood that generally adults hold somewhat negative impressions of young people. Some of the assumptions adults hold include that youth (teenagers) care little about their community, they are out running the streets, and generally they are up to no good. BYP members believed adults saw them differently because of the community work they do through the BYP. A previous gardening participant talked about how the youth in the gardening team used to go out in a big group and people would notice them walking down the street. He said people really took note of them and their contributions to the community: “Hey, those are teenagers and they are doing stuff.” During a focus group discussion, several youth described shaping the views and opinions of adults about who young people are and what they do. One youth stated, “... it’s affected it positively. They’ll see young people spending their time doing something good not bad, like gardening... It gets a lot of kids involved.” A different youth in the group responded, “I think they like to [see us] doing

something rather than being in the streets.” Another BYP member followed with, “Yeah, doing something positive.” Youth in different focus groups echoed the sentiments of those above:

I think we are just setting a positive example for people who maybe don't know what BYP is. They kind of learn about it. Just like, these kids are actually doing something to help their community.

I also think since in a neighborhood like this where people think of teenagers do like negative things and it's like we set an example that shows that we're not just that type of people.

Yeah. Some of the other adults in the community they see you and they know you are doing a good job and that you're not doing anything horrible or anything. So, it shows a lot of positive spin on the youth.

We could be doing anything right now, we could be at Sandcastle or the wave pool or something but we chose to come here and like put some work into our community and make it better; shows that we care, so. I think this has a great impact on the community. I feel like we've changed people's, uh, how they look at youth in this community. Like before, like I say, if we didn't have this job we'd be on the streets. That's how most adults would look at it.

As noted above, youth are showing adults, through their hard work and dedication to the community, how young people can be positive resources in their community. In terms of adults seeing youth differently, one youth summed this all up by saying “I think adults get a good feeling to see sometimes their kids and just youth in the community doing work.”

Speaking to the community response to BYP youth, one of the young men involved with BYP for many years said people look at youth differently now. He said, “I feel like that's changed a lot. People like appreciate the work you do and they don't speak to you like you're a child. They speak to you with respect and like you are just like them.” When I asked him how people in Braddock look at teenagers he said, “I think pretty positively now. I guess that might not be true, but at least for BYP. I've noticed adults, they really enjoy the company of the youth here and stuff, and they have been really outgoing and kind and stuff like that.” The following is from an interview with a young person who participated in the early years of the BYP. She felt

people realized that many of the beautification projects were spearheaded by BYP youth. (She did note that some resulted from collaborations with regional artists):

I feel that it made people to see, you know, there are people – children, kids – who are trying to be active, to do things and I know some people walk by and seen that there were kids doing that, even when we did the thing where the artist came in, and they did the painting. Those paintings are still all over the place. The place still looks beautiful, and I walk past them, and I'm like we were involved and a part of that and it touches me. If it touches me and I did it, I know it touches other people because BYP really did a lot of things in Braddock - the paintings and they made the Welcome to Braddock sign with the dog on top of it. They made the garden and I know people realize that wasn't something that was there before. There was a welcome to Historic Braddock sign, a plain sign and now it's beautiful, and I feel like that impacted people. I feel like it did. I feel like they knew the kids were involved and seen us working hard, and I mean it wasn't done before so we got in there and started making a change.

The prevalent view among the youth was that adults appreciated the work of youth.

However, several youth talked about how some people in Braddock did not appreciate the work youth were doing:

Most of the community appreciates the, I don't even want to say it like this, but there's a lot of snotty older people in Braddock, that don't. They think that we don't really do anything for [the] money [we earn]. Like we just, they just think we just get paid to come here. And they don't really see all the work that we put into [the community] and stuff like that. So they wouldn't understand. But that's just the older people, I'd say like, 45 and up.

This youth said the younger people in the community who know BYP recognized their efforts. This includes other young people who previously worked for BYP because “they know what you're all about.” He felt those who supported the BYP youth served as a nice counter to the “oh, those are the people that ‘do nothing’ for money” people. In one of the focus groups, youth talked about how older people “don't get that we are a big impact.” Several youth in this focus group and other youth in individual interviews talked about the recent destruction of one of the first youth gardens. One youth exclaimed, “You see what they did to the garden.” A local organization procured funding for playground equipment and renovation. Without consulting

with BYP youth, they tore down the garden space and constructed the new play area. Many youth were insulted and hurt by this action. Expressing his feelings, one youth said, “When they changed it I was mad.” This action served as evidence to them that youth were not respected by this organization.

Another youth felt that while some people don’t appreciate what BYP youth are doing to revitalize the community, others do. Those who do can see the transformation:

I mean to be honest some people do, some people don’t. But I feel like the people who needed to appreciate it did. The people who lived in Braddock for a long time, for years who have seen it where it was and seen where it’s at now and seen where it’s going to go, I’m pretty sure they appreciated seeing something going on, something getting started here.

While being in BYP is changing the collective image of youth, one young man talked about his personal experience of how being in BYP changed people’s opinion of him. He started:

I feel like I met a lot of new people that lived in my community, but I never really met them or anything before. And I feel like I changed. I changed their impression of me, like, or, like if they seen me one day and I wasn’t working, they’d be like, ‘oh, he’s a little thug or something.’ But then like they see me doing something for the community like, they’re like, ‘oh, this is actually a good guy.’ Then they start seeing me more and more. I think that’s how I built my relationship with [name of a community member]. Not saying that she thought of me as a thug or anything, but me and [name of community member] never really knew each other and then it was like one event that we did or something like that. And she must have just noticed that I was working hard and just started talking to me. And we just started talking. And that’s how me and her clicked.

