

THE VOICE OF SCHOOL-BASED VOLUNTEER MENTORS:  
A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The theory guiding this study is Jack Mezirow's transformative learning theory as it provided context to understand the internal developments of the mentors. The study answered the following research questions: (a) How do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, describe their experiences? (b) To what extent, if at all, do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, experience transformation? (c) What do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, identify as contributing factors and/or obstacles to experiencing transformation? Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a writing activity producing the individual and collective voices of the school-based mentors. The analysis of collected qualitative data revealed the themes of depth, breath, enhancement, challenge, and future growth describing the essence of mentoring at-risk high school students. Implications for educational practice and recommendations for areas of future research are included.

*Keywords:* at-risk students, school-based mentoring, transformation, transformative learning theory

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this manuscript to my wife and children. Kristy demonstrated extraordinary patience, faithful support, and selfless sacrifice as we have trudged forward through this dissertation journey together. Julia, Olivia, Claire, Kathryn, and Jude inspired me with their endless joy and unconditional love. They have endured years of interruptions to my most transformative callings, that of a husband and a father. I promise that I will make it up to you!

## Acknowledgments

My God lives in me, and through Him, I have been sustained along this journey. Like Solomon, during this journey I have needed the reminder to acknowledge God and “serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind” (1 Chronicles 28:9, NIV). He has sustained me with the reminder to “be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the Lord is finished” (1 Chronicles 28:20, NIV).

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**List of Abbreviations**

Community-Based Mentoring (CBM)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

School-Based Mentoring (SBM)

Student Assistance Program (SAP)

Transformative Learning Theory (TLT)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The problem is that no known studies have given a voice to the school-based mentors of at-risk high school students. Background details about the Student Assistant Program (SAP) are shared in this chapter to explain the mentoring program from which mentors are drawn. To further clarify the framework for how the experiences of the school-based mentors were shared, the background of mentoring, situation to self, problem statement, purpose, the significance of the study, research questions, definitions, and a summary are presented in this chapter.

### **Background**

The mentors of those at risk of reaching their maximum potential were the focus of the investigation. Ehrich, Hansford, and Tennent (2003) defined mentoring as a personal, helping relationship between a mentor and a mentee that includes professional development, growth, and support. This symbiotic relationship can produce reciprocating levels of professional and personal growth as well as a greater understanding of self.

Erdem, DuBois, Larose, Wit, and Lipman (2016) called for more investigation into the perspective from mentors and the impact they have on these youth development factors. There is a shared belief that the perceptions mentors develop of the youth they serve can dramatically inform the shape their mentoring takes (Lakind, Atkins, & Eddy, 2015). Similarly, Weiler, Zarich, Haddock, Krafchick, and Zimmerman (2014) recommended future study into mentor perceptions as opposed to just focusing on mentor outcomes.

## Historical

Historically, research studies identifying and discussing mentoring did not solidly rest on a clear and consistent theoretical framework. Many studies focusing on mentoring were framed upon various models, theories, or frameworks. The most commonly mentioned models were adult learning theories, developmental stage theories of teachers, cognitive development theories, and adult development theories (Ehrich et al., 2003). The experience of particular interest was the holistic and real-world exploration of the lived experiences of educators who mentor at-risk youth. Understanding how and why mentors negotiate their role as they do remains unexplored and poorly understood (Lakind et al., 2015). Because the most credible and believable experiences come from those who have actually lived the experience, this study focused on the perceptions and viewpoints directly from the school-based mentors. Of specific interest was how the stories and reflections from the school-based mentors describe how they were transformed both personally and professionally (Augustine, 2014).

In public schools across the state of Pennsylvania, the process of mentoring at-risk students is expected to be an outpouring of the SAP core team members' work with students. SAP is defined by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (2016) in *Chapter 12: Student Rights and Responsibilities* as:

A systematic process designed to assist school personnel to identify issues, including alcohol, drugs and others, which pose a barrier to a student's learning and school success. Student assistance is a systematic process using effective and accountable professional techniques to mobilize school resources to remove the barriers to learning, and, when the problem is beyond the scope of the school, to assist the parent and the student with information so they may access services within the community. (p. 16)

The Pennsylvania government mandates that schools develop a core team of school-based individuals who implement this process. Individuals who serve on each team do so in a voluntary manner. Teams typically consist of several members, including teachers, counselors, central office administrators, principals, nurses, and other pertinent stakeholders (Student Assistance Program, 2017).

## **Social**

The social variable of particular interest was the phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of educators who mentor at-risk youth. Understanding how and why mentors negotiate their role as they do remains unexplored and poorly understood (Lakind et al., 2015). Because “an important question is whether mentoring relationship could benefit from more qualitative research. . . . we believe the answer is a resounding ‘yes’” (Allen, Eby, O’Brien, & Lentz, 2008, p. 348). The most credible and believable experiences come from those who have actually lived the experience; thus, this study focused on the direct perceptions and viewpoints of the school-based mentors.

Describing the perspective of the mentoring relationship through the view of the mentors has led to many interesting, valuable, and meaningful outcomes. This perspective provided a focus on what school-based mentors themselves identified as effective strategies (Slack, Johnson, Dodor, & Woods, 2013). Understanding the mentors’ goals for the relationship strongly influenced relationship quality and outcomes, particularly in the context of youth risk (Raposa, Rhodes, & Herrera, 2016). The voice of the mentors was developed in order to explore multiple aspects of their conceptualization of their role (Lakind et al., 2015). An overarching theme was to explore the perspectives of the mentors regarding the factors that have facilitated or hindered effective mentoring (Simões & Alarcão, 2014c). Successes and struggles, the

perceived competence, and self-efficacy beliefs about one's ability to perform his or her role successfully, may inform future professional development sessions (Simões & Alarcão, 2014a).

