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Community Gardening and Critical Mentoring as a Means of Youth Empowerment

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Community Gardening and Critical Mentoring as a Means of Youth Empowerment

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Urban Studies
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Senior Thesis

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for the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies

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Chapter 1: Getting Rooted

*47 ways them black brothas won't behave,
and now since I'm stressed I'm on quest to send them to they grave
I'm trying to go to school but the system wasn't havin' me,
some say it's technicality, but this is just reality*

– Mac Mall

Introduction

This paper will address the extent to which the practice of mentoring may serve as an effective remedy to common risk factors affecting youth today. Many social and societal factors inhibit certain demographics of youth from achieving social, academic, and professional success. The peer pressure and negative influences pervasive in low-income communities cause many youth to age without developing tools necessary to thrive in school or in the workplace. Structurally, the lack of support that youth stricken by poverty and unstable family conditions receive creates low levels of self-esteem – further hindering development.

I will argue that the versatility and flexibility of mentoring programs makes them an appropriate method for combating these diverse and imposing risk factors. Mentors fill the void created by these detrimental circumstances by providing positive role models to help build character and positive self-esteem. Mentors empower youth to be agents of their own change, by providing support and expectations necessary to grow. Due to the interpersonal nature of these programs, this paper holds that the growth of adolescent

participants is directly proportional to the strength of the connection between the mentor and the mentee.

This study is situated in Poughkeepsie, New York, because it is a fitting encapsulation of sources of poverty and their effects. The structure and orchestration of the city of Poughkeepsie is such that poverty is endemic to many neighborhoods, and upward mobility is a practically unattainable goal. The urban infrastructure – lacking reliable public transit and accessible employment opportunities – is insufficient to support the city’s sizeable working-class population. While there are many available social services and community assets, their disparate nature and organizational dispersion makes them inaccessible to much of the urban population. This structural inadequacy creates an environment in which poverty is perennially concentrated in certain areas of the city, with few resources available to combat its effects. Beginning by evaluating Poughkeepsie’s evolution as well as its strengths and weaknesses, we will situate Rooting for Change – a mentoring program founded in the spring of 2010 – within the greater context of the environment in which it exists.

The latter portion of this chapter conveys Rooting for Change as a response to the inequities and insufficiencies of Poughkeepsie. The pervasive poverty and insufficient infrastructure serve as the impetus for the program. Upon establishing these contextual guidelines, we will turn our focus to the process through which the program was conceived. This paper holds that which Rooting for Change is a constructive resource for youth because its structure was formulated around community assets and was designed specifically to combat the weaknesses that inhibited the progress of many of Poughkeepsie’s individuals and communities.

Subsequent to establishing a contextual foundation, we will turn our focus to three bodies of literature that have informed and shaped the development of Rooting for Change. We will begin by presenting the various factors said to put certain youth “at-risk,” while expanding upon the overlaps and interconnections of each circumstance. In formulating a cohesive understanding of the diverse sources of risk, we are able accurately assess the appropriate mediums to combat them. Then, we will analyze the practice of community gardening through the lens of character building. We hold that gardening – the vehicle through which Rooting for Change seeks to empower youth – cultivates traits and tools relevant to success in many stages of life. While gardening is the medium employed by Rooting for Change, the means used to reach youth is the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. Chapter two provides a synopsis of factors to be considered in mentoring, and the most effective ways to implement them. These three bodies of literature – “at-risk” youth, community gardening, and the mentor-mentee relationship – situate the work done in Rooting for Change, and allow it to be critically evaluated.

After presenting the relevant literature and contextualizing it as it pertains to Rooting for Change, we will turn our focus to Marissa Christopher, a student from the program whose progress exemplifies tenets put forth in Chapter 2. The field notes and interview data provided will give us tangible examples of the ways in which mentoring affects student growth. Chapter 3 is followed by a conclusion in which we explore other potential contexts for this model of mentoring, as well as its pitfalls. We will end by situating the significance of this study within the greater context of education.

This study makes important contributions to the disciplines of Education and Urban Studies, as it explores ways to combat the effects of poverty as they are manifested in youth. The factors that put youth “at-risk” are interrelated and stem from various aspects of the urban experience. This thesis synthesizes these seemingly disparate factors, positing that mentoring is an effective means of addressing them. From an educational standpoint, this thesis is significant in proposing that students, through participating in mentoring, can experience greater personal growth outside of the classroom setting.

Methods

This literary foundation will serve to inform what comprises the central focus of the paper – extensive field notes which chronicle the progress of one of our students, Marissa Christopher. Chapter 3 will build upon the arguments presented in the previous chapter and underscore this paper’s contention that mentoring is a multifaceted medium that utilizes a strong interpersonal connection to fill societal and environmental voids in the lives of youth. The field notes, taken over the course of one year, track the social development of Marissa and trace improvements to specific aspects of her relationship with her mentor. Chapter 3 – along with components of the other chapters – are thus based around the analysis and notes of myself, the participant observer. The chapter is comprised of distinct areas in which Marissa’s progress may be delineated to the mentor-mentee connection. Chapter 3 does not aim to provide an all-encompassing evaluation of Marissa’s maturation, but focuses on the ways in which Rooting for Change palpably impacted her development. This section of the paper lends focus to the ambiguous nature of mentoring, and chronicles the many diverse factors that impact mentees.

Utilizing field notes about one student to draw explicit conclusions about the impact and effectiveness of mentoring is problematic for several reasons. We focus exclusively on Marissa because, of the four students who participated in Rooting for Change at its inception in May of 2010, Marissa is the only one to have remained for the duration of the program. Critical evaluation of continuous programs necessitates data spanning a large time frame. Arguments formulated around the behavior of the other three students could be inaccurate, as they did not participate in Rooting for Change long enough to demonstrate any significant changes. Furthermore, it would be audacious to connect any of their improvements to their participation in the program, as their limited involvement likely precludes them from being significantly impacted by it.

Though Marissa Christopher exemplifies many of the traits touched upon throughout the course of the paper, she is a single individual, and thus may be an inaccurate barometer of the effectiveness of Rooting for Change. Each adolescent is unique, and Marissa may have internalized environmental influences or reacted to various mentoring strategies differently than would other youth. Her progress, though it reflects the literature on mentoring, may be unreliable as a blueprint with which to evaluate such programs.

It would also be a stretch to presume that all positive improvements exhibited by Marissa are a direct result of her participation in Rooting for Change. As we will see in Chapter 2, adolescents are complex, ever-changing individuals that are significantly affected by a variety of factors and circumstances. The social and academic progress captured by the field notes may be due to changes in other aspects of her life. While there are clear connections between her behavior and specific interaction within Rooting

for Change, mentoring is by no means the only entity that has significantly impacted Marissa over the last year.

This paper presents the negative factors that create a necessity for mentoring, and proceeds to evaluate the most effective means of combating them. The field notes orchestrate the related literature around two concepts: the multifaceted nature of mentoring, and the importance of the mentor-mentee relationship. As mentoring strives to fill the structural and emotional voids in the lives of individual youth, it is simultaneously flexible and ambiguous. Each program and each relationship is affected by different factors, and necessitates different courses of action. Mentoring, thus, is not an exact science, but an assemblage of theories and practices that manifest themselves in the interactions that occur within the programs. Though the imprecise and social nature of such programs makes them difficult to comprehensively evaluate, their effectiveness is directly correlated with the strength of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. While adolescents are continuously affected by diverse life circumstances, the engine for growth within mentoring programs is the supportive and mutually respectful relationship between mentees and their mentors.

Background

Due to its practical location – in a level swath of land next to a wide segment of the Hudson River – Poughkeepsie emerged early in the nineteenth century as a powerful player in the region’s shipping, whaling, and manufacturing industries. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Poughkeepsie continued to attract both commercial and cultural assets. However, an infatuation with man-made marvels such as massive freeways and suburban malls emerged from political, cultural, and economic

developments that swept America in the middle of twentieth century.¹ These behemoth structures cast a shadow over the landscape of Poughkeepsie, diverting capital to other areas and destroying small businesses. “The emergence of suburban malls in the 1960’s... created a rather bleak scenario,” characterized by a lack of pedestrian foot traffic and the precipitous decline of Main Street as a viable urban core.² The ensuing decades saw successive waves of urban disinvestment, culminating in companies such as Smith Brothers cough drop manufacturers, IBM, and other technology manufacturers moving their workforces elsewhere. This created a vacuum of unemployment, as people were still migrating to Poughkeepsie in hopes of finding jobs, but the city’s infrastructure was unable to support them. The 1970’s thus marked the beginning of Poughkeepsie’s precipitous decline and its ubiquitous perception as an unstable urban climate.

The suburbanization of the Hudson Valley – perpetuated by massive malls, highways, and imprudent planning – has concentrated socioeconomic disadvantage in the city of Poughkeepsie. As a result of this alarming trend, Poughkeepsie is a highly gentrified area in which social and economic resources are not equitably distributed. Encapsulating this issue is the fact that 22.7% of Poughkeepsie’s residents live below the poverty line.³ This problem seems especially acute when juxtaposed with the fact that the poverty rate in all of Dutchess County is just 8.7%.⁴ Within the city’s seven poorest

¹ Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Boston: First MIT Press, 2003).

² Tamara Watson, “The Sun Shines (Again) on Poughkeepsie,” *Empire State Report*, Volume 27, Issue 7/8, 2001, pg. 30.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, “State & County Quickfacts, Poughkeepsie, New York,” 2008.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, “State & County Quickfacts, Dutchess County, New York,” 2008.

contiguous census tracts, the percentage of people of color ranged from 42.5% to 77.4%.⁵ Perhaps the bleakest aspect of this data is that these trends stand to continue, as families with children are among the most impoverished in the area. Signifying the extent to which children are affected, 87% of students in the Poughkeepsie City School District qualify for free or reduced lunches.⁶

The accompanying effects of severe poverty are interconnected, and create an unstable social climate that is not conducive to the growth or development of youth. Single-parent homes are the hardest hit by difficult job conditions – 34.1% of all female-headed homes in Poughkeepsie live below the poverty line – which augments the already stifling difficulties of raising children alone.⁷ Given Poughkeepsie’s high percentages of both poverty and single-parent homes, it does not appear as a coincidence that the area is also ravaged by crime. With a violent crime rate of 11.6 per 1,000 people, both the youth and the adults of Poughkeepsie suffer from an environment that drives people to engage in illicit activity – whether by insufficient financial resources or a deficiency of positive influences.⁸

Mismanaged Resources and Municipal Insufficiencies

With Poughkeepsie being something of a void for both jobs and capital, the inadequacy of its infrastructure serves as a further inhibition to social mobility. The staggering rates of poverty are a formidable enough obstacle to face, especially given the lack of support available to those who need it most. Historically, public transportation

⁵ Susan Grove, “Building Bridges: Poughkeepsie Community Food Assessment,” Poughkeepsie Farm Project, 2009, pg. 1.

⁶ IBID

⁷ Grove.

⁸ *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 2000: Summary of Population and Housing Characteristics: New York*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 2001.

has been of high importance to the lower classes. Within Poughkeepsie's seven poorest census tracts, the percentage of households with no vehicle ranges from 25.5% to 55.5%.⁹ Those without cars depend heavily upon public transit in order to get to work and to get their children to school. According to the city's data, "5 city buses travel over 650 miles and provide transportation for 1,200 citizens."¹⁰ This system is not an appropriate fit for Poughkeepsie, given that the amount of city residents who are unemployed (2,000) is nearly double the total population served by the LOOP buses. The limited number of buses routes does not accommodate the number of Poughkeepsie residents that rely on public transit for employment, familial, and academic endeavors.