In an informal discussion with this youth, he told me a story of how recently he had a conversation with a community member. He asked the gentlemen where he lived in Braddock and the gentleman gave his address. The youth asked the gentleman if he knew a woman by the name of [name of women] who lived on the same street years ago. The man said he did and responded that she had some children who were hellions. The youth laughed and told the man that he was one of those children. The man laughed also and commented on how well he turned

out. The youth told me this was true and said his behavior changed as a result of his involvement in the Braddock Youth Project.

Debunking the myths about youth and putting forward a new image of what it means to be a young person has resulted in adults appreciating youth in a new way. In one of the focus group discussions, a young woman shared the following story, underscoring how youth at the BYP are changing the perceptions of young people:

I know one time I was up at [name of local market]. It's right when you come into Braddock, and I had that shirt on (points to one particular BYP shirt) and he [an older man] was like 'oh you work down there at BYP?' And I was like 'yeah.' He was like 'ya'll keep it up. Ya'll some great young folks.' The other girl [a girl with the older gentleman] was like, 'what's BYP?' [the older man said] 'I don't know. I just know they do a lot of good stuff.' It was really funny. He was really old and stuff, even he knew who we was. He didn't know what we do, for real, but he knew who we was.

The BYP t-shirts, worn by youth during their work day, seem to have become a symbol in the community. Many youth said they are recognized by their t-shirts and the t-shirt will prompt conversations with community members. A former BYP member said, "Well when I was a youth, we always, it always felt good because there was always people looking at us, because it was always like no less than five of us, and we always had our BYP shirts on."

Another youth shared:

When I have a BYP shirt on; when I'm walking from work or something, like I still have my shirt on and I walk to the store or something, people be asking, people be saying 'oh yeah, you work for BYP' and 'I'm like, yeah'. They say 'oh, that's a good program' There's a whole conversation about it. People like to see stuff like that in the community that's going to help their community. Every time I walk, nobody, really, there's no dislike. Yeah, people honk they horns and all that. If you have your BYP shirt on people will.

Others who participated in that focus group agreed that people will honk their horn at the youth when they have their t-shirts on. Another person in the group added to the response, "respect you." A different youth responded to this by adding, "Respect you and they are going

to notice you. They are going to ask you a question, ask you about BYP like ... I see you have a BYP shirt on andall of that.” In another focus group, youth talked about people honking their horns at the youth in appreciation and giving them the “thumbs up.” Younger children in the community also take notice of the t-shirts and engage in conversation with the BYP youth. This allows BYP youth to share information about the program. One youth articulated, “It helps the community because some of the younger kids get to see you with a BYP shirt on and like ‘oh, you work at BYP? How does it work?’ And then they start asking questions and then it just don’t stop.” A second youth said, “Yeah, like some of the kids say ‘what does BYP stand for?’ Stuff like that. That’s like when you have the shirt on, they respect you more.”

7.4 CONCLUSION

As evidenced by this chapter, youth provide meaningful and sustainable community develop projects to their community. These projects respond to and address a myriad of community needs and build on the strengths of the community. Youth are aware of the vibrant history of their neighborhood and hope to rebuild it. Their creative solutions and community collaborations are moving the neighborhood to better place. They are receiving growing appreciation by local residents of their efforts. Through their work, youth believe they are challenging the notion of what it means to be a young person in Braddock. Young people are seen as doing good not bad.