### **Theoretical**

A theoretical framework made up of transformative learning theory (TLT) and research questions that were introduced in this chapter reinforced this specific study. Drawn from mentoring theory, an overarching theme was to explore the perspectives of the mentors regarding the factors that have facilitated or hindered effective mentoring (McKimm, Jollie, & Hatter, 2007; Simões & Alarcão, 2014c). Successes and struggles, the perceived competence, and self-efficacy beliefs, could inform future professional development sessions (Simões & Alarcão, 2014a). The active process of school-based mentors changing their frame of reference as they engage in mentoring relationships can be understood through the foundational tenets of the TLT (Mezirow, 1997).

### **Situation to Self**

I am an SAP team member serving as a mentor to at-risk students at a high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. I became involved with the SAP team and began formally mentoring at-risk students when I became a building administrator eight years ago. Engaging in symbiotic relationships with at-risk students during this time has transformed the ways in which I view students, their potential, my role as an educator, the mentors who have been involved in my life, and many other personal and professional frames of reference. The whole of these professional mentoring experiences has formed the philosophical assumptions that I brought to this study. I hold the ontological assumption that reality is multiple as seen through multiple viewpoints on an issue (Creswell, 2013). This multiple viewpoints assumption has driven me to examine the phenomenon of school-based mentoring (SBM) of at-risk high school students by

hearing from the perspectives of multiple school-based mentors. The epistemological assumptions that the nearer that I can situate myself to the phenomenon of SBM of at-risk high school students guided my qualitative data collection and analysis as I described the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). This led to the decision to include focus groups in the data collection process as a way to allow the mentors to collaborate with me and their peers as co-creators of subjective evidence based on their own experiences. The narrative created through this study was shaped by my axiological values including the intrinsic value of a person. The potential for individual growth and biases I carry also influenced the study. Methodological assumptions include holding the phenomenon of SBM of at-risk high school students tightly as the focus, while understanding that the study was an inductive and emergent process (Creswell, 2013).

The paradigm that I brought to this study was both constructivist and interpretive in nature. Constructivism sees knowledge as relative to the unique experiences of each of us. There is no true meaning to an event, only the event as experienced or interpreted by the people who experience it (Stake, 2010). This view also suggests that the participants' way of making sense of their mentoring experiences is valid and worthy of respect (Patton, 2015). The interpretive paradigm will help to produce practical knowledge as it considers the meaning constructed by humans who have lived through a shared phenomenon (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). This allowed me to be the human instrument intent with understanding and sharing the story of the phenomenon from the perspective of the mentor. My role as a researcher was to conduct semi-structured interviews, collect writings that share a reflective student experience, facilitate focus group discussions, and analyze data. This process was employed to develop an understanding of mentoring at-risk high school students from the perspective of the mentors.

## **Problem Statement**

Mentoring programs hold at their core the formation of close alliances between adults and adolescents (Erdem et al., 2016; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Youth mentoring is a phenomenon that has demonstrated the potential to promote the positive development of young people (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Through role modeling, emotional support, and positive reinforcement, mentoring can influence students' perception of self-worth, their self-efficacy towards learning, and the value they place on academics (Rhodes et al., 2000). Concerns about the future of young people have led to a focus on the setting of SAP core team members who mentor at-risk high school students in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The County has lost 3% of its student population from 1970 to 2010 along with an increase in poverty rates for those under the age of 18, a 13.4% increase during that same period (Oakridge County, 2012). There has also been an increase in drug overdoses, with heroin specifically increasing 68% since 2015 and 683% since 2002; in addition, fentanyl-related overdoses have increased 364% since 2015 (Bacha, 2016).

The problem is that no known studies give a voice to the school-based volunteer mentors of at-risk high school students. While many studies seek to understand the experience of mentoring from the perspective of the mentee (Raposa et al., 2016; Simões & Alarcão, 2014a; Simões & Alarcão, 2014c; Weiler, Zimmerman, Haddock, & Krafchick, 2014), there is a lack of research giving a voice to the perspectives and experiences of the school-based mentors of at-risk high school students. Much greater attention needs to be paid to understanding mentoring processes so that mentoring programs can be effective in their efforts to improve the lives of the youth they serve (Rhodes et al., 2006). Researchers suggest that listening to the mentors may lead to many interesting, valuable, and meaningful outcomes, and provide a focus on what the

mentors identify as effective strategies (Lakind et al., 2015; Slack et al., 2013). Research is lacking in areas such as different settings, traditional one-on-one mentoring, less intensive mentoring, and additional programs to develop an understanding of mentors' relationships with at-risk youth (Lakind et al., 2015; Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014). Augustine (2014) recommended a continued focus on understanding the complexities of the mentoring relationship with an emphasis on short- and long-term benefits.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based volunteer mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. Mentoring at-risk students is defined as developing a caring and supportive relationship between a youth and a nonparental adult similar to the SAP mentoring process (Rhodes et al., 2006). The theory guiding this study was transformative learning theory as it provided context to understand the internal developments of the mentors (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1997). Transformation is defined as the process of learning in which a frame of reference undergoes significant change through critically reflecting on assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it (Mezirow, 1997). Point of view transformation happens when the participant voices significant personal transformations (Mezirow, 1997). SBM is the formal assignment to meet regularly with an at-risk student with the goal of helping the student reach their full potential.