Given the structure of the bus system, those without cars are effectively eliminated from the employment sector. The discrepancy between the areas that need public transit the most, and the areas served by the LOOP is striking. Image 1 on page eighteen demonstrates that the bus does not travel extensively within the city of Poughkeepsie, and completely neglects the impoverished areas of Hudson Avenue and Mansion Square. This system relegates these sections of Poughkeepsie to perpetual poverty and social isolation. Public transportation must be an important component of any push to alleviate social inequity in a city.¹¹

The spatial subjugation of Poughkeepsie's lower classes creates singular environments that are devoid of cultural diversity, as citizens are only able to affiliate with other neighborhood residents. This trend becomes problematic when youth are

⁹ Grove.

¹⁰ "Bus Service," City of Poughkeepsie, <http://www.cityofpoughkeepsie.com/bus.html>, July 1, 2010.

¹¹ Jonas Rabinovitch, "Innovative Land Use and Public Transport Policy: The Case of Curitiba, Brazil," *Land Use Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1996.

constantly surrounded by negative neighborhood influences, and are not able to encounter people with different values and experiences. Mentoring programs serve as a response to this limitation by exposing youth to individuals who can provide alternative viewpoints and support. Rooting for Change, in many ways, is a response to Poughkeepsie's insufficient public infrastructure. By engaging youth in the unfamiliar act of community gardening, and incorporating them into a social network separate from that of their neighborhood, the program seeks to combat environmental factors that hinder youth development. Mentoring, as such, is a response to the distinct circumstances that put participating youth "at-risk."

Though the Hudson Valley possesses a bounty of agricultural resources, limited collaboration and community activism has left many Poughkeepsie residents to suffer from extremely limited access to food. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, food security occurs when "all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."¹² There is but one full-service grocery store, Casa Latina, in Poughkeepsie, which is not within walking distance of many of the city's most food-insecure areas. Historically, it has been difficult for low-income neighborhoods to attract large-scale grocers, as they are not seen as lucrative markets; store owners are often skeptical of residents' abilities to patronize their business on a regular basis. As these trends limit lower-class access to proper nutrition, there is a

¹² Technical Cooperation Department, "About the Special Programme for Food Security," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, <http://www.fao.org/spfs/about-spfs/mission-spfs/en/>, 2010

growing body of data which indicates that residents from low-income neighborhoods with negative food environments demonstrate the highest rates of obesity and diabetes.¹³

Poughkeepsie’s food security issues do not stem from insufficient abilities to produce and distribute food, but rather from a failure to properly apply and utilize the strengths of the agricultural system to benefit the lower classes. According to a study done by the New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, “local farm production capacity within 100 miles of Red Hook and Poughkeepsie low-income neighborhoods is more than adequate for the basic food needs of these two communities combined.”¹⁴ As regional and inter-industrial collaboration is limited, food produced in the surrounding area is not reaching residents in need. Furthermore, there are several farmers markets in the city, but they are poorly publicized and do not incorporate residents to the utmost extent possible. These markets are held in predominantly affluent areas, such as the periphery of Vassar College, and thus do not serve the most food insecure areas of the city.

The nutritional affliction faced by inner-city residents does not seem congruent with surplus of resources. The lower-classes of Poughkeepsie suffer from food insecurity because of the inequity of distribution politics, rather than a lack of agricultural infrastructure. Rooting for Change, aside from addressing mental effects of such poverty, serves as a structural response to the inadequacy of this system. By providing youth with the tools to grow their own food, we are reducing their reliance on this system that has failed to properly incorporate them. The collaborative nature of Rooting for Change –

¹³ *Designed for Disease: The Link Between Local Food Environments and Obesity and Diabetes*, a study conducted by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy, PolicyLink, and the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, April 2008.

¹⁴ Grove, pg. 3

and mentoring programs in general – works to expose communities to new people, and create networks that can support youth both emotionally and practically. Formulating connections between youth from low-income areas, and local organizations strengthens both their abilities and their confidence to support themselves.

Poverty does not stem from an inaccessible job market alone, but from infrastructural insufficiency, prejudices, and inadequate education. As no single one of these problems exists in a vacuum, any effort to combat them must incorporate multiple disciplines and ideologies; one issue cannot be solved without addressing the others. It is in this regard that collaboration among community leaders and organizations becomes crucial to the empowerment of any particular neighborhood or demographic.

Collaborations occur when separate groups have shared interests. Community organizations have specific areas of expertise, and often benefit greatly from alternative perspectives. Each participant also has their own specific agenda that they hope to realize, and therefore strive to use their peers to do so. Writing about the nature of collaborations, Norton Long notes:

sharing a common territorial field and collaborating for different and particular ends in the achievement of over-all social functions, the players in one game make use of the players in another and are, in turn, made use of by them. Thus the banker makes use of the newspaperman, the politician, the contractor, the ecclesiastic, the labor leader, the civic leader – all to further his success in the banking game – but, reciprocally, he is used to further the others' success in newspaper, political, contracting, ecclesiastical, labor, and civic games.¹⁵

In this regard, community members with different goals are drawn together with the ambition of perpetuating the points of overlap – each with something to offer and

¹⁵ Norton Long, “The Local Community as an Ecology of Games,” *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 64, No. 3, 1958, pg. 253.

something to gain. Through these efforts, organizations are able to address single issues with complicated and multifaceted components.

The Formation of Rooting for Change

It was under similar circumstances that Rooting for Change was born. In the Spring of 2010, several separate individuals and organizations were each drawn to the idea of a gardening program to benefit inner-city youth. The initial momentum for the program was provided by Marcelle Crago and Deahnara Reagan, faculty at Poughkeepsie's Circle of Courage High School who had dreamt of a garden-based peace education program for their students. Though they were able to secure a \$3,200 grant from Lowe's to fund the project, their progress came to a halt when the Poughkeepsie City School District announced that they intended to close the school. These two women were thus left with funding and an idea for a program, but no youth to participate in it.

Since February of 2010, I had been speaking with Colette Cann, an Assistant Professor of Education at Vassar College, about working together on a project the following summer. We had worked together in three of my classes, and I felt that she would be a good resource as I tried to find a way to utilize my interests in gardening, education, and social justice. Colette immediately committed to helping us find a suitable opportunity, her main motivation being to find something righteous and productive for one of her students to do over the summer. Tangentially, she was interested in pursuing a project with "potential to create alternative spaces for urban teens."¹⁶

¹⁶ Colette Cann, Response to IRB Survey, November 15, 2010.

Shortly after beginning her search for organizations to partner with in this endeavor, Colette was put into contact with Marcelle and Deahnara. Each party shared the ambition of creating a program that would help Poughkeepsie teens build social and life skills. They were able to develop a working structure that oriented character building around community gardening, but still had no youth to participate in it. Felicia Schinella, the principal of Circle of Courage, directed their focus to the juvenile justice programs in Poughkeepsie that were continuously searching for employment opportunities for their teens.

Michele Morris, a case manager for Astor Services for Children and Families, had recently received a grant that would pay local organizations to employ her youth. However, given the pervasive aversion to hiring youth with criminal backgrounds, she had not been able to utilize it. Michele – who had both sufficient funding and adolescent participants – became a perfect collaborative match for Colette, Deahnara, and Marcelle, who “had a program with no youth and not enough funding.”¹⁷

Upon formulating this initial nucleus of the program, the group’s focus turned to establishing the logistical framework that would allow the program to function smoothly. Susan Grove and Jamie Levato of the Poughkeepsie Farm Project – a local non-profit dedicated to promoting issues of health and food justice in the Hudson Valley – became an integral part of the organization due to their gardening expertise and prior experience with such programs. Later in the summer, Shabaz and Josephine Jackson of Greenway Environmental Services would be brought in for similar reasons. In accordance with the initial goals established by Colette, Michele, Deahnara, and Marcelle, Rooting for

¹⁷ IBID.

Change was established as a youth empowerment program that sought to use community gardening as a vehicle to help adolescents develop professional and interpersonal skills necessary to succeed. With garden sites at New Hope Community Center, the Family Partnership Center, and Poughkeepsie High School, students would work together under the tutelage of myself, and temporarily Jamie Levato. The program curriculum used the principles of community gardening to enhance the students' communication and conflict resolution skills.

Each party had their own priorities – Colette wanted to create a productive urban space for urban teens that would benefit youth as well as her own academic research, Marcelle and Deahnara wanted to establish a program that would emphasize peace education and conflict resolution, Michele was focused on finding employment opportunities for her kids, both Greenway and the Poughkeepsie Farm Project wanted to expand their role in the educational sector, and I wanted to be involved in a program that empowered urban youth to make their own choices. Due to this diversity of interests and expertise, the program was very loosely structured, so as to accommodate shifts in priorities and participation. This is not to say that every participant was exclusively driven by these singular goals, but that the intermingling of each participant's overarching ambitions is what gave shape to Rooting for Change. All members of the program were thus involved in a collaborative effort that served to benefit them in some way, and positively affect the community in accordance with their ideologies and priorities.

Image 1.) A map of the Poughkeepsie transit system.¹⁸

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

¹⁸ “Bus Service,” City of Poughkeepsie, <http://www.cityofpoughkeepsie.com/bus.html>, July 1, 2010.

Chapter 2: Situating Rooting for Change within Relevant Literature

In this chapter, I will situate this thesis in the bodies of literature that are foundational to Rooting for Change. The program was designed to address specific developmental trajectories through a defined set of pedagogical procedures and strategies. Firstly, I will contextualize the significance of the program by elucidating the risk factors affecting the youth that it serves. Teenagers face emotional and structural obstacles that inhibit their development; Rooting for Change seeks to promote constructive choices by utilizing a mentor figure to directly address each of these risk factors. Though the program has specific curriculum, it is centered around the notion that the relationship between mentor and mentee is the most effective means of combating these detrimental factors. Mentoring programs are fueled by the strength of this connection, and use it as the driving force behind all positive change. Lastly, I will convey the ways in which community gardening is an appropriate medium to orchestrate youth development around these two dialogues. Community gardening acts as the space in which the growth realized through mentoring programs is physically manifested. As such, the last section of this chapter will provide justification for the implementation of gardening curriculum as a means of addressing the aforementioned risk factors and relationship goals.

Youth At-Risk

Adolescence is a turbulent time for most youth. While the body is undergoing significant changes, teens are also charged with being more accountable for their own actions and taking on greater responsibilities. For many, this time period is the first in which they critically evaluate their own identity – who they hang out with, what music they listen to, and their attitudes towards school become deliberate choices that cumulatively form their persona. The social manifestations of this stage serve as a reflection of the intimidating, pervasive nature of the changes; for the first time, adolescents are faced with the responsibility of making choices that can drastically affect the course of their lives.¹⁹

While each teenager has distinct strengths and weaknesses, there are specific circumstances that negatively affect low-income adolescents without proper support networks, making them more likely to encounter adversity during the transition to adulthood. The contemporary nomenclature for this group is “at-risk youth,” signifying that, for whatever reason, they are “at-risk” of incurring physical or emotional damage, developing negative habits, or making detrimental choices throughout their adolescence.²⁰

Poverty

Though each individual risk factor perpetuates different results and stems from differing circumstances, poverty is the common denominator for each of them, catalyzing each instance of pressure, malevolence, and low confidence. An overwhelming majority of youth involved in the juvenile justice system come from poverty-stricken families. As

¹⁹ Keating, Lisa; Tomishima, Michelle A.; Foster, Sharon; Alessandri, Michael, “The Effects of a Mentoring Program on At-Risk Youth,” *Adolescence*, Vol. 37, 2002.