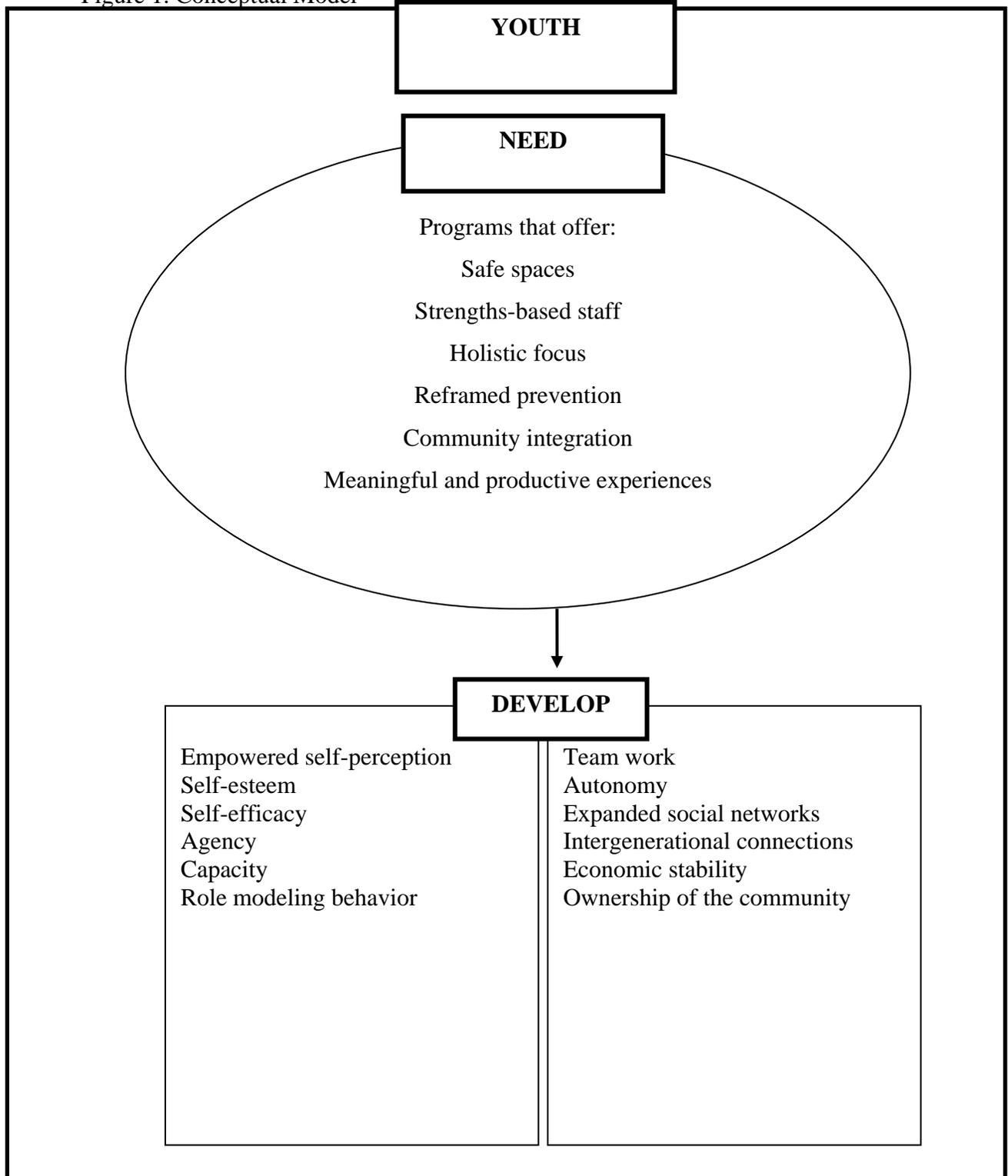
8.0 DISCUSSION

This dissertation provides insights into how youth perceive their role as change agents in community development. Youth at the BYP expressed aspirations to be involved in making Braddock better. They described having ideas for improving the community and the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance the landscape of the neighborhood. Their views shared during focus group and interview discussions lead to answering a question posed by Finn and Checkoway (1998), who ask, “What would happen if society viewed young people as competent community builders?” This dissertation provides a glimpse into how youth can engage and participate in their community when given the opportunity to be leaders. This research both confirms the theoretical claims and previous research in the literature about how youth can impact their community and creates new knowledge about how to promote young people in community leadership.

Based on my research, I developed a conceptual model to explain how youth move from being young people living in a community to engaged citizens making changes within a community. In the case of the BYP, this happens through an organization, where young people and adults work together with the aim of improving the community. In Figure 1, I detail what youth need from an organization and what they develop when engaged in a program that practices youth participation principles – empowering youth to take part in and influence decisions that affect their lives, taking action on issues they care about, and involvement in institutions that affect their lives (O’Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). In terms of what youth need from a program, six essential factors were noted by youth. These factors include: safe spaces, strengths-based staff, holistic focus, reframed

prevention, community integration, and meaningful and productive experiences. I describe each of these factors and their importance in detail here.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Young people require *safe spaces* to spend time. A youth program should be perceived as a safe place by young people. Youth in this study define a safe space as one that provides both physical and emotional safety, to ensure that youth can thrive and grow. Programs often attempt to address physical safety, but they often neglect to attend to emotional aspects of safety. While a physically safe environment is immensely important, it is simply not enough. Youth need and want supportive and caring environments, where they feel free to take emotional risks, try new things, meet new and different people, and learn new skills. They also need safe settings to build their strengths and confidence. Emotionally safe settings encourage youth to reach beyond their comfort zone, even when their efforts may end in failure or embarrassment. When youth felt cared about by staff and other youth, they became secure enough in themselves to take emotional risks and try things, including things like being silly and playful.

A positive setting is key to making youth feel secure. Adults and other staff (youth interns and adults alike) need to be happy and “smiley,” as this leads to youth mirroring these responses. This attitude becomes infectious; as youth said, “You don’t got no choice but to be happy too.” A setting that helps youth shift gears after a bad day also ensures that youth feel secure. Having a family-like environment that makes youth feel like they are at their “second home” is created by trusting and nurturing relationships with staff and other youth, and is interpreted to be a protected place. When youth feel safe in the spaces they spend time, transformation can happen. This takes time, patience, and commitment on the part of the program. This research found that some young people find it challenging to trust other people, including staff and other young people.

In terms of safety, a program has to balance providing a protective environment with allowing young people to be out in the community actually doing things that make it safer. The

interventions youth create need to attend to the real problems and experiences of the community; yet young people need to know they are safe in their efforts to make change. This research also found that safe spaces for youth can be used to provide a sanctuary to the neighborhood. For example, when youth hold community events, they are creating safe places for community members to come to have fun, away from the other things going on in the neighborhood.