Mentoring, defined as school-based, takes place in the school setting over the course of an academic year (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, 2012). A challenge that many mentoring relationships face is that they are tenuous in nature with many failing or dissolving prior to strong emotional connections being built (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005;

Weiler, Zimmerman, et al., 2014). Qualitative examinations of mentoring are needed to generate insights into the inner workings of mentoring relationships and to develop more nuanced understandings of the ways these processes affect the perspectives of youth and their mentors (Rhodes et al., 2005, 2006). Secondary students in the process of transitioning to adulthood face many unique challenges. Supportive mentoring relationships with nonparent adults hold the potential to make a critical contribution to identity development and decisions related to increased independence (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Mentoring could be an effective approach used within schools to reduce dropout rates and improve student performance in academic, social, and behavioral outcomes (Rhodes et al., 2000; Slack et al., 2013; Weiler, Zimmerman, et al., 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

Forms of research exists on mentoring relationships, but most studies are focused on the area of mentoring in the business world (Ragins & Kram, 2007). In regards to mentoring within the education context, empirical research focuses on the outcomes related to the mentees (Weiler, Zimmerman, et al., 2014). This study contributes to TLT by addressing the literature gap of mentors transforming perceptions of the mentoring relationship. Investigating facilitators and barriers to effective mentoring, mentors' goals for the relationship (which can strongly influence relationship quality and outcomes), their perceived competence, and self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to perform the role successfully, may inform future professional development sessions (Raposa et al., 2016; Simões & Alarcão, 2014a, 2014c). Much greater attention can be paid to understanding mentoring processes so that mentoring programs can be effective in their efforts to improve the lives of the youth they serve (Rhodes et al., 2006).

## **Practical**

Describing the perspective and experiences of the mentoring relationship through the view of the mentors has led to many interesting, valuable, and meaningful outcomes. This perspective provided a focus on what school-based mentors themselves identified as effective strategies (Slack et al., 2013). Understanding the mentors' goals for the relationship strongly influences relationship quality and outcomes, particularly in the context of youth risk (Raposa et al., 2016). The voice of the mentors was developed in order to explore multiple aspects of their conceptualization of their role (Lakind et al., 2015). SAP core team members were invited to reflect critically on their firsthand experiences, share the results of the symbiotic relationship, and identify implications for the future (Quezada, 2011). Stake (2010) further explains that understanding the perspectives of the mentors only makes sense if a researcher writes about what actually happened and what people said they experienced.

## **Empirical**

Forms of empirical research exist on mentoring relationships, but most are focused on the area of mentoring in the business world (Ragins & Kram, 2007). In the context of this study, mentoring was broadly defined as a mentor working directly with a student where the primary goal is to develop a personal connection that aids in improving student outcomes (McDaniel & Yarbrough, 2016). Most formal programs fit into the categories of community-based mentoring (CBM) or SBM (Rodríguez-Planas, 2014). CBM means that mentored youth and adults engage in community activities. This is in contrast to SBM, which is characterized by taking place in the school setting and facilitated by school personnel (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015).

Most existing studies focus data collection on adolescent self-report. Empirical data taken from mentors can substantially reduce the risk of report bias in this study's analyses.

Additional descriptive information regarding the participants developed through this study provided a more nuanced understanding of relationship variations (Rhodes et al., 2005). In regards to mentoring within the education context, empirical research focuses on the outcomes related to the mentees (Weiler, Zimmerman, et al., 2014). Youth mentoring holds the potential to promote the positive development of young people and is becoming a popular and widespread phenomenon (Rhodes et al., 2006). As youth mentoring programs assume an increasingly important role in society, an improved understanding of the ways in which they work and do not work must take precedence. With a deeper understanding of the mentoring process developed through this study, educators can use programs more effectively to capitalize on the potential to influence a range of developmental outcomes positively (Rhodes et al., 2006). This study contributed by helping to close the literature gap of mentor perceptions of the mentoring relationship.

### **Theoretical**

This study has the potential to further expand mentoring theory, as the perspectives from education, more so than the business world, have been included in past research (Kitchenham, 2008). TLT was extended as this study provides significance to the changing voice of the mentors and their critical reflection of the impact that the mentoring relationship has on their worldview and personal or professional growth (Ragins, 1997b). This study created practical opportunities to influence the daily interactions of educators and at-risk students. Giving voice to the mentors helped to determine which methods to replicate that work toward supporting at-risk students. Findings may cause other mentoring methods, training programs, or strategies that do not work be discontinued. Administrators may be able to better support the mentors as they struggle with challenges such as time, setting, or energy to mentor, on top of their standard

responsibilities. Results of the study may also lead to the creation of formal or informal networks of support for the mentors if it is determined that they need a social outlet to share their experiences. Schools may be able to improve future mentoring relationships through professional development aimed at the mentors needs. Findings may improve the mentors' ability to develop positive mentoring relationships.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this investigation into the lived experience of school-based mentors of at-risk high school students:

**Research Question 1:** How do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, describe their experiences? Ragins and Kram (2007) described mentoring as having the potential to be “a life-altering relationship that inspires mutual growth, learning, and development” (p. 3). This research question provides an opportunity to gain firsthand insight into the actual stories of school-based mentors' experiences or actions in the context of mentoring at-risk students. Foundational to this question is the personal participation needed from the school-based mentors through the collection of firsthand evidence (Yin, 2014). Mentors were invited to reflect critically on the meaning of the lived experience, share the results of the symbiotic relationship, and identity implications for the future (Quezada, 2011). Stake (2010) further explained that understanding the perspectives of the mentors will only make sense if a researcher writes about what actually happened and what people say they experienced. Christie, Carey, Robertson, and Grainger (2015) advocate placing educators through semi-structured interviews to reveal transformative learning outcomes. These opportunities for critical reflection took place following a potentially disorienting dilemma that could trigger a change in the mentor's attitude, beliefs, and values.