²⁰ Kathy Thornburg, Stevie Hoffman, and Corinne Remeika, “Youth at Risk; Society at Risk,” *The Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 91, No. 3, 1991.

a society, we tend to focus on the manifestations of poverty – such as crime and delinquency – and use them as microcosms for the character of those affected. In spite of this negative categorization, Kathy Thornburg notes:

It would be easy to point a finger at the home and to place the sole blame, with its resulting additional guilt, on the families who must live with these realities. To do that, however, removes responsibility from the society that has contributed to the very conditions in which our nation's children and youth struggle to survive.²¹

In light of this contention, low-income youth are thus predisposed to encountering adversity that obstructs their maturation process. Environmental and societal conditions inherently limit opportunities and create hardships. Poverty allows many other risk factors– such as peer pressure, low self-esteem, and insufficient support networks – to alter the life course of many adolescents, as they and their families often lack the resources to combat them. While the transition to adulthood can be a time of exploration and confidence-building, for many it marks the beginning of an intense stage of vulnerability. Low-income youth are at greater risk of dropping out of school because of the negative influences they continuously face, and the additional responsibilities they are forced to take on.^{22 23} Mentoring programs address this matter by helping youth orchestrate their lives around their priorities, and by giving them the self-confidence necessary to abstain from potentially toxic relationships.

Environmental Factors

²¹ IBID, pg. 200.

²² Stephanie Cosner Berzin, “Vulnerability in the Transition to Adulthood: Defining Risk Based on Youth Profiles,” *Children and Youth Services Review*, Vol. 32, Is. 4, April 2010.

²³ Suh-Ruu Ou and Arthur Reynolds, “Predictors of Educational Attainment in the Chicago Longitudinal Study,” *School Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 2, June 2008.

Over the course of this trying and pivotal stage, environmental and exterior factors augment the vulnerability of certain youth, placing them at a significant disadvantage for their ensuing development. Aside from the usual insecurities associated with growing up, additional “vulnerability results from developmental problems, personal incapacities, disadvantaged social status, inadequacy of interpersonal networks and supports, degraded neighborhoods and environments, and the complex interactions of these factors over the life course.”²⁴ Conditions such as obesity and alcohol abuse – previously attributed to a lack of discipline, self-respect, or responsibility – are being reframed as they come to be seen as diseases linked to environmental conditions, such as limited access to food, that are less under individual control.²⁵ Inhibiting structural and societal factors are often implacable, regardless of an adolescent’s individual strengths and coping mechanisms.²⁶ Consistently, the affected youth are those from the lower classes. Though each factor stems from different sources and stymies youth in different ways, the inherent nature of them is that they overlap in such a way that it is virtually impossible to distinguish where one influence ends and another begins.

As risk factors are diverse and interrelated, the social role of mentoring allows it to combat them effectively. Adolescents are constantly-changing individuals. Two teenagers may respond to similar environmental factors in varying ways, as their distinct

²⁴ David Mechanic and Jennifer Tanner, “Vulnerable People, Groups, and Populations: Societal View,” *Health Affairs*, Vol. 26, No. 5, 2007, pg. 1220.

²⁵ K.D. Brownell and K.B. Horgen, *Food Fight: The Inside Story of the Food Industry, America’s Obesity Crisis, and What We Can Do about It* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2004).

²⁶ Diane de Anda, “A Qualitative Evaluation of a Mentor Program for At-Risk Youth: The Participants’ Perspective,” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001.

personalities lead them to internalize them differently.²⁷ By formulating action upon individual connections rather than sweeping procedures, mentoring is constructive in working with youth from different circumstances with different dispositions. Factors inhibiting youth are not precise and quantifiable, and the adaptability of mentoring allows it to address them effectively.

Lack of Support Networks

Youth and adults alike rely on others to confront challenges. As Thornburg notes, “children need adults who hold out to them expectations, require from them responsible behavior, help them learn the connection between their own efforts and success, and challenge them to realizable dreams.”²⁸ Authority figures and role models provide the crucial function of pushing youth to tenaciously pursue their goals. Those youth who “lack intimate and instrumental support; and neighborhood and community resources that may facilitate personal coping or interpersonal relationships” are more likely to lose focus of their goals (or not develop them at all) over the course of their decision-making process.²⁹ By consistently prompting youth to make choices that will further their ambitions, mentors provide the scaffolding necessary for youth without strong support networks to succeed both professionally and academically.

More than any other resource, youth rely on their family for guidance. Teenagers from impoverished areas, however, are often not provided with the support they need. Manifestations of this inequity are palpable in academics. Large families and single-parent homes, in particular, often do not have the luxury of being able to attend parent-

²⁷ Kevin Kumashiro, “Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education,” *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 70, No. 1, 200.

²⁸ Thornburg et al, pg. 202.

²⁹ Mechanic & Tanner, pg. 1220.

teacher conferences or help their children with their homework. Given these difficulties, “many studies have indicated that single-parent families and step-parent families are more likely to display signs of early disengagement from schools, which affects children’s academic achievement.”³⁰ Children from families that are unable or unwilling to participate in their education are less likely to succeed in school, as they do not receive assistance with their homework, instruction about sound study habits, or systems of academic accountability.^{31 32 33}

Youth plagued by environmental factors that limit their support face challenges of far greater magnitude than their peers. In order to level the playing field, mentors synthesize the guidance that teens are not getting in their school or home lives. Youth can lose track of their aspirations when trying to balance them against a broad and impersonal school curriculum designed to reach students in the most general and consistent ways. Mentoring programs provide a space in which interactions are formulated entirely around the goals of the mentee. By utilizing continuous informal check-ins to monitor the progress of youth, mentors are able to identify each adolescent’s trajectory, and help develop values and structures necessary to support them. In this capacity, the social connection between mentor and mentee allows the two of them to work together to hold youth to high expectations, and provide the scaffolding and goal-setting necessary to achieve them.

Peer Pressure

³⁰ Ou & Reynolds, pg. 200.

³¹ IBID.

³² Alexander, K.L., Entwisle, D.S., & Kabbani, N. “The Dropout Process in Life Course Perspective: Early Risk Factors at Home and School,” *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 103, No. 5., 2001.

³³ Ou & Reynolds.

Increased reliance on external support networks makes youth exponentially more vulnerable to negative influences, as they may lack the confidence to adhere to their own principles in the face of judgment. According to Francis Ianni, youth without a cohesive or diligently involved family unit are inherently more desperate for the approval of others, as they strive to fill these voids with the company of their peers.³⁴ In actively seeking affection, youth are more likely to make choices that are not necessarily congruent with their morals in order to receive attention. Peer pressure and lack of family guidance reinforce each other, making many teens unprepared to navigate their increasingly complex social world.³⁵

During their adolescence, youth are more susceptible to negative influences. As teens age, they are more likely to make destructive choices, as their peer groups are larger in scope and more insulated from adult intervention.³⁶ Adolescent social life creates a cocoon of exposure and pressure, as “the subculture of the peer group not only provides a world of standards that is apart from that of adults, but it also provides one that is in opposition to that of adults.”³⁷ Adolescents are further away from their parents’ sphere of influence during the teen years, and many of them lack the support and confidence to navigate this tumultuous territory. As rapidly developing youth try to piece together their own identities, they internalize the negative labels they receive, making them self-

³⁴ Francis Ianni, “Social, Cultural, and Behavioral Contexts of Mentoring,” (Chicago, Illinois: Institute for Urban and Minority Education, 1990).

³⁵ Thornburg et al, pg. 199.

³⁶ D. Harman and O.G. Brim, *Learning to be Parents* (Beverly Hills, California: Sage, 1980).

³⁷ Ianni, pg. 7.

fulfilling and permanent.³⁸ In an academic setting, the impact of these labels is magnified, as youth who are not made to feel successful in school are less likely to perform well, and more likely to drop out.³⁹

Mentoring programs combat these negative effects by addressing a quantifiable environmental need – that of positive role models and support in goal-setting. By providing a consistent voice that instills confidence and admonishes destructive activities, mentors provide the support necessary to counteract peer pressure. The strong connection maintained by mentor and mentee allows youth develop confidence around characteristics that were previously ravaged by peer pressure and constrictive labels.

Considerations in Addressing Risk

These malevolent factors are difficult to address, as they are all interrelated and require specific attention, yet can only be combated cumulatively. Responses to adolescent behavior are generally aimed at certain archetypes and specific results. Regarding government programs for at-risk youth, Osgood, Foster, and Courtney explain that “each program is designed to respond to what is believed to be a distinct need even though vulnerable young people do not neatly fit into such narrowly defined eligibility boxes.”⁴⁰ Teenagers are changing rapidly and are anything but homogeneous.

Given the multidimensional circumstances facing certain youth, it is essential to create a climate that can continuously facilitate their development, rather than sporadically addressing individual issues. Family involvement is fundamental to the

³⁸ F. Elkin and G. Handel, *The Child and Society: The Process of Socialization* (New York: Random House, 1978).

³⁹ Ou & Reynolds.

⁴⁰ D. Wayne Osgood E. Michael Foster Mark E. Courtney, “Vulnerable Populations and the Transition to Adulthood,” *Future of Children*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2010, pg. 214.

success of youth service programs, as it ensures that the traits and lessons they learn will be employed consistently in the home setting, rather than occasionally.^{41 42}

Organizational collaboration complements family participation, as it allows adolescents to address relevant issues in a format that promotes the collective development of the teen's personality, rather than individual subsections of it. When varying organizations – such as mentorship, job training, or counseling – collaborate on behalf of youth, it allows them to see connections across disciplinary boundaries, and recognize the ways in which their actions affect different aspects of their lives.⁴³ By paying respect to the multifaceted strengths and weaknesses of adolescents, they can be reciprocally used to inform and combat each other.

Rooting for Change aimed to address these risk factors by helping youth build the skills to rise above them. The initial goals of the program of character building, conflict resolution, and confidence building were direct responses to these negative influences. Developing proficiency in these areas will give youth the ability to combat such risk factors on their own. Negative influences thrive upon insecure and unsupported youth. Though Rooting for Change emphasized the acquisition of life skills, it focused significantly upon building the self-esteem of the students, and providing them with adequate support networks. By creating a personal relationship between teens and a caring adult, Rooting for Change sought to supply youth with guidance and confidence they were not receiving elsewhere. We aimed to use the mentor-mentee relationship to

⁴¹ K Hoagwood, "Family-Based Services in Children's Mental Health: A Research Review and Synthesis," *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, Vol. 46, No. 7, 2005.

⁴² R Berlin et al, "Examples of Sports-Based Youth Development Programs," *New Directions in Youth Development*, Vol. 115, Is. 9, 2007.

⁴³ Mechanic & Tanner.

promote positive self-esteem, and simultaneously facilitate the development of life skills that reduce the impact of risk factors.

The Mentor-Mentee Relationship

Many scholars attribute anti-social tendencies of youth to the absence of caring adults; the mentoring movement seeks to fill this void by creating a relationship that provides youth with the direction that they are not receiving in their home or school settings. Mentoring is seen as effective because of its directness and flexibility, allowing adult figures to play multiple roles in a youth's life.⁴⁴ The movement, designed to improve social and attitudinal habits of youth, is inherently personal. As youth appropriate from people they respect and admire, mentoring is fueled by the connection between the mentor and the mentee. Through positive social interaction, mentoring simultaneously improves targeted areas, while inadvertently improving seemingly disparate aspects of an adolescent's life.⁴⁵ Mentoring is not an exact science – its versatility is what allows mentors to reach youth in a variety of different contexts. Within the adaptable and personal structure of mentoring, mentees are able to work with their mentors to directly combat the inequities that have put them at a disadvantage. Though mentoring programs incorporate and address different risk factors, the success of such programs revolves around the connection between mentor and mentee.

⁴⁴ Marc Freedman, "The Kindness of Strangers: Reflections on the Mentoring Movement," Public/Private Ventures, Fall 1991.

⁴⁵ Lynn Thompson and Lisa Kelly-Vance, "The Impact of Mentoring on Academic Achievement of At-Risk Youth," Children and Youth Services Review, Vol. 23, Is. 2, 2001.