It is critical to have staff who maintain a *strengths-based* perspective and value youth as collaborators and partners. Staff must be willing to share power and decision making with youth. Reciprocal and mutual relationships make young people feel that adults respect them, listen to them, and believe in their abilities to act for themselves. Youth do not need adults who “seek to save, protect, and defend them from conditions that affect them,” nor do they need adults who desire to represent their interests without actually being accountable to the youth in any way (Checkoway, 2005; Checkoway & Guterrez, 2006, p. 3). This research found that adults should convey a sense of being committed to helping, but they need to let youth express their ideas and aims. Jackson (2009) promoted the idea of adults moving away from being the experts in relationships with youth. In his experience, being the expert prevented him from providing the best possible service to the people he wanted to help the most. He found when entrenched in the role of expert, adults stand in the way of youth fulfilling their full potential and participating in their own development. This research found that youth wanted adults to help them succeed in their efforts and not dissuade them from experimenting and trying different approaches. Youth appreciated being presented options and alternative ideas, rather than being given rote responses and suggestions.

In terms of desirable attributes, this research found that youth preferred to be surrounded by staff who are nice, kind, flexible and fun. Adults need to be willing to work with a diverse

population of young people and be open to different personalities. Making an effort to get to know youth, their interests and ideas, is important. Other key qualities in staff included being “down to earth,” open, honest, and a willingness to share about yourself. Staff need to be supporters, mentors, and sometimes friends who often maintain long-term connections and provide assistance to young people even after they leave the program.

When working with youth, a *holistic program* affords the flexibility to respond to a wide range of needs and hopes. Young people, especially those in communities burdened by poverty and racism, face many challenges, and it is incumbent upon a program to support youth in addressing the myriad issues they face. Issues youth face are related to schools and other institutions, family, and peers. As this research found, a program is helpful to youth when it is perceived to assist youth with everything they need. A program offering a holistic approach provides youth the chance to build a host of new and wide-ranging skills. Attending to individual needs of youth and giving individual attention is necessary. This research found that schools are not perceived to meet all of the educational needs of young people and parents may lack the resources and/or skills to help their children advance. A program can provide opportunities that in the words of one youth “most adults [in their community] never even had.” Additionally, parents may be working outside of the home a significant amount of time in order to provide for the family. For these and many other reasons, youth programs need to do more than provide services that address one aspect of a young person’s life. Findings from this research also show that a youth program can bring significant resources to bear on a community. They can offer computers, various software programs, learning opportunities, economic resources, nutritious foods, opportunities to see other communities, and connections to other organizations and individuals.

“Crime, drugs, dropouts, pregnancy: These are the types of images that permeate professional and popular thinking about youth” (Finn & Checkoway, 1998, p. 336). While these conditions are realities facing youth in Braddock and in other poor neighborhoods, they are, in fact, counter to a productive *framing of prevention*. This study, like others (Kohler, 1981; Pittman, 2000) suggests that prevention should aim to do more than solely prevent “negative” behaviors or outcomes by filling idle time and keeping kids off the streets. Instead, prevention efforts should be reframed to focus on channeling youths’ energies, ideas, and time in areas of interest to them. Youth should not be required to work on projects and activities that they do not consider worthy of their time. When youth have a say over how they spend their time, they know they are valued as decision makers and leaders, and they are more likely to be engaged. Because there are fewer options for productive activities in poor communities, youth are at greater risk for “running the streets,” which can result in their involvement in either negative or illegal activities.

Programs that encourage youth to take part in interesting activities and create an atmosphere where they want to spend time do more for youth than aim to prevent negative behaviors. Rather than focusing on traditional prevention norms of treatment or rehabilitation, a youth participatory model hones the strengths of youth (Finn & Checkoway, 1998). This research found that youth do want something to do with their time, other than “run the streets,” but they remained active and involved in the program because it gave them something to do that felt meaningful and important. This involvement in positive activities and being around positive people was more important than simply having something that filled their time. An interesting area for future research is the idea that traditional prevention efforts may not be successful because programs, as one youth posed, are not “preventing anything ‘cause there’s not much it

can stop.” However, they can, in this youth’s opinion, “influence them to do better things ... influence to do the right thing.”

Community integration suggests that youth be immersed in the community and be given real roles in community development. These roles should be more than token offers, as real opportunities ensure that youth gain skills and develop. Villarruel and colleagues (2003) suggest that youth should develop in community settings where youth, their peers and their families spend time rather than in places where youth are isolated from the community. Findings from this research suggest the same. Programs should ensure that youth are well-acquainted with the community, including its history. The historical perspective seems to link youth to the community in a deeper way. This research shows that youth are acutely aware of community conditions, including the lack of necessary amenities, poverty, violence, the drug economy, and the deteriorating infrastructure. Projects should be carried out in the community as much as possible in order to keep young people in touch with what is happening; also, when youth are present and visible to members of the community, the public gains an awareness of the program and the efforts of young people. Findings from this research support Kohler’s (1981) claims that youth benefit in multiple ways from fully participating in their community including: decision making, collaborative work with adults, satisfying a genuine need in their communities, and opportunities to reflect on their work and learn skills.

This research found that a symbol or something that signifies the organization enables members of the community to distinguish the youth and, thereby, provides an opportunity to learn about what they are doing. Programs should create opportunities for youth to talk with community members both formally and informally, and provide avenues for them to share information about their work. These efforts give the community a chance to recognize youth as

the resources they are to the community, and as competent citizens who have the right to participate in the community and the responsibility to serve their community (Kurth-Schai, 1988).

Youth should be engaged in *meaningful and productive experiences*. As stated above, youth should participate in real community change efforts and not in superficial roles, where they have no effect on the community. When youth play an active role in selecting experiences and developing programs and interventions to address community issues, the experiences will be both meaningful and deemed a productive use of youths' time. This study confirms the established literature on youth participation that argues for meaningful opportunities that affect the lives of youth, and those that have real effects on the projects and people with whom they are working (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Checkoway, 1995). This research found that youth valued being able to make a difference in their own lives, but also in the lives of those residing in the community.