Reflecting on the lived experiences of this mentoring phenomenon gets to the root of a phenomenological investigation. To unearth the experience of SBM, it is critical to make explicit thematic meanings that emerge from the shared mentoring phenomenon (van Manen, 1997).

**Research Question 2:** To what extent, if at all, do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, experience transformation? The process of transformation takes place when an individual critically reflects on his or her assumptions, validates contested beliefs through discourse, takes action on one's reflective insight, and critically assesses the learning process (Mezirow, 1997). Learning experiences that lead to personal transformations challenge an existing way of thinking, believing, and thinking at a deep and fundamental level. A disorienting dilemma, such as feeling deeply moved by mentoring an at-risk student, creates powerful feelings that may shake a mentor to their core (Mezirow & Dirkx, 2006). The transformation of individuals, groups, schools, and communities can happen through profound and enduring mentoring relationships (Ragins & Kram, 2007). This research question acts to further probe the meaning of the stories school-based mentors attribute to their personal and professional growth because of the symbiotic mentoring relationship (Creswell, 2013). Investigating this produced an opportunity to gauge the extent individuals were given the chance to work outside their comfort zones and mentor individuals directly affected by social justice issues. The investigation gauged to what depth the overall experience produced transformations in the mentors (Green, Comer, Elliott, & Neubrander, 2011). Information came directly from individuals sharing from their personally challenging life experiences and their subsequent response pattern (Dweck & Legget, 1988).

**Research Question 3:** What do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, identify as contributing factors and/or obstacles to experiencing transformation? Impactful qualitative research focuses on how things happen and how things are working. Probing the assertions of the mentors produced a more credible understanding of how members of the SAP core team experience the mentoring of at-risk high school students (Stake, 2010). Ragins and Kram (2007) described mentoring as having the potential to be “a life-altering relationship that inspires mutual growth, learning, and development” (p. 3). This question provides an opportunity to gain firsthand insight into the actual stories of school-based mentors’ experiences or actions in the context of mentoring at-risk students. The interpretation of the mentor’s role and goals for the mentoring relationship can strongly influence the quality and outcome of the relationship, especially when considering the ramifications for at-risk teenagers (Raposa et al., 2016). Close and enduring relationships between a mentor and mentee are authentic, provide regular companionship, and are influenced by acts of empathy (Rhodes et al., 2006). Longevity is an important factor underlying beneficial mentoring relationships. Long-term relationships provide more opportunities for stronger and more influential bonds to develop between the mentor and the child (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Grossman et al., 2012). Effective mentoring strategies include encouraging the mentee, setting goals, building mentee self-esteem, spending extra-curricular time with mentees, acting as a positive role model, helping their mentee make positive choices, and helping to improve grades (Slack et al., 2013).

### **Definitions**

1. *Coaching* – A short-term arrangement between a teacher and a student for the immediate improvement of performance with a narrow focus (Abiddin, 2006).

2. *Discourse* – The dialogue that is involved to assess beliefs, feelings, and values (Mezirow, 2003).
3. *Essence* – van Manen (1997) characterizes essence as the meaning of a human experience that is made up of a complex array of aspects, properties, and qualities.
4. *Frames of reference* – The structures of assumptions from which an individual understands their experiences (Mezirow, 1997).
5. *Habits of mind* – The broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions. To become articulated in a point of view while also being more durable than a point of view (Mezirow, 1997).
6. *Mentee* – The individual being helped from a mentor and through a mentoring relationship (McKimm et al., 2007).
7. *Mentoring relationship* – A relationship built upon mutual trust and respect, openness and honesty that forms a bond. The relationship is focused on helping the mentee grow in self-confidence and develop independence, autonomy, and maturity (McKimm et al., 2007).
8. *Point of view* – The constellation of belief, value judgment, attitude, and feeling that shapes a particular interpretation (Mezirow, 1997).
9. *SAP core team* – A team of individuals that exist within all public schools in the state of Pennsylvania that identify issues related to alcohol and drug abuse as well as other barriers to a student's learning and school success. The team then engages in a process using effective and accountable professional techniques to mobilize school resources to remove the barriers to learning, and, when the problem is beyond the scope of the school,

to assist the parent and the student with information so they may access services within the community (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2016).