By providing “at-risk” youth with otherwise lacking support, mentoring makes strides towards rectifying the effects of poverty that inhibit the growth of low-income adolescents. Conditions of poverty often force both parents to work demanding schedules, leaving youth without the source of constructive guidance that helps them navigate the difficult stage of adolescence. Elaborating upon this principle, Inge Carmola explains:

“One of the most important factors previously carried out by the family was the development and nurturance of future aspirations and expectations of children for their adulthood. That is, children historically had an interested adult who took the time not only to monitor the child’s progress in school, but also to anticipate ways of furthering achievement of that child’s goals. With many families in such disarray, this critical function is easily overlooked or not properly encouraged.”⁴⁶

This is especially concerning for children in low-income neighborhoods, as they confront negative influences on a daily basis. In order to combat this inequity, mentorship programs create scenarios in which youth can receive these expectations and nurturance from other sources. Turning prior areas of weakness into strong sources of support makes mentoring an effective response to the effects of poverty.⁴⁷ In providing this resource, “The whole mentoring movement is predicated on the assumption that one can artificially create for children what might be lacking in a more naturalistic way.”⁴⁸ By combating the source of risk – the absence of role models, and the accompanying guidance and positive influences – mentoring is able to have a continuous affect on youth in a multidimensional way.

⁴⁶ Inge Carmola, “The Effects of Mentoring on Student Growth,” 1995, pg. 3.

⁴⁷ David DuBois, Bruce Holloway, Jeffrey Valentine and Harris Cooper, “Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs for Youth: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2002.

⁴⁸ Carmola, pg. 7.

Functionally, mentoring programs centered around concrete activities and outcomes produce tangible results and create formal direction. Focused mentoring puts the building of competence at the center, preparing youth to interact as constructive and independent members of society.⁴⁹ Within this framework, the mentor serves mostly to augment the skill and character-building processes, and provide advice about how to interact in specific contexts.⁵⁰ Organizing the mentoring relationship around goals such as art, gardening, or sports deliberately situates them as progress-based relationships, rather than sporadic social interactions in which affection and approval take priority.⁵¹ Goal-oriented structures utilize the mentor-mentee connection to effect quantifiable results that directly facilitate student growth. Given Carmola's concern that low-income youth are developmentally inhibited because they do not receive adequate goal-setting support, mentoring programs promote success by addressing these areas of weakness.

In emphasizing prudence in matching youth to appropriate mentors, scholars recognize the fundamental importance of the mentor-mentee connection. While most evaluations of mentoring programs focus on the factors and results which are apparent after the commencement of the program, organizations must "provide appropriate screening and matching" prior to beginning work.⁵² Utilizing the natural disposition of both mentors and mentees as the foundation for programs makes mentoring a safe and constructive space. While diligent program organization and support can help facilitate positive relationships, it is intrinsic traits that make for strong mentors and healthy

⁴⁹ Stephen Hamilton and Mary Hamilton, "Mentoring Programs: Promise and Paradox," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 73, No. 7, 1992.

⁵⁰ "Rebecca Saito and Dale Blyth, "Understanding Mentoring Relationships," *Search Institute*, July, 1992, pg. 32.

⁵¹ Hamilton & Hamilton.

⁵² Saito and Blythe, pg. 10.

relationships.⁵³ While it is important to maintain specific goals, respecting the uniqueness and individuality of each mentor-mentee relationship allows them to maximize their impact. Programs founded upon a genuine connection between mentor and mentee are able to use it as a tool to reach and inspire adolescents.

Establishing an equitable social environment allows mentors to cultivate the interpersonal connection that is fundamental to promoting positive development. It is important for mentees to simultaneously admire and relate to their mentors, as youth “acquire attitudes and behavior patterns as a result of identifying with another person.”⁵⁴ Effective mentors level with their mentees in order to establish an empathetic and cohesive climate. As such, it is helpful for mentors to share their own struggles, so that their mentees may recognize that it is possible to adjust and persevere through mistakes and difficulties.⁵⁵ Youth who see aspects of themselves – whether it be their strengths or imperfections – in their mentors view their input as constructive advice, rather than rejecting it as high-handed preaching.⁵⁶ Functional mentor-mentee dynamics allow for the eventual trust, respect, and reciprocity that is necessary for such programs to work. As we will see in the following chapter, Marissa Christopher felt closer to me and more receptive to my influence as I shared my weaknesses and difficulties with her.

Stemming from unsupportive home lives, many youth grow to be tentative with authority figures, even those who have their best interest at heart. Mentors who respect the individuality and choices of their mentees give them the support and confidence

⁵³ Amy Johnson and Judith Sullivan, “Mentoring Program Practices and Effectiveness,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, Vol. 95, Is. 66, 1995.

⁵⁴ Jay Smink, “Mentoring Programs for At-Risk Youth,” National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson, South Carolina, February 1990, pg. 3.

⁵⁵ Johnson & Sullivan.

⁵⁶ Keating et al.

necessary to succeed both socially and academically.^{57 58} Many authority figures only demonstrate interest in their constituents insofar as they are responsible for that component of their life; teachers focus on academic performance, while sports coaches value athletic performance. Youth who do not feel that they are fully accepted by teachers are more likely to drop out of school, as they do not feel personally invested in the experience.^{59 60} Instead, these adolescents gravitate towards environments in which their entire being is embraced – often times these relationships occur in deviant subcultures rather than productive settings. By providing youth with extensive one-on-one attention in a positive setting, mentoring assures teenagers of their innate worth, and guides efforts and curiosity towards constructive mediums.⁶¹ These open and trusting environments facilitate a dynamic in which mentees are comfortable both making their own choices, and responding to their mentors. Marissa’s improvement was similarly based on her deduction that her mentor cared about her entire personality, making her inclined to be open and gregarious. She knew that I respected her choices, which gave her the confidence to push herself and take risks.

Orchestrating programs around the direction of the mentees helps facilitate development in all aspects of their life, as it cultivates both motivation and responsibility. Regardless of the specific aims of a mentoring program – be it academics, gardening, or art – putting the mentee at the center allows them to apply success in that one discipline

⁵⁷ Margaret Beam, Chuansheng Chen, and Ellen Greenberger, “The Nature of Adolescents’ Relationships With Their ‘Very Important’ Nonparental Adults,” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 2002.

⁵⁸ de Anda.

⁵⁹ Smink.

⁶⁰ de Anda.

⁶¹ Freedman.

to different facets of their life. For example, some mentoring programs “had students who improved significantly academically, despite their being no explicit emphasis on schoolwork.”⁶² This success may be attributed to the fact that, through their respective mediums, mentors emphasize applicable values of accountability, dedication, and diligence.⁶³ Allowing youth to pursue specific goals provides the mentor with a vehicle through which to impart valuable advice that can be used as building blocks for future success in multitudes of different settings.

Strong, constructive mentor-mentee relationships are reciprocal. With equally distributed social responsibility comes solidarity. In asking mentees to be open about addressing their vulnerabilities, mentors must be prepared to do the same in order to model equitable power dynamics.⁶⁴ Powerful conversations – those about values and life choices – influence all participants. In order to help their mentees grow, mentors must be prepared to be simultaneously influenced.⁶⁵ These mutually beneficial relationships provide the mentee with both a source of support, and another person in which they are personally invested.

Mentoring programs aim to help youth by providing them with the tools necessary to navigate the obstacles they face. Mentors do not necessarily seek to alter the greater societal structures that inhibit student growth – they devote their focus to shifting the way that youth internalize these risk factors. By focusing on the individual, mentoring programs directly address the nuanced ways in which youth respond to their peers and

⁶² Keating et al, pg. 731.

⁶³ Thompson & Kelly-Vance.

⁶⁴ Freedman.

⁶⁵ Edmond P. Bowers, Yibing Li, Megan K. Kiely, Aerika Brittian, Jacqueline V. Lerner and Richard M. Lerner, “The Five Cs Model of Positive Youth Development,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 39, No. 7, 2010.

surroundings. Formulating progress around the mentor-mentee relationship gives youth the support they do not receive elsewhere, and ensures that it is distinctly tailored to their personalities and ambitions.

Just as there are structures and characteristics that are valued within the movement, there are some that are not suitable. While the prior literature emphasizes flexibility, fortitude, and openness, we may speculate that the converse of these traits would make for an ineffective mentor. Mentoring programs rely on the skill of individual facilitators, which is potentially problematic given the multifaceted nature of human personalities. Mentors who are not comfortable sharing with their students, or who are not able to adapt easily, could encounter significant difficulties in programs that emphasize such values.

Problems in Mentoring

While the social and attitudinal benefits of mentoring are clear, the movement has encountered significant obstacles – both structural and ideological – during its evolution. Mentoring programs have had difficulty garnering pervasive support because of the lack of tangible evidence supporting their effectiveness. Human relationships are exceedingly complex, and it is difficult to delineate development to specific relationships, conversations, and activities.^{66 67} Furthermore, continuous lack of funding for mentoring programs inhibits their ability to finance research that will validate their claims.⁶⁸ These issues have limited both the widespread acceptance of mentoring as an effective way to

⁶⁶ Smink.

⁶⁷ Carmola.

⁶⁸ Keating et al.

combat inequity, and the development of new strategies and philosophies within the movement itself.

Due to the personal nature of mentoring, many are reluctant to embrace it as a ubiquitous response to the conditions of poverty. Mentoring is both labor- and capital-intensive. Each youth involved in a program is paired with a caring, motivated adult figure; this is problematic, as there are “a limited number of adults available to serve as mentors and a scarcity of organizational resources necessary to carry out a successful program.”⁶⁹ The scarcity of these assets makes mentoring a dubious medium with which to combat risk factors, as there are over 15 million children that could benefit from mentoring, and only 75,000 who are being placed each year.⁷⁰ The inherently personal nature of mentoring programs makes it difficult to implement them on a large scale to significantly impact society.

The mentoring movement is not palatable to some because it values certain human characteristics higher than others. The mentoring movement is predicated upon the notion that youth “need” something that an older person has.⁷¹ This assumption inherently places people of certain backgrounds above others. Arbitrarily ascribing “needs” to entire demographics of youth is problematic in that it perpetuates sweeping negative assumptions about the backgrounds of adolescents.⁷² As mentors strive to help their mentees develop constructive values, they run the risk of further disempowering

⁶⁹ Grossman, J.B., and Garry, E.M. 1997 (April). *Mentoring: A Proven Delinquency Prevention Strategy*. Bulletin. Washington, DC. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, pg. 4.

⁷⁰ IBID.

⁷¹ Smink.

⁷² S. Garcia and P. Guerra, “Deconstructing Deficit Thinking: Working With Educators to Create More Equitable Learning Environments,” *Education and Urban Society*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2004.

them. Some theorists hold that perpetuating “narrowly defined white middle class values” creates a discrepancy of cultural capital that further limits youth development.⁷³ By emphasizing specific cultural values – regardless of their merit in the professional or social world – mentoring programs run the risk of reinforcing hierarchical social structures that consistently oppress both the lower classes and people of color.^{74 75} Given these concerns, it becomes crucially important to ensure that mentees themselves provide the direction individual goals for the programs.

Rooting for Change aimed to utilize these principles to facilitate meaningful conversations that could significantly impact youth. By allowing the students to provide the momentum for the program, it was distinctly tailored to their needs and goals. The strength of the mentor-mentee connection allowed the youth to feel safe and comfortable as they pushed themselves to grow.

Community Gardening as Character-Building Pedagogy

Just as the various components of the mentor-mentee relationship vary in their relevance and importance, so too do the methods for utilizing that dynamic to foster development. Given that destructive habits such as crime and violence often stem from low levels of self-esteem, a pervasive goal throughout the mentoring movement is to use confidence as a building block for future emotional and professional growth. Self-confidence accumulates from the gradual mastery of specific skills, making it important

⁷³ Tara Yosso, “Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2005, pg. 77.

⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, (London: Sage Publications, 1977).

⁷⁵ Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

for mentoring programs to be centered around specific crafts and projects.⁷⁶ As youth develop useful skill sets, they grow confident in their ability to interact in both social and professional settings. Community gardening is a constructive format for mentoring programs because it fosters accountability, and facilitates transformative dialogue between mentees and their mentors.

The first step to helping youth become strong, independent individuals is building their confidence in using specific, tangible skills. Gardening is a particularly beneficial forum, as it provides youth with a physical space in which they can actively practice the material they learn. It is important for adolescents to get this hands-on experience, as people of a young age learn far better by practicing and doing than by listening and memorizing.⁷⁷ In practicing the leadership and cooperation intrinsic to community gardening, youth grow comfortable employing those skills outside of the garden space. By developing these traits, youth no longer resort to their previously confrontational or violent approaches.⁷⁸ By participating in garden-based programs, youth develop the confidence to formulate stable relationships and resolve conflicts.

Gardening uses alternative spaces under a different realm of social control to help youth deviate from the labels and reputations that hinder their development. Gardens are dynamic spaces that require participants to contribute in different ways each day. Development-based gardening programs allow youth to strengthen their character by

⁷⁶ Saito and Blythe.

⁷⁷ Robert Allio, "Leadership Development: Teaching Versus Learning," *Management Decision*, Vol. 38, Is. 7, 2005.

⁷⁸ Karen Schmelzkopf, "Urban Community Gardens as Contested Space," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 85, No. 3, 1995.

experimenting with different roles.⁷⁹ Youth declared to be troublesome in school have the opportunity to act as leaders in the context of community gardening, as it requires a completely different set of skills. Facilitating peer interaction separate from the school sphere allows gardens to be safe, growth-oriented spaces. Gardens facilitate development by providing a space in which youth can be open about their weaknesses, and actively experiment with positive character traits.⁸⁰

“At-risk” youth benefit from the new interactions and perspectives they attain from community gardening, as their isolated social environments often continuously expose them to negative influences. Many youth spend their entire lives in the same homogenous communities, accepting the behavior they witness as ubiquitous cultural norms. Community gardening allows youth to develop more multidimensional perspectives by exposing them to new people and viewpoints.⁸¹ This fluency in differing manners of discourse gives youth the social competence to interact comfortably under differing circumstances. Community gardening builds social competence by engaging youth in collaboration with people from different backgrounds and neighborhoods.⁸² Youth involved in such program are able to use the confidence they attain from their mentor to build tangible social skills.

⁷⁹ Troy Glover, “Leisure Spaces as Potential Sites for Interracial Interaction: Community Gardens in Urban Areas,” *Journal of Leisure Research*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 2004.

⁸⁰ D. Gonzalez, “Las casitas: oases or illegal shacks?” *New York Times*, September 20th, 1990.

⁸¹ Ellen Teig et al, “Collective Efficacy in Denver, Colorado: Strengthening Neighborhoods and Health Through Community Gardens,” *Health and Place*, Volume 15, Issue 4.

⁸² Lee Sigelman, and Susan Welch, “The Contact Hypothesis Revisited: Black-White Interaction and Positive Racial Attitudes.” *Social Forces*, Vol. 59, 1993.

Marissa Christopher lives within one mile of the majority of her friends, and Poughkeepsie High School, making it difficult for her to formulate relationships outside of that nucleus. In participating in Rooting for Change, she formulated meaningful relationships with individuals of different backgrounds. On a daily basis, she interacted with myself, a middle-class white student from Vassar College, and Shabaz Jackson, a black agricultural entrepreneur from Newburgh, New York. The cultural pluralism that Marissa received from these interactions gives her a plethora of perspectives to draw from when sorting out personal and interpersonal difficulties.

Within these eye-opening new environments, mentors are able to facilitate the ways in which their mentees process the new information. Mentors can help adolescents incorporate these new perspectives by illuminating the ways they are relevant to their personal lives. In this regard, the mentor-mentee connection serves to scaffold student intake of the tenets of community gardening.

Community gardening, like certain aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship, helps youth develop systems of accountability and responsibility that they do not receive elsewhere. Community gardening is a democratic enterprise which requires all participants to be active in helping the space achieve its goals. This is far more than a rhetorical allowance, as it calls for action, responsibility, and pride for all those involved.⁸³ Such endeavors give youth a chance to critically evaluate their circumstances, and establish rules accordingly. Upon participating in the process of norm setting around physical spaces they are personally invested in, adolescents are more

⁸³ Teig et al.

likely respond positively to power structures in other aspects of their lives.⁸⁴ Within community gardens, one works extensively for something that benefits them not exclusively or individually, but as a member of a group. By participating in this group-oriented system of progress, youth are compelled to hold one-another accountable for their actions as they pertain to the garden. Over the course of the program, group work helped Marissa become more aware of the ways in which her actions affect others, making her inclined monitor her behavior more diligently. Through community gardening, youth develop a sense of responsibility that benefits their academic and professional endeavors as well.^{85 86}

Though mentors may provide the rhetoric and encouragement, community gardens are physical examples of the ways in which youth can significantly affect their environments. Navigating the diplomacy involved proves to youth that they can effectively participate in and influence institutions aimed at improving their neighborhoods. The social and political demands of a community garden involve youth in collective decision-making, which enhances their ability participate in democratic processes. These

voluntary associations have the potential to form, enhance, and support the capacities of democratic citizens. Presumably, they do so by enabling their members to participate in collective judgment and decision making, while concurrently developing autonomous judgments that reflect their members' own personal preferences and normative beliefs.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Berlin et al.

⁸⁵ Troy Glover, "Association, Sociability, and Civic Culture: The Democratic Effect of Community Gardening," *Leisure Sciences*, Vol. 27, 2005

⁸⁶ R.J. Sampson, S.W. Raudenbush and F. Earls, "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy," *Science*, Vol. 277, 1997.

⁸⁷ Glover, 2005, pg. 77.

The gardens that students work in act as barometers of their capacity to collaborate with others in a goal-oriented setting. While the social undertakings affiliated with gardens underscore democratic capabilities, the physical progress generates inherently positive effects for the self-esteem of the students involved. Many scholars believe in the ability of gardening to foster stability and confidence in its participants, as it allows them to invest themselves in an ongoing and tangible project.⁸⁸ Mentoring programs based in community gardens thus assure youth of their capacity to engage in the necessary relationships to have a meaningful impact on their neighborhoods. Again, though community gardening offers these benefits, the extent to which they resonate with the adolescents is contingent upon the strength of their relationship with their mentor. This connection allows mentors to relate the material to the personal lives of their mentees, and elucidate the ways in which it is tied to their academic and social aspirations.

Though gardening has many intrinsic merits of its own, it is merely the vehicle through which Rooting for Change sought to engage with its students. Based on the apparent needs of the student participants as well as goals of the program – to help youth build both confidence and a sense of accountability, and to give them the support and the interpersonal tools necessary to succeed – gardening seemed to be an appropriate medium. The multifaceted roles that it allows students to play, as well as the type of activities it engages them in, provides the proper structure for such a program. However, the gardens themselves were not the priority of the program directors.⁸⁹ The founders of Rooting for Change, myself included, found the connection between mentor and mentee

⁸⁸ Francis, M., Lindsey, P., Rice, J.S., 1994. *The Healing Dimensions of People/Plant Relations: Proceedings of a Research Symposium*. Center for Design Research, Department of Environmental Design, UC Davis, CA.

⁸⁹ Colette Cann, Response to IRB, November 15, 2010.

to be of central importance to support youth development; gardening was a vessel identified as being conducive to fostering this connection. The structure and dynamism of community gardening is an effective focus for such mentoring programs as it facilitates transformative dialogue and social confidence.

Chapter 3

Marissa Christopher: Growth Through Friendship

This chapter will orchestrate the bodies of literature presented in the previous chapter around Rooting for Change. Chapter 2 presents the ways in which the mentoring movement and community gardening are able to address the risk factors that inhibit youth development. We will elucidate those principles by applying them to specific situations that occurred within Rooting for Change. This chapter will formulate the main argument of this thesis – that mentoring programs are driven by flexibility and the strength of the mentor-mentee relationship – around the progress of Marissa Christopher. In focusing on the conversations and interactions between myself, the mentor, and Marissa, the mentee, we will delineate her personal development to specific methodologies and values. Analyzing one individual’s maturation as it pertains to Rooting for Change will give us perspective on the ways in which the tenets of mentoring have contributed to that growth.

This chapter will convey her gradual improvements – social, academic, and professional – throughout her involvement with the program. However, over the course of the year, several moments stand out as particularly momentous or indicative of Marissa’s progress. We will explore the ways in which these occasions are manifestations of the effectiveness of the mentor-mentee relationship. The information

presented in this chapter holds that the personal conversations that arose organically played a significant role in helping Marissa develop her social skills and work ethic. Utilizing this lens of analysis positions Marissa's development as a direct result of her close relationship with her mentor. This chapter will use field notes and interviews to support the claim that the success of mentoring programs is contingent upon the strength of the connection between mentor and mentee.

The information presented in this chapter is drawn from two sources: my participant observation field notes, and an interview conducted on June 10th, 2010. Since the program's commencement in the spring of 2010, I have taken field notes after each session. These notes, taken immediately after the conclusion of each meeting, focus upon student interactions with each other and with myself. My field notes chronicle important moments in each session, particularly the conversations in which students share their thoughts, emotions, and ambitions. After each meeting, I write one page about each student, generally comprised of quotes they have said to me and to each other. I also denote specific changes that I have noticed in my students throughout their involvement in the program. Over the summer, I met with the students every day for two months before taking a two-month hiatus. Since September of 2010, we have met twice a week every week. Though my field notes span this entire period, this chapter will focus on a specific portion of them that serves as a microcosm of the greater impact of Rooting for Change.

On June 10th of 2010, Michele Morris and I interviewed each of the students after they had participated in Rooting for Change for three weeks. These interviews served to give us perspective on the ways that the youth were responding to the program, and

prompt them to critically evaluate it. We questioned them on what they had gained from participating, and the ways in which their interactions with the authority figures had affected them. My field notes provide accounts of actions that manifest student progress; the interviews convey the students' perspective on the ways Rooting for Change is structured, and what they value about it. Each interview was taped with an audio recorder and transcribed. The quotes from the interview that are presented in this chapter use student reflections to affirm and contextualize the principles encapsulated by my field notes and the literature.

Marissa Christopher is the only student to have remained in Rooting for Change from the program's inception in May of 2010 through May of 2011. Starting is a shy, immature fifteen-year old in the company of more composed peers, Marissa initially stood out as the least likely to dedicate herself to the program. While each of the other three participants had a specific personality trait – whether it be benevolent gregariousness or anger management – Marissa managed to remain in the background of most activities and social interactions. Initially, our efforts to formulate a cohesive dynamic and build a trusting environment centered around group activities. Endeavors such as group puzzles and trust falls require participants to work through difficult situations democratically, and gives them a sense of the working habits of their peers. However, throughout Rooting for Change's nascent stages, Marissa allowed herself to be directed by her peers, and was unwilling to speak extensively about her personal life during discussions. In order for the youth to embrace to the program goals of character-

building, leadership development, and the strengthening of social and professional skills, they needed to be both personally invested and open-minded.

While other students began to show signs of progress early on, Marissa appeared stagnate.⁹⁰ A group-centered, goal-oriented approach did not work for her. She seemed continually disinterested and content to merely go through the motions. Although the program creators spent a tremendous amount of time developing a curriculum that would facilitate personal, professional, and academic growth, Marissa was impervious to these intricately orchestrated lessons. Though it happened with respect to a timetable completely independent of the one developed for the program as a whole, Marissa began to show signs of improvement after her first few weeks of Rooting for Change. Her personal growth took place in accordance with her gradual investment in the personal relationships she developed within Rooting for Change.