When young people receive support from programs that operate in these six ways, youth develop empowered self-perceptions, self-esteem, self-efficacy, agency, capacity, role modeling behavior, team work, expanded social networks, intergenerational connections, economic stability, skills to make long-term impacts and a sense of ownership of the community. These factors can also be seen on the model I developed (see Figure 1).

Youth gain an *empowered self-perception*. This research found that youth seemed protected from the influence of negative perceptions of youth people. Youth were able to see themselves as leaders and as capable community members in change efforts as a result of participating in a program where they had a chance to voice their opinions and take on leadership roles. One of the major concerns youth advocates have for young people in our society is that

they will embrace and then express the negative images of youth portrayed in society. Youth of color, especially those living in poverty, are depicted as perpetrators of crimes, drug users, school dropouts, and overall problems to society (Checkoway & Guetierrez, 2006). Other disempowering images of youth include being victims of their circumstances and problems in society to be fixed. From this research, I learned that youth rejected these representations; rather, they have proven themselves to be active agents of change. They defied the idea that young people are disengaged and do not care about their community, instead they are committed and invested in bringing about new prospects. On a daily basis, they worked in the community and observed their peers doing the same thing. Rather than assume youth were disinterested, they were given options to operate as experts and were put in charge of community efforts. They generated community change by surveying the community and formulating interventions. Additionally, they worked alongside a small cohort of people seeking to better the community of Braddock. Partnerships with organizations and individuals provided youth a chance to work in collaboration with adults who respected the youth and their endeavors to improve the overall landscape of Braddock. This allowed youth to view themselves as empowered community partners and as experts.

Youth view not only themselves but other young people as change agents and leaders. As one youth shared, “There’s a lot of young people who can change this community.” Youths’ strengths need to be the focus of programming, not their deficiencies, and the adults working with youth need to encourage and support them in doing their best in all aspects of their lives. Youth responded to being seen as assets to their community by growing and challenging themselves to do better. Whereas graduating from high school was once seen as the biggest accomplishment, higher standards were proposed to youth and challenged them to think beyond

the minimum. Viewing themselves as mature, responsible, positive, and as teachers, mentors and leaders, youth see themselves in ways that are empowering. When youth see themselves in these ways, adults also view youth from a fresh perspective, one that appreciates their role as citizens doing good in the community.

This study found that youth seemed to have a positive *self-esteem*. They developed self-confidence and a sense of self-worth through their work and interactions with others. Self-esteem grew from multiple factors, including youth feeling heard, and being able to articulate their thoughts and ideas. Youth talked about learning to be “outspoken,” “break out of their shells,” and becoming “less shy.” Additionally, learning and mastering skills contributes to increased self-esteem.

This research suggests that youth enhanced their *self-efficacy*, *agency*, and *capacity* as a result of participating in the BYP. Self-efficacy relates to one’s sense of being able to produce and regulate events in one’s life (Bandura, 1982). Agency refers to the capacity for a person to act in the world. Capacity is the ability to perform an act. The educational and skills training youth receive, as well as hands-on experience, bolster how youth see themselves and their effects on change. Moving from a participant in the program to a leadership position exemplifies to youth their changing capacities and roles. Being seen by other youth and adults as capable leaders, role models and trusted allies shape how youth see themselves.

Role modeling and serving as leaders to children and younger youth is an important component in terms of what youth develop. This research found that young people saw being a role model as immensely critical work and where they made the most significant impact in community development. This finding supports other research in the area of youth participation that suggests youth should be mentors and leaders to other youth in the community. This

research emphasizes youths' belief about the need for role models in their community and their commitment to the younger generation. Youth take this role very seriously, as they want to help other young people by modeling behaviors, attitudes and values. Because there are few role models for young people and many youth themselves did not have role models, they want to be the kind of positive person who mentors and teaches younger kids. Having role models who are close in age was deemed as important and necessary. This gives young people positive role models who are close to their age, especially since they may not take adults in their lives seriously. In terms of learning and work, younger kids see older youth taking their work seriously and strive to emulate their behavior. This is a good teaching model for programs. Older youth also help younger people find and build up their voice. They support younger people by letting them know they are valued and that they what they have to say is important. Ultimately, keeping kids out of the street and out of trouble is what youth mentors hope to accomplish. The mentoring motto is "it's all about the kids."

Youth enjoy *team work*, which allows them to work closely and collaboratively with other youth. The research found that being part of a team and being in large groups are preferable ways of working. Working together across groups was also noted to be desirable. Team work enabled youth to learn from one another and broaden their perspectives, due to exposure and exploration of a wide range of ideas and different opinions. Ideally, organizations should encourage different groups of people to work together on community projects. Youth developed respect for other youth from different backgrounds when working together and felt they were able to build connections across the differences. These experiences, learning to interact with different types of people, helped young people become more open and receptive, not only with youth in the program but others as well. Learning to compromise and work

collaboratively with people who hold diverse opinions prepares youth for relationships now and in the future. Young people need to know as one youth said “how to deal with people.” Garvin (2009) also found that youth appreciated meeting new people from diverse backgrounds who they would not have met if not for a youth program. This study and Garvin’s (2009) found that difference mattered less after relationships were built.