10. *SBM* – A mentor working directly with a student in the school setting facilitated by school personnel where the primary goal is to develop a personal connection that aids in improving student outcomes (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2015; McDaniel & Yarbrough, 2016).
11. *School-based volunteer mentors* – These are individuals employed in a school setting that volunteer to take on the additional responsibility of fostering, nurturing, and maintaining close, positive one-on-one relationships with at-risk mentees (Lakind et al., 2015).
12. *Symbiotic relationship* – Mentoring is reciprocal in that both members of the relationship have input into how it develops and receive outcomes as a result (Ragins, 1997b).
13. *Transformation* – A transformation includes a disorienting dilemma that triggers a change in an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and values (Christie et al., 2015).
14. *Transformative learning* – The process of effecting change in a person’s frame of reference through critical reflection of assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one’s reflective insight, and critically assessing it (Mezirow, 1997).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided background information about SAP core teams, mentoring at-risk students, and the process of transformation experienced by mentors in the school-based setting. In this specific study, the problem of no known studies giving a voice to the school-based volunteer mentors of at-risk high school students was addressed. Gaining the perspective of the transformation that mentors did or did not experience led to interesting, valuable, and meaningful

outcomes that informed many potentially significant applications. Hearing from school-based mentors who are committed for an extended time and develop emotional connections assisted in understanding the complexities and nuances of the mentoring relationship. Specifically, research was needed to understand the transformative experiences of the school-based mentors of at-risk high school students. This shared phenomenon was investigated through the lens of a transcendental phenomenological investigation. This approach gave voice to the individuals who engaged in the mentoring of at-risk students through their role as school-based mentors in high school schools across Oakridge County, Pennsylvania.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Concepts in literature connect with empirical studies to support the need to undertake the study. The concepts found in the literature developed the guiding theme through the problem and the purpose, and situated the study in the context of previous academic work. The theoretical framework and review of precedent literature that follows constructed the foundation for the study. Prior academic work combines to demonstrate linkages, illustrate trends, and provide an overview of the concepts, theories, and applicable literature (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009).

There were several pertinent issues relating to concerns about young people that lead to a focus on the setting of Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The problem that necessitated this research study is that no known studies gave a voice to the school-based mentors of at-risk high school students. There is an associated lack of research giving a voice to the transformation experienced by school-based mentors of at-risk high school students. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The school-based mentors may have experienced transformation through their role as educators and SAP team members in school districts across Oakridge County, Pennsylvania.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this qualitative study involves the presentation of TLT as well as its empirical and conceptual foundation (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). The core values of TLT serve as the guides for this qualitative investigation. The TLT provides context to understand the internal developments of the mentors. The learning through meaning

transformation of the mentoring relationship is individualistic, found inside the mentor, and was uncovered through the critical discourse associated with qualitative data collection (Kitchenham, 2008).

One of the defining characteristics of mentoring is the engagement in shared activities in a one-on-one environment that grows into a supportive youth-adult relationship (Deutsch, Wiggins, Henneberger, & Lawrence, 2013). Within these shared activities were three distinct purposes, youth mentoring, academic mentoring, and workplace mentoring. The streams specifically applicable to the theoretical framework of this study were youth and academic mentoring. These theory components directly connect the internal processes that a SAP core team member goes through when working with high school students at risk of reaching their full potential in emotional, psychological, and academic areas (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). Seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of the mentors is an outgrowth of the relational and social processes of mentorship.

Christie et al. (2015) support Mezirow's TLT belief that every individual has a view of the world around them based on a set of paradigmatic assumptions. TLT illuminates the critique of thought processes, points of view self-assessment, and experiences that educators wrestle with through the social process of mentoring at-risk high school students. Driving this study was a quest to more deeply understand the experiences of mentors through the avenues of critical analytical reflection, self-awareness, and how mentors transfer newly acquired knowledge to their professional and personal lives. This helped to answer the ever-present natural human craving to understand the meaning of mentoring experiences for the school-based mentors (Mezirow, 1997).

## **Transformative Learning Theory**

TLT provides the framework in which a description of the mentor's change in perceptions can be understood (Mezirow & Dirkx, 2006). The theory is defined in lay terms as the belief that every individual has a particular view of the world and is a synonym for independent thought (Christie et al., 2015). "Transformative learning is not an add-on. It is the essence of adult education" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). Mezirow wrote the seminal works on the TLT and revised it many times over the years. The early development of the theory was as an outgrowth of studies that Mezirow (1997) conducted on U.S. women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace following an extended time out on leave.

Mezirow's (1997) research led to the proposal of a 10-phase theory, including the significant concepts of disorienting dilemma, meaning schemes, meaning perspectives, perspective transformation, frame of reference, levels of learning process, habits of mind, and critical self-reflection (Christie et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2008). Follow-up revisions to the theory include adding instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective learning, stressing the importance of critical self-reflection in the transformation of perspectives, and introduced the concepts of habits of mind and points of view (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow's (1997) adult learning theory is defined as the process of effecting a change in an individual's frame of reference. A frame of reference includes cognitive, conative, and emotional components (Kitchenham, 2008). Many frames of reference were taken for granted by adult learners and are problematic in nature. These may include cultural bias, ideologies, stereotyped attitudes and practices, religious doctrine, moral-ethical norms, and aesthetic values and standards (Mezirow, 2003).

An individual's frame of reference is composed of habits of mind and a point of view (Kitchenham, 2008). Habits of mind are more durable while points of view are subject to continuous change based on the individual reflecting on the content or process by which the problem was solved. Habits of mind were described by Mezirow (1997) as a broad, abstract, orienting, habitual way of thinking and acting that is influenced by assumptions. Points of view were then the resulting opinion subject to continuous change as an individual reflects on the process by which a problem is solved (Mezirow, 1997).

The interplay or internal dialogue involving individuals assessing their beliefs, feelings, and values is called discourse. Taking the perspective of another individual involves engaging in an intrapersonal and interpersonal process. Understanding this perspective on a deep level depends on the nature and goal of the scenario and its social context. Having an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, bracketing out taken for granted frames of reference, and seeking common ground are skills relevant to participating in meaningful discourse. Transformative learning emphasizes critical learning and critical self-reflection to assess what has been taken for granted and develop a more dependable working judgement (Mezirow, 2003).