As her ties to specific individuals strengthened, Marissa developed specific social skills and demonstrated tangible improvement in various areas of her life. Through the casual conversations that took place inadvertently to our planned lessons, the youth formulated genuine personal relationships that were based on shared involvement in an enriching activity and mutual investment in the well-being of one another. Through participating in Rooting for Change, Marissa developed a close enough connection with another student that they decided to collaborate on a project for school.⁹¹ This demonstrated that she was engaged with the program – and its members – beyond just going through the motions. One can trace her acquisition of certain personality traits and increased attention to objectives to her respective connections to her peers and mentor.

⁹⁰ Field Notes from May 24th, 2010.

⁹¹ Field notes from November 9th, 2010.

Marissa's issues with truancy, petty crime, and substance abuse gradually dissipated as she began respond to her peers from the program. On one occasion, after an enduring group discussion about both the merits and risks of theft, she told me that she decided to stop stealing because "it just ain't worth it," demonstrating a massive transition from her previous stance on the issue.⁹²

It is easy for youth to rationalize behaving selfishly when they do not care about those who reap the repercussions of their actions. As Marissa grew to respect other members of the group, she became more inclined to behave in such a way that merited their respect. Gardening makes group and individual success mutually dependent, such that one cannot exist without the other. Though Marissa was not emotionally invested in the growth of the garden, she came to understand that her friends were, which required her personal accountability in order to honor that relationship. At the beginning of the program, she viewed school attendance, positive attitude, and ethical behavior as disparate qualifications unrelated to her practical life. Marissa began to be cognizant of the ways in which not showing up, or being forced to miss work because of disciplinary issues, negatively affected the group. More importantly, she began to care. On June 13th, Marissa told me that she had initially intended to skip school, but chose to attend because she knew that school attendance is mandatory to participate in Rooting for Change. She said she made such a choice specifically "because I didn't want to disappoint you, Dylan."⁹³ Marissa held herself to a high standard because she knew that her absence would let the group down. Each of her improvements was driven by her reluctance to

⁹² Field Notes from November 3rd, 2010.

⁹³ Field notes from June 13th, 2010.

disappoint those she cared about, and to contribute to the enterprise that cultivated their friendship.

In this regard, the strength of the mentor-mentee relationship served as a source of motivation for Marissa. Even though she was inclined to miss school or work, she recognized that her connection to others required more responsible behavior. Despite her disinterest in school or gardening, her personal connections pushed her to hold herself accountable for her actions. Through her personal investment with members of Rooting for Change, Marissa began to make choices that were not necessarily easy or fun, but represented her commitment to the program and her respect for her peers. Her relationship with her mentor served as the focal point for her change, and affirmed the notion that progress is centered around personal connections.⁹⁴

Marissa's personal growth depended upon her coming to feel that she did not need to withhold aspects of her personality in the garden space. Marissa – as well as the other three students – was subdued throughout the beginning of the program, palpably nervous about speaking honestly and candidly. During an interim interview in June designed to chart the progress of the students, Marissa claimed that her reluctance to open up was due to program rules that she found to be restrictive.

Jamie Levato, an employee of the Poughkeepsie Farm Project who acted as my co-mentor for the first three weeks of the program, felt that language use was something that Rooting for Change should emphasize. She believed that in order to support the program goal of helping the youth build professional skills, we needed to give them the tools to monitor their language in a work setting. Due to the rampant use of profanity and

⁹⁴ Saito & Blythe.

sarcasm, Jamie implemented a rule prohibiting the students from cursing or saying anything negative under any circumstances. The students responded to this regulation very negatively, saying that they felt uncomfortable speaking at all out of a fear of being reprimanded.⁹⁵ The youth often complained to me about the rule, but the lack of communication between Jamie and myself left the issue unresolved until the end of June.

These restrictions on their interactions made the students feel as though they were required to close off significant components of their personalities. Thus, this rule had an adverse effect than initially intended. Marissa stated “we couldn’t act like ourselves, I guess... it’s a bad thing ‘cause if we’re not acting like ourself, the program gets boring, because me and Smooches [another Rooting for Change student] is the life of the party.”⁹⁶ Marissa thus felt that she was not accepted in the garden space because the foundation of her communication – her language – was deemed inadequate and inappropriate. These sentiments underscore Amy Johnson’s conclusion that youth need attention and affirmation of their innate value from caring adults in order to absorb positive influences and build confidence.⁹⁷ It is counterintuitive to ask a teenager to be open and honest, when she believes that speaking itself is uncomfortable.

In the middle of July, Michele and I met with Jamie to discuss this rule, and expressed our concerns as well as those of the students. I felt that the most important aspect of the program was that it gave youth a space to express themselves free from judgment; Jamie maintained her position that allowing youth to use inappropriate language would inhibit their long-term success. After a lengthy and open conversation,

⁹⁵ Interim Interview of June 10th, 2010.

⁹⁶ IBID.

⁹⁷ Johnson.

we agreed to repeal the rule and prioritize the promotion of a more open environment. We determined that such a regulation condoned the risk factors we were trying to address, as it perpetuated the low self-esteem and self-consciousness that leads to destructive behavior.^{98 99} Most importantly, such a rule limited the development of a strong connection between mentor and mentee, as the students were disinclined to be open and honest. Rooting for Change as whole suffered from these reservations, as mentoring programs are driven by the strength of the mentor-mentee relationship. Deconstructing the rule made the students more inclined to share – as they did not need to monitor themselves – thus allowing us to work together in supporting their goals and development.

While allowing her to speak freely made Marissa more inclined to share during group discussions, she was not willing to speak introspectively until she felt that her peers and mentor fully accepted her as an individual. Many students do not commit themselves to school or activities because their adult affiliates view them primarily as statistics, rather than as people.¹⁰⁰ We assured Marissa of our interest in her not through the gardening or trust-building activities, but through the conversations that took place adjacent to these endeavors. While weeding, we would speak about our home lives and our career ambitions. Marissa said that these conversations helped her grow closer with her peers and open up “because it wasn’t like we was just there just working. And like when we talked about school, it seemed like ya’ll was interested in our regular life so it’s

⁹⁸ Bowers.

⁹⁹ Berlin.

¹⁰⁰ Smink.

not like, just work.”¹⁰¹ In order for youth to open up to adult figures, they must feel assured that these adults deeply care about them, and are personally interested in their progress in all fields.¹⁰² Demonstrating that we were invested in Marissa’s entire personality earned her trust, which allowed her to disclose her fears and challenges, and gave us an opportunity to help her conquer them.

While I earned her trust through demonstrating a genuine interest in her, it was earning her respect that allowed me to act as an influence rather than just a companion. Once she made the initial decision to open up, Marissa did not decline any opportunity to speak. Willingness to be outgoing is important, as it offers insight in one’s life and the types of support they need, however, it does not necessarily entail them learning from others or taking advice. Through our conversations, Marissa was able to recognize that she and I shared many common experiences and difficulties. When she discovered that I too had disciplinary issues as an adolescent, she began to view me as a more multidimensional person, and took more of an interest in learning about my personal life.¹⁰³ As she grew able to relate herself to me, my advice became directly relevant to her life.

Marissa and I spoke extensively about fighting, and she demonstrated her willingness to learn from me on November 2nd, 2011 when she got into an altercation with Marco Stewart, another student from Rooting for Change. Upset at the way Marissa responded to a group discussion, Mark said “you suck” and berated her for a period of several minutes. Though she had previously spoken proudly of her ability and desire to

¹⁰¹ Interview June 10th, 2010.

¹⁰² Beam.

¹⁰³ Field Notes from October 26th, 2010.

fight, she simply turned to Mark and said, “you shouldn’t have said that,” and disarmed the dialogue.¹⁰⁴ Though it is impossible to attribute a teenager’s development exclusively to interactions with one individual, there is a clear trend in Marissa’s development. Her disinclination to use violence stemmed, at least partially, from our conversations on the matter. Youth model themselves after those who they respect and relate to.¹⁰⁵

Admiration prompts them to appropriate the characteristics they see as definitive of their role models. After our conversations about conflict resolution and composure, Marissa has cited her willingness to be less confrontational as being derived from her respect for someone who demonstrated similar tendencies.¹⁰⁶ Soon after we began discussing our shared disciplinary issues, Marissa developed a strong ongoing interest in the orchestration of my life. On one occasion in which I told her we would be stopping by my house for a short period of time, she said, “Yay! I like learning about your life and having a college experience.”¹⁰⁷ Through ascertaining the details of how my life worked and the decisions I made, Marissa hoped to acquire the traits and values that she admired in me. In admiring and identifying with her mentor, Marissa was inclined to appropriate certain aspects of my composure and responsibility.

Upon developing mutual trust and influence, Marissa began to value our relationship as a source of expectations and accountability. Once Marissa was enthusiastic about our relationship, she was able to respond to my requirements and aspirations for her. Youth live up to people’s expectations of them.¹⁰⁸ Many youth from

¹⁰⁴ Field Notes from November 2nd, 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Smink.

¹⁰⁶ Field Notes from October 27th, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ Field Notes from November 9th, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Ou & Reynolds.

low-income communities do not have teachers who think highly of them or non-parental adults who are invested in their development. Marissa, like many of these adolescents, did not have figures aside from her mother who held high expectations for her. On one occasion, she told me that she did not focus in school because her “teachers don’t think I will... Class is just too boring.”¹⁰⁹ Unlike these figures, I was open about what I expected of the students, and did not hesitate to reprimand unacceptable behavior. While this stark contrast was initially jarring and off-putting, it eventually became a balancing presence in the lives of the youth. It is self-assuring for teenagers to know that there is somebody who believes in their capacity to succeed, and expects them to do so. After one of our frequent conversations about Marissa’s unsatisfactory punctuality, she demonstrated renewed focus for the rest of the session. During our conference, I told her how it was personally disappointing and offensive that she took her tardiness so lightly, and that it strongly affected other members of the group. When Michele, her case manager, complimented her improvement in the area, she said “it’s because Dylan yelled at me in the beginning.”¹¹⁰ Rooting for Change pushed youth to succeed because such a system of accountability was absent from other aspects of their lives. The flexibility of the program allowed us to put increased emphasis on issues such as tardiness and work ethic when we realized they could be improved upon.

It was Marissa’s investment in our relationship that allowed these expectations to be effective. Though she frequently complained about how strict I was, she admitted that the direction I provided was valuable, because I was “always, like, trying to keep us on

¹⁰⁹ Field Notes from June 9th, 2010.

¹¹⁰ Field Notes from November 2nd, 2010.

task, you know, so that helped us.”¹¹¹ She also stated that my rigid criteria positively affected the amount of physical work the students accomplished, and that when I took a leave of absence, “we didn’t get nothin’ done. It was like we were on vacation.”¹¹²

Youth respond to expectations aimed to help them realize their full potential because they are positively constructed, rather than based around pejorative restrictions and punishments.¹¹³

It is not enough to merely set expectations and require youth to conform to them – guidelines become applicable through dialogue between mentor and mentee. While norms may be put in place in order to facilitate adolescent development, they will remain an abstraction until the youth have a means of relating them to their lives. As “at-risk” youth often lack adults who assist them in setting goals and provide a means of realizing them, the role of the mentor is to fill this void by helping youth see the connections between their actions in the present and their future ambitions.¹¹⁴ At the beginning of the program, Marissa did not respond to the group norms or express interest in making sound decisions because she viewed the future as a separate entity. Marissa told me that, although she wanted to go to Yale medical school and become a nurse, she saw no reason that such an aspiration should affect her present behavior because of its remoteness.¹¹⁵ She saw no relation between her long-term ambitions and her current actions, and did not have anyone to help her draw that connection. Over the course of the program, rather than lecturing Marissa about the importance of abstaining from substance abuse or

¹¹¹ Field Notes from Interim Interviews.