In environments where youth have fewer opportunities to build trusting relationships, being able to establish trusting, open and respectful relationships is important. Through working together as part of a team, youth develop and improve their communication skills. Communications skills were noted to be helpful in their job and in other aspects of their lives, including relationships with other adults and family members. Young people understood communication skills were critical to their success in many areas of life.

Autonomy, in this study, refers to the idea that as youth develop leadership skills and take on leadership roles in programs, they rely less on the adults in the program. This comes from an empowered perspective, not one of disrespect for adults. This research found that as youth developed skills, self-confidence, agency, and voice, they felt capable of taking over many activities essential to the program. Younger youth observed older youth in many of the leadership roles, which set the tone for their own burgeoning leadership. An atmosphere of mutual assistance among youth encourages young people to count on and help one another. Youth discover working together to complete community-based initiatives, as well as helping each another emotionally with issues that arise by responding with genuine concern. Through this process, youth develop an attitude of looking out for one another. They also see themselves as holding the power needed to make decisions and improve their own lives.

Meeting new people and *expanded social networks* are beneficial to young people because they open doors to new opportunities for youth. Chawla and Driskell (2006) suggested adults should assist youth in developing a network of other adults who have access to resources, political connections, and who are invested in helping young people realize their goals. This research found that connections and networks developed put youth in touch with people they would not otherwise have access to, and these connections resulted in learning opportunities and resources. Some of the new networks formed were with individuals from outside the community who bring new prospects and ideas to youth, while others are from the community. These individuals root youth in the community. Social networks also included other youth involved in the program. Through the relationships they establish with peers in the program, youth move away from negative social circles to a group of new friends who are trying to do positive things with their lives. These youth, because they are not “running the streets” and are trying to do positive things with their lives, help peers change their lives by encouraging them to get off and stay off the streets and establish themselves in positive activities. These networks can result in long-lasting positive friendships and positive peer supports.

This research found that *intergenerational connections* develop in the community when youth were committed to working with residents and serving the needs of community members, especially when recognizing the most vulnerable residents. A program to mentor younger children was established by youth in order to provide care to the youngest members of the community. Youth also saw the need to reach out to seniors who are often isolated from the community. BYP youth provide connection and friendship to these vulnerable populations and are committed to the support they provide. Youth learn and grow from these relationships. This

finding confirms the work of Chawla and Driskell (2006), who found the most effective model for achieving change involves children, youth and adults *working together*.

Youth programs can provide *economic stability* to youth and their families when youth are paid for their contributions. Tilton (2009) found that if programs want poor kids to participate, then those in power must realize they need money. This research also found young people need access to an income. Paid programs help youth in numerous ways. First, they provide employment to young people in their early teens who would not be hired elsewhere. They provide jobs to young people in their own community, which is helpful since there are few jobs opportunities for employment in poor communities. When youth are employed in their community, there are fewer barriers for them to get to work, and they have more time to dedicate to their school work and other interests because they do not have to spend time traveling. Additionally in poor neighborhoods, while there is a dearth of formal jobs, there are illegitimate ways to make money. Making “clean” money is hard to do. During times of economic downturn, like in recent years, it is even more challenging for youth to find employment, as they are competing with more experienced workers and adults who are perceived to be more mature and reliable. This is true even for unskilled labor. A community development program located in the community can provide youth with their first job, the skills necessary to maintain a job, and a safe setting in which to earn money.

In poor neighborhoods, many families are struggling economically, and young people need to earn money to help their families. In this study, it was found that the money youth earned from their work impact their families in many ways. Some youth used their money as pocket money so they did not have to ask their parents for spending money. Others purchased their own school clothes and supplies, because their parents did not have the financial resources

to make such purchases. Others helped support their families by paying bills with their earnings: they had to bring income into the house. When youth were able to earn their own money, they reduced the stress on parents and bolstered the economic stability of the family. Youth felt a sense of pride from earning their own money and from not needing to count on their parents. Economic stability in the long term is supported also because youth build their skills and are encouraged to plan their futures. They are armed with what they need for success – education, skills, leadership, social networks, and positive attitudes and outlooks.

A sense of *ownership of the community* is established when youth feel as though they are integral members of the community. This research found that when young people have a say in the community needs, are involved in making changes to address those needs, and can see themselves and their peers as community resources, they are able to make a committed investment in the community. They get to know their neighbors and other community members, become acquainted with local business owners, and engage in the resources in the community. Youth also develop a sense of pride in their community, which drives youth to continue their community work. It also makes youth feel positive about where they live, instead of wishing to be elsewhere. Pride encourages youth to talk positively about the community to others. With community residents, it engenders community pride and encourages others to take part in rebuilding the community. When outsiders hear youth talking positively about their community, it shapes their beliefs about the community. All of this results in youth wanting to stay in the community long-term and continue to be involved in change efforts. Youth are encouraged to seek education and training after high school, and, thus, will have skills to relocate to other communities. When youth feel attached to the community, they may be more committed to return.

8.1 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research contributes to the greater understanding of youth participation in community development by including the perspectives of young people engaged in community change efforts. The intent of this section is to discuss the limitations of the study and propose future research. First, the data were collected from youth involved in one program in the northeastern region of the United States. Future research would benefit from the inclusion of youth from a broad array of youth programs in diverse geographic regions. Moreover, this exploratory study, with a small, non-representative sample, does not allow for generalizations to be made. The intent of qualitative studies is to provide an in-depth examination of the topic of research instead of causal conclusions. The findings from this study provide knowledge and guidance for future research, both qualitative and quantitative, in this area. Another limitation of this study is that it provided a view from a snapshot in time. Youth participated in only one conversation during the course of the study and observations were made during a specific period of time. Although this research provided perspectives from youth who have completed the program, an understanding of the long-term impacts from involvement in such a program would be beneficial. Therefore, future research would benefit from longitudinal studies to examine youth experiences and the impacts of involvement over time.