Discourse is devoted to assessing reasons presented in support of differing interpretations (Mezirow, 1997). To reach the most powerful discourse, the highest level of reflective judgement must be reached wherein individuals can offer a perspective about their own perspective. This is an essential condition for the type of transformative learning that occurs when the critical reflection of assumptions takes place independently or through in-group interaction (Mezirow, 2003).

Transformative learning has expanded with many constructs being added since its introduction by Mezirow to adult education in 1975 (Kitchenham, 2008). Specifically, Mezirow (1997) characterizes autonomy as an essential learning to the understanding, skills, and disposition necessary to be successful in the 21st century. Teacher mentors can function as a facilitator, rather than as a sage, and model the norms and respect that allows mentees to become thinkers that are more autonomous. Mezirow (2003) also added specifics about discourse, the intrapersonal process by which we come to understand our own experiences. Transformation thus occurs by critical self-reflection of the assumptions, and a resolution happens only after the problem is redefined. The original foundation of transformative learning has stayed consistent with depth added to include the processes of meaning scheme and meaning perspective, renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships, types of reflection, habits of mind and points of view. If a learner rationalized a new point of view without dealing with the deep feelings that accompanied the original meaning scheme or perspective, perspective transformation could not occur (Kitchenham, 2008).

Evidence that mentors have the potential to engage in situations that transform their thinking was referenced throughout research in a cursory manner. Mentors describe themselves as changed individuals because of past mentoring relationships and have altered views of interpersonal skills, academic success, citizenship, professional development, and emotional responses (Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014). Educators provided with an opportunity to reflect socioculturally on their experiences can produce rich details about how teacher learning emerges out of and is constructed within the context of their profession. Making the mental lives of teachers visible gets to the root of the transformation educators experience as understood within

their belief system, their teaching practices, and the opportunities they were able to create (Tasker, Johnson, & Davis, 2010).

Augustine (2014) shared that a school-based mentor described mentoring at-risk students as a relationship that “caused me to break things down differently for the kids. Not necessarily to lower my expectations, but to organize things in a way that kids could kind of grasp on and meet those small goals more easily” (p. 97). Other mentors discussed that, as a response to building a mentoring relationship with an at-risk youth, they were personally transformed and were motivated to complete a college degree (Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014).

### **Related Literature**

The positive effects of mentoring were derived from the support and role modeling these relationships offer (Rhodes et al., 2006). SBM connects this definition of mentoring with the formal assignment to meet on a regular basis with students determined to be at-risk by their respective high school SAP team. There were concepts that were understood prior to engaging in this study, including mentoring, coaching, mentoring relationship, school-based mentoring, symbiotic relationships, duration, connectedness, at-risk students, and educators as servants.

### **Mentoring**

Ragins (1997b) and Ragins and Kram (2007) describe the relational nature of individuals who engage in a reciprocating relationship between a mentor and a protégé that is developed by both individuals and has outcomes for both. Mentoring programs have assumed an increasingly important role in society, and there is a need to understand the ways in which they work and do not work. With a deeper understanding of the mentoring process, programs can more effectively capitalize on the potential to influence a range of developmental outcomes positively (Rhodes et al., 2006).

Formal mentoring programs can be traced back to the early 1900s as a way to address the lack of naturally forming mentoring relationships. Mounting concern for the growing number of children born into poverty led to the creation of a wide range of social service programs. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America grew out of this concern and is still the largest mentoring program in the United States. Initial crops of mentors were fueled by a desire to rescue poor children (mostly delinquent boys) from poverty and the problems of their homes and neighborhoods. Mentoring programs relying on volunteers often face the challenge of high attrition rates. Students in need of a mentor can be placed on long wait-lists due to an insufficient number of volunteers to meet the demand (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016).

Belle Rose Ragins (1997b) provides both a strong foundation for the framework of mentoring and a practical application for its tenets within industry. Mentoring is first understood within the context of the power perspective. Power is the bridge between mentoring and diversity literature. True mentoring is a reciprocating relationship between a mentor and a protégé that develops through feedback from both individuals and produces outcomes for both. In its original context, the mentoring relationship was primarily a workplace apprenticeship with career development behaviors at the center of most studies. At its roots, mentoring is a developing relationship embedded within the career context. The primary focus was thus on career development and professional growth (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentoring programs come in many different forms and satisfy very different goals. Mentoring programs may intentionally focus on victims of child abuse, teen-pregnancy prevention, improvement in health status, reducing crime, or improving labor market success (Levine, 2014).

Additional effects of the mentoring relationship have been determined to be in the psychosocial and role-modeling roles (Ragins, 1997b; Ragins & Kram, 2007). An added layer to

this framework is dependent on the diversity composition of the relationship. It has been found that diversity outcomes, intrinsic outcomes, and mentor outcomes hinge on the diversity dynamic between the mentor and mentee. The context and setting in which the mentoring takes place affects both the development and the outcomes of the relationship. Organizational factors that may have an influence include culture, structural integration, and management systems (Ragins, 1997a).