¹¹² **IBID.**

¹¹³ Teig et al.

¹¹⁴ Smink.

¹¹⁵ Field Notes from June 9th, 2010.

fighting, I chose to ask her questions about the ways in which she thought it might affect her future. Through our conversations, Marissa began to see that my expectations of her were not high-handed requirements, but scaffolding designed to help her achieve her own personal goals. Her attendance greatly improved, as she missed only three days throughout the fall, compared with seven during the summer. During her interim interview, she said that, though she initially did not see the value of punctuality, she gradually recognized that the group norm “that was really important was the one about attendance and punctuality and stuff.” Marissa did not come to this realization on her own, rather, it was “because ya’ll always say that it was important for us to get here on time, so I figured it was important to prepare us for when we get older, I guess.”¹¹⁶ Though the program rules and expectations were designed to help the youth build the skills necessary to succeed, it was the conversations about goal-setting that allowed the students to see their connection to the future, making them relevant to their present lives. Mentors who are close with their mentees are able to help them see the connection between their personal goals and their actions. This added perspective makes each subsequent decision a building block for future success, rather than a misguided choice.¹¹⁷

Democratic dialogue about actions helps youth develop better decision-making habits, as they have more perspective on the repercussions of their choices. The role of a mentor is not to dictate to students, but to provide them with the tools necessary to make

¹¹⁶ Interim Interview.

¹¹⁷ James M. Mcpartland and Sandra Murray Nettles, “Using Community Adults as Advocates or Mentors for At-Risk Middle School Students: A Two-Year Evaluation of Project RAISE,” *American Journal of Education*, Volume 99, Number 4, August, 1991.

their own choices in the future.¹¹⁸ Bombarding youth with subjective wisdom is an expedient change that does not address the root of destructive behavior. In order for adolescents to improve the course of their lives, they must be capable of making the right choices for themselves by consciously evaluating both the intentions and the likely effects of their actions.¹¹⁹

Early in her involvement with the program, Marissa had a careless tendency to make offensive statements without being fully aware of their implications. We were once speaking about misogyny, and she said she felt it was justified because “women are less than men.”¹²⁰ In response to such statements, I would ask Marissa how it felt to make derogatory statements about groups that she was a part of. Through these conversations, I would call her attention to the fact that such statements have far greater implications than she was aware of. She gradually began to catch herself in such situations. On October 26th, she said that she was not able to have a positive impact on the garden because she was “lazy and black,” and when I asked her to repeat herself, she stated “because I’m lazy,” leaving out the racial aspect.¹²¹ This adjustment demonstrated her understanding that outside perception of her language often varies greatly from her conception of it. This simple interaction shows a dramatic increase in self-awareness. When I began to probe about where this statement stemmed from, she said, “Dylan, you know I hate it when you do this kind of thing.”¹²² Embarrassed by the jarring nature of her words, Marissa recognized both the message they sent about her, and the way they

¹¹⁸ Saito and Blythe.

¹¹⁹ Beam.

¹²⁰ Field Notes from June 15th, 2010.

¹²¹ Field Notes from October 26th, 2010.

¹²² IBID.

affected other people. In immediately trying to change the topic of conversation, she demonstrated an awareness that was not evident prior to having been held accountable for explaining her statements.

Both flexibility and a strong mentor-mentee connection are fundamental to facilitating transformative dialogue. These conversations arose during gardening activities, and the fluid nature of the program allowed us to allocate more time to them. In a more rigid program in which physical work is the priority, we would not have had the luxury to make such a choice. The progress of these conversations is heavily dependent upon the mentor's knowledge of the mentee. Such interactions formulate difficulties, past experiences, and ambitions into a cohesive entity; this innate understanding is not possible unless students feel inclined to both open up to their mentor, and listen to their opinions. Transformative dialogue facilitates progress, but is driven by the social intimacy and mutual respect of a strong relationship.

Marissa's self-monitoring likewise extended beyond her language, to her physical actions and life-choices. We had an ongoing dialogue about the effects of smoking marijuana. Marissa first spoke to me of her habit on June 9th, and vehemently defended her usage by saying that it did not negatively affect her life in any significant way.¹²³ Our discussions frequently centered on what marijuana use implies about priorities, and the way that it inhibits her academic and athletic ambitions. In provoking her to independently deduce the unintended effects of drug use, our conversations put the habit into perspective. In September, after several months of this ongoing conversation, she told me that she decided to stop smoking because "It was just time to stop being a badass

¹²³ Field Notes from June 9th, 2010.

and be an adult and get ready for stuff to happen.”¹²⁴ These dual allusions to the maturation process and preparedness indicate that Marissa had engaged in a much more critical evaluation process than she had at the beginning of her habit.

Though we did not initially anticipate addressing drug use in Rooting for Change, the flexible conversational format accommodated the incorporation of issues directly relevant to the lives of the students, and allowed them to utilize the program as a resource for discerning their own priorities. The role of the mentor in this situation was to direct their attention towards components of their decisions they had not yet considered, and allow them to ascribe their own value. I was able to raise concerns about drug use as they pertained to Marissa’s life, as she had felt comfortable enough to share her goals and ambitions with me.

Strong mentor-mentee relationships promote positive improvements, as youth act in response to the expectations of their mentor, rather than those of their peers. Peer pressure is a leading cause of destructive behavior, as it pushes adolescents to fulfill the expectations of others. Those who are particularly susceptible to peer pressure are at risk of incurring negative attitudinal and disciplinary changes, as many norms within teen culture “isolate youth from adult values and insulate them from acceptance of the community’s expectations and standards.”¹²⁵ Marissa and the other students spoke openly about how good students at Poughkeepsie High School were looked upon scornfully by the general student body, making many teens reluctant to value their classwork. Marissa told me that studious kids “don’t get no attention, don’t get no play,

¹²⁴ Field Notes from September 29th, 2010.

¹²⁵ Ianni, pg. 4.

don't get no boyfriends.”¹²⁶ These youth do not try in school because they do not want to disappoint their peers and risk social exclusion.

Marissa, however, recognized the value of sound judgment because of our conversations about expectations and aspirations. Over the course of our relationship, I constantly emphasized the notion that it was “cool” to perform well academically and make mature behavioral decisions. I told her that, rather than aspiring to win the approval of her peers, she “should only hang out with people who respected her choices.”¹²⁷ Through this supportive dialogue, I conveyed to Marissa that, though many of her classmates might not think so, doing well in school is worthy of admiration. This validated her efforts, and encouraged further dedication, as she valued my opinion as much as that of her peers.

While my support allowed her to feel more comfortable in pursuing her ambitions, Marissa was also driven by her desire to meet my high expectations of her and not disappoint me. Our extensive discussions about the program norms conveyed to Marissa that I had very specific criteria for the ways she should behave. As we had spent so much time engaged in conversation, she knew very well where I stood on fighting, theft, academics, and substance abuse. The continual nature of our dialogue assured Marissa that my expectations for her were formulated with regards to her best interest, rather than a self-serving goal of my own. Her increased investment in our relationship motivated Marissa to make intelligent choices. While we were preparing to give a presentation about our program at the Vassar College Ford Scholars Symposium, a Vassar student made a snide comment to Marissa about her burping. Rather than

¹²⁶ Field Notes from October 26th, 2010.

¹²⁷ Field Notes from October 26th, 2010.

responding to the student, Marissa turned to me and said, ““man if it wasn’t for you Dylan I would go crazy on that bitch right now.”¹²⁸ Despite her initial inclination to respond aggressively, she recognized that it would offend me and embarrass me in front of my peers. Marissa’s reluctance to disappoint me outweighed her desire to engage with the Vassar student. In this capacity, the mentor-mentee relationship serves as an overarching source of motivation and guidance.

Marissa’s dedication to both gardening and schoolwork improved, as she began to affiliate them with positive experiences she had in Rooting for Change. Though she demonstrated incredible aptitude in both her schoolwork and in a leadership position with the program, the focus for Marissa was on the social interactions that took place around the activities. She derived great satisfaction from building raised beds and impacting the physical space of the garden, but neglected those accomplishments in her reflections about the program. Marissa told me that her favorite days in the program were not those in which she made tangible progress in the garden or in her coursework, but when “it’s just me and you because it feels more like we’re just equals and friends, and when there’s other people around it’s like you’re my boss.”¹²⁹ Fundamentally, such equitable dynamics are more empowering when two people seek to effect change as peers, rather than within a hierarchical system.¹³⁰

For Marissa, Rooting for Change was a valuable social opportunity that happened to be centered around gardening and school assistance. Her abilities in these peripheral disciplines improved as she began to positively associate them with her preferred aspects

¹²⁸ Field Notes from October 27th, 2010.

¹²⁹ Field Notes from November 9th, 2010.

¹³⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970).

of the program. We were able to turn her Global History assignments into such an enjoyable activity that we would have to move to a different area of the library due to her voracious laughter. After several weeks of this, Marissa desisted in her adamant opposition to doing homework, saying, “it’s because I like Global.”¹³¹ In using our humorous rapport to enliven our study time, Marissa grew more open to the material we covered. The same is true of gardening. In her interim interview, Marissa said she did not enjoy gardening because “I don’t like dirt. I’m like one of them type of girls.”¹³² These unpleasant activities became palatable for Marissa because of the intermittent social interactions that accompany them. This affinity facilitated a transition from her being inherently averse to it, to telling me, “I’d be sad if the program ended, ‘cause I like gardening.”¹³³ Her close connection to me as her mentor superseded her feelings towards the activities themselves, and also helped to foster a deeper appreciation for them. Our relationship served as a tool to generate motivation and enthusiasm for otherwise unpleasant challenges.

Marissa’s personal progress was facilitated by activities that took place in the garden, but it was driven by the strength of her connection with her mentor, and the program’s ability to accommodate momentous interactions. As she gradually became more invested in the personal relationships she made within Rooting for Change, she grew reluctant to disappoint her peers. Within the gardens, she saw physical examples of the ways in which her participation affected others, and was more inclined to adjust her behavior accordingly. This system fostered accountability, as Marissa was perpetually

¹³¹ Field Notes from November 2nd, 2010.

¹³² Interim Interviews of June 10th, 2010.

¹³³ Field Notes from November 9th, 2010.

aware of the ways that her choices impacted other people. She learned – about herself and others – through open conversations that substantiated organically. Given the flexible nature of the program, we were able to embrace these moments as they arose, and use them to give the students opportunities to express themselves.

Regarding her personal life choices, Marissa benefited greatly from having our mutually respectful relationship. In knowing that she had someone who respected her choices, she was able to pursue her interests – even if they were “uncool” – without fear of being judged. Simultaneously, she sought to appropriate mature aspects of my personality, because I had worked hard to earn her respect. For Marissa Christopher, the strength of the mentor-mentee connection motivated her to pursue her goals, and helped her develop the tools necessary to do so.

Conclusion:

Significance of Rooting for Change within the Mentoring Movement, and Implications for Education

Rooting for Change utilized a strong mentor-mentee relationship to directly respond to the risk factors affecting adolescents in Poughkeepsie, New York. The city itself presents many conditions that inhibit youth from developing into confident, successful adults. The striking concentration of poverty in specific neighborhoods creates a potpourri of risk factors that strongly affect only certain demographics of the area's population. The number of single-parent homes, the high rates of crime, and limited employment opportunities converge to present youth with multitudes of obstacles to navigate throughout the tumultuous period of adolescence. The city's insufficient school system (Poughkeepsie High School's retention rate over four years is less than fifty percent),¹³⁴ and lack of community programs leaves these youth without the guidance and support necessary to surmount such adversity. Given the city's insufficient transit system and its segregated distribution of wealth, few teens have the opportunity to interact with people from different backgrounds with alternative values. In Poughkeepsie, the ubiquitous risk factors of insecurity, peer pressure, and insufficient

¹³⁴ "Poughkeepsie High School," Public School Review, http://www.publicschoolreview.com/school_ov/school_id/57692, 2011.

support are augmented by the city's rampant poverty, the massive dichotomy between neighborhoods, and its inadequate infrastructure.