A criticism of qualitative methods is that participants in the study may feel compelled to respond to questions in ways that promote what they assume the researcher expects or hopes to hear. Despite efforts to build rapport with youth and encourage them to provide their honest opinions, it is possible that youth gave scripted answers. However, the similarities in the findings across groups, as well as between the older and younger youth, suggests that youth provided authentic responses. Additionally, having the BYP youth involved in the analysis helped assess

if answers were fabricated. The research team felt secure in the findings of the research. Subjectivity is also a criticism of qualitative research. Again, the participatory model for analysis mitigated concern about researcher bias regarding the data and analysis. The research agenda and the interpretation of the results were the product of a team effort consisting of youth, program staff, and me (in the role of the research partner).

Several strategies, discussed by Padgett (2008), were adopted to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the data in this study. As mentioned above, youth and staff at BYP were involved in member checking. They were actively committed to the research process and read the final results of the study. The findings seemed to ring true to them. I used negative case analysis to look at cases where different points of views were expressed. Finally, I thoroughly documented my methods and provided a clear audit trail. With the goal of answering “how” and “why” questions and providing deep and rich exploration on a topic, it is not expected that a qualitative study can or should be replicated exactly. However, I provided transparency in my process by recording the steps I took in data collection and analysis.

As Youth Participation is a relatively new field of practice with an underdeveloped body of empirical research, this dissertation provides insights on the roles youth are capable of and willing to play in their community. The findings from this research show that youth participation is a promising intervention in simultaneously improving the lives of youth and solving community problems. Youth appreciate being active community participants and want to be offered opportunities to influence decision making in community development. As stated above, future research should examine the long-term impacts of youth participation in community development. A community-based participatory research model is ideal for understanding the experiences of youth, thus future research would benefit from incorporating this model along

with qualitative methods. Additional research focusing on how to create youth-led environments would be valuable to practitioners. Exploring the concepts of emotionally safe spaces and how to help youth, especially those living in poverty, develop their voice are critical needs in research and practice.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding from the perspectives of youth of color on the topic of community development, because relatively little research has been conducted in this area. Despite the fact that the vast majority of youth in this study were youth of color, mainly African American and Bi-racial, race was not a topic of discussion in the interviews, nor was it discussed by the research team. No direct questions were asked about race nor did youth link race to the conditions of Braddock or the neighboring communities in which they may reside. They also did not link issues of race to their own lives or situations. It is possible that youth may not have felt comfortable discussing race with a Caucasian researcher, especially the younger youth newer to the BYP program. Youth may also be unaccustomed to discussing racial issues in general or conditioned to believe race is no longer a critical issue. Class and race are intertwined in our society so when youth talked about poor communities or poverty, they could possibly be eluding to issues of race in the discussion. Future research utilizing a critical perspective to explore youth perspectives on race and its relevance to community issues and community development would be useful. I would be especially interested in learning about how youth see the role of race as it relates to their specific communities, the social and community problems they deem important, and to the solutions they offer to community issues. I would also be interested in exploring how perceptions of race affect youths' images of themselves and their roles as community leaders in their neighborhoods and in the larger society.

8.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND POLICY

8.2.1 Implications for practice

Youth of color living in poverty are still viewed as “trouble” in the current U.S. culture, and the media images of these young people continue to focus on the negative qualities and actions of this population. In an attempt to change youth, many programs continue to work from a risk-reduction model and many still practice containment and control as the primary focus of their intervention. A perspective of solely keeping the youth off streets or keeping youth busy does little to actually change their lives or environments. These programs, therefore, maintain the status quo. Youth remain powerless and participate in programs, institutions and communities that contribute little to their positive development.

Programs serving youth of color living in poverty need to revolutionize their missions and interventions. The focus should be on empowering youth and providing them with the skills and education they need to make systemic changes. This research provides direction to youth-serving agencies interested in adopting a new practice model. Youth-serving organizations have the capacity to make a considerable impact on the lives of youth in their communities. Organizations require education and training to support them in creating new ways of communicating with youth and learning how to share power with youth. Additionally, they need instruction on how to include youth in leadership positions, where youth have a say in how to spend their time as well as in the oversight of programs. Those working with youth need to move beyond the rhetoric of empowerment and leadership and embrace practices that truly allow young people to hold power.

Social work professionals contribute to the workforce of youth-serving organizations and serve in policy-making organizations; therefore, it is imperative that the training they receive

reflect innovative practices with youth. As growing evidence affirms, youth benefit from youth participation and empowerment programs. As social workers have taken up the call to work with individuals, groups and communities in addressing injustice, disparities and oppression from multiple avenues including practice, policy and research, they need to ensure their perspectives and ways of practicing are extended to young people. Instead, traditional training has taught social workers to ‘care’ about young people rather than ‘empower’ them (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). New models of practice would, instead, train professionals in power analysis, understanding the role of social and political forces, and power sharing. These practices would encourage equality and equity in relationship and provide youth with opportunities to voice their needs and help determine ways for them to be involved in change efforts. As Nybell, Shook, & Finn (2009) note, power sharing is unsettling for professionals unaccustomed to such practice and requires professionals to rethink the role of expert. This work moves practice from the will to do good to one where we learn from youth and work as partners (Jackson, 2009; Nybell, Shook, & Finn, 2009). The findings from this dissertation support these earlier findings and offer perspectives from youth on what contributions they want to make and how adults can successfully work with youth.