Mentoring research has focused almost exclusively on the mentor's role in the development of the relationship and the impact of the relationship on the protégé. A core assumption is that the mentoring relationship is reciprocal. Mentoring is a symbiotic relationship developed by both members and has outcomes for both parties (Ragins, 1997b). For example, mentors may achieve transformations to their knowledge base, empathy, and skills related to interacting with mentees, while mentees have their needs met in areas such as counseling, acceptance, and personal support (Ragins, 1997b). However, "there is a serious gap in the bridge between research and practice" (Ragins & Kram, 2007, p. 11). Many studies have been conducted on the impact that mentoring has on the outcomes for the mentees, while relatively little attention has been paid to the benefits received by the mentors. Expansions upon the original framework need to be further developed due to changing mentor and mentee demographics, increased diversity, and the shift in work-life balance (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Psychosocial and role modeling functions can be an area to expound upon including the extent to which a mentor can fulfill these functions for at-risk students (Ragins, 1997b).

The extent to which a mentoring relationship benefits the mentee through such things as improved job performance, career success and revitalization, peer recognition, or a sense of personal fulfillment and satisfaction is only briefly discussed within mentoring literature (Ragins

& Kram, 2007). The range and degree to which the mentoring relationship is a fit between the needs of the mentor and mentee calls for more study to understand the chemistry of the relationship (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentoring provides a solid foundation for understanding the relationship developed between a mentor and a mentee. Mentoring was used alongside the TLT in establishing a framework to fully investigate and interpret the nuances of this complex social phenomenon.

### **Coaching**

Mentoring and coaching have many similarities as well as some very important differences (Abiddin, 2006; Bishop, 2015). Both involve two parties: one is a teacher (general term for a supervisor, mentor, or coach), and the other is a student (general term for a trainee, mentee, mentoree, coachee, or protégé; Abiddin, 2006). Mentoring and coaching aided in the development of leaders as they can be applied to nurture a person's abilities to improve his or her behavior or performance (Deans, Oakley, James, & Wrigley, 2006).

At the core of the difference between the two educational processes used to develop individuals is that coaches instruct while mentors counsel (Abiddin, 2006). With this differing emphasis, coaches drive the goal-setting process with a focus on immediate goals and specific skills. Coaching is therefore viewed as more task-oriented, skills-focused, directed and time-bound (Deans et al., 2006). In a coaching program, the coach is the expert directing the didactic process of setting goals focusing on skill development (Gallant, Kelchtermans, & Riley, 2015). Coaching is guided through practice and feedback from the student. It is about asking many open-ended questions and providing encouragement (Lemma, Gebremedhin, Hoekstra, & Tegegne, 2016).

Coaching has in its history a connection to athletics with coaches traditionally acting as an instructor of sports. Coaches assist the athletes or the team to improve their performance. Coaching is typically a short-term arrangement between a teacher and a student for the immediate improvement of performance with a narrow focus (Abiddin, 2006; Deans et al., 2006). A coaching program developed out of the athletic mindset in the Netherlands was used to reduce school dropout by employing coaches to work on study skills, counseling through personal problems, and contact with parents. The coaches initiated various interventions including both curative and preventive measures that differed from traditional mentoring programs in that the coach guided the student in a directive manner (Bishop, 2015; van der Steeg, van Elk, & Webbink, 2015).

### **Mentoring Relationship**

Mentoring involves a caring and supportive relationship between a youth and a non-parental adult. Positive change resulting from this relationship were typically thought to be a result of the support and role modeling that this type of relationship offers. The effectiveness of this social relationship is likely to be governed by the quality and longevity. Through genuine care and support over time, mentors can challenge negative views that youth hold about themselves or of their relationships with adults. A consistent and responsible mentor may promote a sense of stability and predictability in an otherwise rocky childhood existence. Building a mentoring relationship is an opportunity for the mentor to teach strategies for managing feelings and enhance the social competence of their mentees. Mentors thus can help expand youth's social network as they construct close and supportive ties with others (Rhodes et al., 2006).

Research findings demonstrate that mentoring relationships facilitate growth in the health and well-being of youth. Youth were more likely to exhibit favorable outcomes in the areas of completing high school, decreased risk taking, heightened self-esteem, and improved physical health. For mentors to intervene and produce these gains, a close relationship must be developed over an extended period of time (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Hankey and Ryan (2014) discussed the powerful symbiosis between the role of being an athletic coach and a teacher in the same vein as an educator-mentor. Through the mentoring role of an athletic coach, there were physical, emotional, and time demands that were reimbursed exponentially when students achieved success. Athletic coaching can also influence the professional role by making an individual a better teacher. Both roles require relationship building, reflection, rigor, and leadership.

Mentors can also provide planning for students as they transition from secondary school to college by building social and culture skills in their mentees. Areas of modeling include study habits, style of speech, dress, and physical appearance. Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, a CBM program focusing on children facing adversity, has been found to reduce violence and substance abuse and improved parent and peer relationships as well as school attendance and academic performance. Students who had the most to gain from entering into a mentoring relationship were younger children, those more receptive and malleable, and students whose individual or environmental circumstances placed them the most at risk (Rodríguez-Planas, 2014).

The quality and longevity of a mentoring relationship, as well as the quality of previous relationships, play important mediating and moderating roles in the efficacy of mentoring. Mentors can critically affect the relationship by regularly demonstrating patience and

perseverance (Rhodes et al., 2006). DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) define natural mentoring relationship as extended family members, neighbors, teachers, and coaches who mentor students outside of a formal mentoring program. These nonparent adults may serve as crucial educators and support figures while promoting learning and competence, providing exposure to positive social norms, increasing a sense of efficacy, and helping youth realize their full potential. Many of these potential natural mentors have important roles in the context of existing activities such as school and athletics. An existing connection may help with accessibility and encourage the mentees bonding with peers and institutions in a way that promotes positive health outcomes.