Rooting for Change directly responds to these circumstances by aiming to provide youth with the influences and guidance they do not receive elsewhere. Many youth are predisposed to develop destructive habits due to structural factors that are out of their hands. Mentoring programs – specifically Rooting for Change – has sought to cripple the impact of these factors by giving youth the tools to fight them on their own. Many of the obstacles youth face are tied to social entities. Low self-esteem and peer pressure stem from detrimental relationships with other youth, and lack of support and guidance stem from inadequacies at home or at school. The mentoring movement seeks to address these issues by filling these apparent voids with a motivated and invested companion.

This thesis has shown that mentoring is an effective response to these risk factors because it fills social voids and dangers with a valuable interpersonal connection. The progress of those who participate in mentoring programs is largely indicative of the strength of their connection with their mentor. Through conversations and interactions, mentors are able to help youth build self-confidence and orchestrate their actions around their goals. These skills empower youth to continuously effect the change they see as being relevant to their lives. This genuine and organic methodology ensures that all improvements are both direct and perpetual, as youth can use the tools throughout the course of their lives. A strong mentor-mentee relationship is fundamental to these improvements, as mentors can only help guide youth insofar as their mentees are willing to share their ambitions, difficulties, and fears. Marissa Christopher demonstrated significant improvements once she grew more receptive to having a close relationship

with me, and more open to my suggestions about behavior and work ethic. Our mutual respect provided her with an incentive to work hard, as she knew that she had someone who was as invested in her as she was in them. This foundation also encouraged her to appropriate constructive behavioral tendencies that she saw demonstrated by somebody she admired. Within Rooting for Change, Marissa's close relationship with me was the driving force behind her progress, as it gave her the confidence and the skills necessary to succeed, and the incentive to push herself.

My study of Marissa Christopher has also affirmed the merit of flexibility within mentoring programs. The structural versatility of the mentoring movement allows it to treat each student as an individual, catering to their strengths and improving their weaknesses. Though Rooting for Change was focused around the progress of specific gardening spaces, those endeavors were subsidiary to the social and emotional empowerment of our youth. This format allowed us to divert our attention away from gardening when important conversations about families, school, and peer pressure arose. In a more rigidly orchestrated program, we would have had neither the opportunity nor the prerogative to make such decisions. Furthermore, the individual focus of Rooting for Change facilitated curriculum development around the respective goals and needs of the students. When Marissa decided that she wanted to spend more time doing homework in order to pursue her nursing ambitions, we decided to allocate more time to studying and less to gardening. Each day, we had the luxury of shifting our focus in light of something that had come up during the previous session. When I grew cognizant of Marissa's immature and irresponsible tendencies, I could create an activity for the following meeting that would cast her as a leader and help her to develop these skills. Rooting for

Change's ability to positively affect Marissa Christopher was directly contingent upon its ability to continuously shift focus so as to cater directly to the ambitions and needs of the students. The mentor-mentee connection is what allowed those subjects to be broached and detected.

This thesis has not proven, however, that mentoring programs *must* emphasize flexibility in order to be successful in reaching their students. Versatility was an asset to Rooting for Change because of the diverse obstacles facing the students, and because of the disposition of the mentor. Each student in the program had familial, academic, and disciplinary difficulties, which necessitated the ability to develop a continuously changing curriculum that could address each of these issues. The structure of the program was suitable for me as a facilitator because I adjust quickly and prefer to work in circumstances that can accommodate new developments, rather than being locked in to singular agenda. Deliberately flexible mentoring programs can be problematic for two reasons. Firstly, some students may need to be overtly aware of the program's organization in order to succeed. Many people work better in situations that present clear long-term goals, and diligently orchestrated processes for realizing them. Though Rooting for Change had overarching goals of building character, confidence, and professional skills, it continuously shifted the short-term means of achieving them. Secondly, such structural openness depends heavily on the mentor's ability to provide stability and direction. In this regard, it becomes increasingly important to provide adequate screening and selection of mentors to ensure that their skills and personalities are conducive to such a format.¹³⁵ In many situations, this openness could allow less

¹³⁵ Hamilton & Hamilton.

confident or astute mentors to negatively affect the experiences of their mentees. For this reason, many programs emphasize the importance of structural support and monitoring of the mentor figure.¹³⁶ Though Rooting for Change functioned due to the looseness of the organizational collaboration, such circumstances are dependent upon the disposition of the mentor, and could easily create difficulties when applied to other programs.

Though Rooting for Change relied heavily upon its flexible structure, there were times when its openness created problems. The collaboration between the contributors was, by nature, very loose, and was heavily affected by matters of circumstance. For example, though I have served as the program's mentor for the majority of its duration, I was replaced by a fellow Vassar student for August and most of July when I had to return home for family reasons. Though my replacement, Roku Fukui, did a fantastic job, the turnaround left the youth feeling fairly confused and created several inconsistencies in the program.

Rooting for Change encountered similar difficulties when Shabaz and Josephine of Greenway Environmental Services were forced to alter their level of involvement in the fall of 2010. Though they remain fully committed to the program, they need to ensure that their business thrives. By the end of the summer, we had come to rely so heavily upon their gardening knowledge and generous donations of supplies that we were at a loss when they were forced to scale back their involvement due to an increase of business-related obligations. As we were left without supplies or significant gardening expertise, we were forced to turn Rooting for Change into a program more centered around homework, planning, and dialogue. This quick shift in trajectory was jarring for many of

¹³⁶ Saito and Blythe.

the youth, and left them feeling as though the program had no direction. Subsequent to this realization, the youth felt disinclined to put forth maximum effort, as they were not viewing consistent, tangible results.¹³⁷ Though the loose structure of Rooting for Change allowed it to adjust to better fit the students, it often created sentiments of inconsistency that stymied work ethic and raised doubts about the viability of the program. Versatility is an important component of mentoring programs, but can complicate them significantly when not balanced by stability.

Though Rooting for Change functioned in large part due to the strength of the mentor-mentee connection, the loose program structure relied too heavily on the relationship, which created strains and setbacks. This study holds that a strong bond between mentor and mentee is a crucial component of any mentoring program, but does not contend that is the *only* factor necessary for success. As Rooting for Change constantly shifted its focus from gardening, to character building, to conversations, to planning, the one constant force that it continuously relied on was my personal relationship with the students. Though it is important for them to feel comfortable around me, the consistent social emphasis led many students to view me more as a friend than as an authority figure or a role model. A degree of professionalism was lost when students grew less responsive to my work directions, and began speaking casually about their sexual exploits and alcohol abuse.¹³⁸

In predominantly social environments, it is easy for approval and friendship to take priority over growth and accountability. Though Marissa flourished because of our close relationship, there were several students who did not engage with me to the same

¹³⁷ Field Notes from November 10th, 2010.

¹³⁸ Field Notes from October 26th, 2010.

extent. Coupled with the lack of program structure, this remoteness left these youth directionless and uninvested within the program. Such heavy reliance is also not suitable to certain mentors who may lack the adaptability and social confidence to uphold an ambiguously orchestrated program. They may feel unsupported and anomic, which would negatively affect the experiences of the youth. It is thus necessary to ensure that mentoring programs, regardless of the strength of the mentor-mentee connection, be based around specific goals and outcomes.¹³⁹

Though community gardening is an appropriate medium for a mentoring program, the study of Marissa Christopher's progress indicates that similar results could be achieved in a number of different settings. Working in a garden fostered investment in a physical space, and necessitated both diligence and accountability. Community gardening is beneficial, as it requires youth to view themselves as part of something greater than themselves.¹⁴⁰ The intrinsic assets promoted many of Rooting for Change's overarching goals – such as responsibility and work ethic – but the most transformative moments came from the conversations that took place parallel to the gardening efforts. Marissa matured gradually as she shared her challenges and aspirations, and we worked together to help her achieve her personal goals. Gardening was merely a platform for these conversations. Marissa's growth was due more to dialogue as it pertained to gardening, than the activity itself.

In this regard, we may speculate that mentoring programs centered around other ongoing projects could affect youth in similar ways. Though Marissa eventually gained an affinity for gardening, she was clear that it was not central to her interests or

¹³⁹ Saito and Blythe.

¹⁴⁰ Glover.

development.¹⁴¹ Due to the productivity of an ongoing physical medium, and the lack of genuine interest in it, students could receive equal benefits from a program orchestrated around entirely different activities. Repairing a car, painting a mural, or building a house all yield the opportunity for youth to learn physical skills, contribute to a collaborative project, and engage in transformative dialogue. With flexibility and a strong mentor-mentee relationship being at the center of progress, the activity is merely a vehicle to facilitate interaction. As long as the two core components are maintained, the tenets of such a program can be applied to multitudes of different settings.

In light of this study, this thesis proposes the notion that extracurricular activities may be more effective than classroom education at promoting positive youth development. The student participants of Rooting for Change continuously expressed frustration and dissatisfaction with their academic careers, frequently claiming that they derived nothing from school.¹⁴² There is considerable literature that dwells upon the pervasive power structures and oppression that is inherent within our nation's school systems.¹⁴³ Such structures – such as heteronormativity, racism, and sexism – strongly affect scholastic experiences of women, homosexuals, and minorities.^{144 145 146} It is difficult for youth to succeed within these oppressive structures, and difficult for individual teachers and administrators to circumvent them. This thesis posits that

¹⁴¹ Field Notes from November 9th, 2010.

¹⁴² Field Notes from October 6th, 2010.

¹⁴³ Kumashiro.

¹⁴⁴ P Orenstein, *School Girls: Young Women, Self-Esteem, and the Confidence Gap*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

¹⁴⁵ Riki Wilchins, *Sexual Subversion and the End of Gender*, (Michigan: Firebrand Books 1997).

¹⁴⁶ J. Kenway & S. Willis, *Answering Back: Girls, Boys, and Feminism in Schools*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

mentoring is able to reach youth because it offers a space separate from these social and political spheres of influence.

In utilizing gardening and social interactions to prompt academic, professional, and emotional growth, Rooting for Change exemplifies that youth can be reached effectively outside of the classroom setting. Education is not limited school. Activities ranging from video games, to music, to graffiti can facilitate the development of social skills and life skills.^{147 148 149} By applying values simultaneous to learning them, youth have the opportunity to see how they function in real-world situations. Mentoring provides youth with the ability to formulate their educational experiences around things that are important to them, rather than mandating that they conform to arbitrary and impersonal school curriculum. This process averts the degradation likely to occur when youth are forced to function within power structures that do not represent their interests or their identities. By formulating development around the ambitions and needs of students, practically-based mentoring programs like Rooting for Change empower youth to be confident, successful, multidimensional individuals.

¹⁴⁷ E. Hayes & J.P. Gee (2010). "Public pedagogy through video games: Design, Resources, and Affinity Spaces," In *Handbook of Public Pedagogy: Education and Learning Beyond Schooling* (eds. J. Sandlin, B. Schultz, and J. Burdick). (New York: Routledge.)

¹⁴⁸ R. Christen (2010). "Graffiti as a Public Educator of Urban Teenagers," In *Handbook of Public Pedagogy: Education and Learning Beyond Schooling* (eds. J. Sandlin, B. Schultz, and J. Burdick). (New York: Routledge.)

¹⁴⁹ J. Sandlin & J. Milam, (2010). "Culture Jamming as Critical Public Pedagogy," In *Handbook of Public Pedagogy: Education and Learning Beyond Schooling* (eds. J. Sandlin, B. Schultz, and J. Burdick). (New York: Routledge.)

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