8.2.2 Implications for policy

The socially constructed images of youth, especially those of youth of color living in poverty, perpetuate negative stereotypes of this population and frequently lead to young people being blamed for problems in communities. Thus, they are not valued as a high priority in terms of social spending. It will take consistent education and lobbying to both policy makers and the public for funding of youth participation initiatives. These types of programs require a long-term time commitment and skilled staff to successfully work with youth, so adequate funding and an

understanding the time commitment is necessary. Advocacy and outreach to policy makers will need to focus on obtaining financial resources beyond start-up funding. Additionally, education about meaningful participation and leadership will need to occur. Youth participation must become embedded in the institutions and processes that influence young people's lives so advocacy efforts with policy makers will need to focus on garnering funding for both local, community-level efforts, as well as bringing about institutional-level change (O'Donoghue et al., 2002). Looking to a human rights model, like the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child, would provide a framework for promoting the rights of children and ensuring that children and youths' needs were being met. Unfortunately, this will require tremendous effort on the part of child advocates and youth in the United States. The United States has neglected to ratify the CRC thus far. A coordinated effort between youth-serving organizations, scholars, advocates and lobbyists and young people is needed to propel social change and procure funding for programs that serve the best interests of young people.

8.3 CONCLUSION

As evident from this study, youth possess the will and desire to be integral and contributing members of their community. Youth have love, passion and a sense of pride for their community, which spurs them to take part in, as youth say, "building it back up." Youth living in blighted neighborhoods aspire to see the community in a better place for themselves and their fellow residents. BYP youth have demonstrated the capacity and motivation to learn the skills needed to create positive transformation. Youth possess the energy, creativity and ideas to renovate and revitalize neighborhoods. The breadth of service BYP youth contributed to the Braddock community is a compelling example of what youth are capable of doing to enhance a community when given resources and support. Establishing community development jobs for

youth, when working from a youth participation and empowerment model, provides critical financial resources to young people and their families. As this dissertation shows, under the right conditions, meaningful and fulfilling work with caring and supportive colleagues overrides the economics. BYP youth have proved themselves to be community assets by addressing the problems and concerns in their community. Youth want to be a part of something positive. When involved in positive efforts, young people are less inclined to be “running the streets” and involved in destructive activities that can have long-term negative impacts.

As the effect of the recent economic recession and the ever present disinvestment from poor communities continues, youth are a resource that can no longer be overlooked. Adults and institutions require new models of intervention that partner with youth, build their voices and promote their decision making and leadership. As young people remind us, they are the future. Involving youth in a program that supports their efforts, respects them as leaders, and fuels their desire to do more, builds an upward trajectory for both the community and youth; we can no longer afford to exclude them from community development efforts.

This research reinforces the idea that youth are needed in our society, all youth! Youth of color living in poverty, while often denied a voice in society, have a unique perspective to share and important contributions to make in their community and in broader society. Imagine how different our communities would look and how conversations with young people would sound if we believed and invested in them. Imagine how they would respond and grow if we provided them with opportunities to be involved in the institutions that affect their lives and be involved in community change efforts. Youth need more than rhetoric and token offers of participation; they need rich and meaningful experiences to express themselves and to share their resources with others. In the end, we all want, as human beings and citizens, the chance to become our

best selves, to care for those we love and to feel heard and appreciated. Young citizens are no different. It is now a matter of how to make it happen, all of us together.

APPENDIX A

Focus Group Discussion Guide 1

Tell me a little bit about the BYP

What do you do?

What would you be doing with your time if you were not involved in the program? What were you doing before the program? What do your friends do with their time?

Why are you involved in this program rather than getting a different type of job? How is this program different?

What do you like about the program?

How does this program help you?

What do you learn in this program? (skills and beyond)

How does this program impact your leadership skills? Work-readiness? School?

What can be improved about the program? How can youth take an active role in the BYP program?

What kind of difference do you think you are making in your community?

What roles should young people play in their community? What can they do to make the community better?

How can adults effectively work with youth?

APPENDIX B

Focus Group Discussion Guide 2

Tell me a bit about what you do at BYP?

How does the work that you do with BYP impact the community?

How has being in the BYP program impacted your life?

What do you see as the benefits to youth of being in BYP?

How will the budget cuts impact what you do at BYP? How will it impact youth in your community?

How will the budget cuts impact the community?

What will youth do if they are not able to participate in the BYP program?

Are there ways in which you see BYP playing a role in prevention for youth? How?

What do you want policy makers to know about cuts to youth programs such as BYP?

APPENDIX C

Guide for Individual Interviews

How long did you participate in the BYP program?

What kind of projects did you do when you were in the BYP program?

Why did you get involved in BYP?

Now that you have graduated from BYP, how do you think the program impacted/changed you?
How did it benefit you?

What was it like to be a youth working in your community? What kind of changes did you make in the community? How did you improve the community?

How did BYP prepare you for work/school?

How did BYP prepare you in terms of leadership?

What did working in the community mean to you? Are you involved in community work now?

Will you be involved in community work in the future?

Are there some things you wish the program would have prepared you for?

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