Mentors may contribute to youths' positive identity development by serving as role models and advocates for students at risk. By developing a mentoring relationship, mentors may be able to shift youth's conceptions of both their current and future identity. As the mentees build a connection with their mentor, they may find that their internalizations begin to change. This internal change process in youth can cause monumental shifts in their sense of identity and social roles. Mentors have the ability to influence their mentee's sense of self by projecting a positive appraisal in how they view them. Affecting this self-worth may modify the way the youth thinks that parents, peers, teachers, coaches and others see him or her. Another way in which mentors can influence youth for the better is by promoting their participation in positive social settings and activities. These events were opportunities to be exposed to socially desirable and high-achieving peer groups with whom they can then identify with (Rhodes et al., 2006).

### **School-Based Mentors**

SBM programs typically consist of volunteers meeting regularly with students on school grounds. In the United States, school-based is the fastest growing type of mentoring program. SBM is typically characterized by adults or older students meeting with their mentees on school

grounds during the school day or immediately after for about one hour per week. The more limited time commitment, including no mentoring in the summer and firmer structure, makes it easier for schools or programs to recruit volunteers (Bayer, Grossman, & DuBois, 2015). SBM programs that run afterschool hours have increased in recent years due to an increase in employed mothers, concern for academic achievement, and a fear of lack of supervision when students typically arrive home from school. Mentors assisting in SBM programs typically meet for approximately one-hour per week at the mentee's school. Mentors provide a range of support including academic and social skills instruction (McDaniel & Yarbrough, 2016).

A review of the major CBM programs produced evidence that outcomes for the mentored youth included improved educational outcomes, reduced negative behaviors, and improved social and emotional development (Fernandes-Alcentara, 2015). CBM tend to produce stronger results than SBM programs due to an increased amount of time spent developing the mentoring relationship. This includes more hours per week over a greater length of time. A positive, caring adult can promote resiliency systems in at-risk youth (McDaniel & Yarbrough, 2016). Most mentoring research focuses on CBM programs, but SBM programs are the fastest growing form of mentorship. SBM programs reach a unique population of students because many referrals come from teachers who may see a different side of the student. Younger adults and college students also commonly support SBM programs (Coller & Kuo, 2013).

SBM relationships with a heavy emphasis on schoolwork were less likely to endure. These academically-focused programs may lack the flexibility and responsiveness that is vital to producing a healthy mentoring relationship. They could also lead mentors to interact in a way that is less responsive to the needs of the whole child (Grossman et al., 2012). SBM emphasizes schoolwork, which may hinder the true benefit of mentoring—providing an adult voice of reason

to adolescents who may be lacking one (Levine, 2014). In a SBM program, youth meet with a mentor during or after school within the school building. The number of SBM programs continues to rise cross the country, in part, due to the hope that mentoring can improve student academic outcomes (Schwartz, Rhodes, & Herrera, 2012). The best opportunity to positively impact students is when a flexible, youth-centered approach is implemented which focuses on the developmental needs of the students (Grossman et al., 2012).

Providing academically at-risk students with the support and attention they need through a mentoring relationship is critical to their future success. SBM programs fill the need by reaching at-risk students and providing them with a range of positive benefits. Being located within the school setting allows mentors to have a particularly positive influence on academic outcomes. Youth in the programs were more likely to be referred by teachers, and educators may be more inclined to help with schoolwork, discuss youth school experiences, and communicate with other school personnel (Schwartz et al., 2012). The responsibilities of teacher-mentors include encouraging the mentee, setting goals, building mentee self-esteem, spending extra-curricular time with mentees, acting as a positive role model, helping their mentee make positive choices, and helping to improve grades (Slack et al., 2013).

In a research study conducted by Schwartz et al. (2012), SBM that occurred after school or during lunch offered the most significant academic benefits. Specific academic growth was demonstrated in reading improvement and general outcomes for youth who were academically at risk. Additional benefits included the opportunity to engage in positive, constructive activities that youth otherwise would not experience. The authors also expressed concern that mentoring during the school day could have some potentially detrimental side effects. Challenges include the effects of missing class time by students who may already be academically at risk,

developing a stigma from being removed from class to meet with a mentor, and inadvertently sending the message that academics were of less importance compared to their mentoring relationship. Benefits to meeting during the school day include reaching students who may not be able to stay for an after-school program, a connection to knowledgeable teachers, and evidence that they were more effective at addressing social or emotional challenges (Schwartz et al., 2012).

A potential negative outcome in relation to CBM programs is that SBM relationships may not have the chance to reach the levels of closeness or emotional connection needed to promote better academic outcomes. The specific SBM program type and whether the focus is on academics or relationship development did not affect the closeness of the relationship. Mentees were less likely to feel close to college student mentors than adult volunteers. Mentees developed closer relationships with high school student mentors than they did with college student mentors. Research into SBM indicated that the school setting may encourage students to trust volunteer adults more quickly, or children may have a lower threshold for close relationships with school-based as opposed to community-based mentors. Future research can produce a richer understanding of the timing, depth, and function of SBM relationships by including additional measures of child and mentor perceptions of relationship closeness (Bayer et al., 2015).

### **Volunteer Mentors**

Volunteer mentoring is, at its core, built on an interpersonal foundation that relies on relationships as the tool of change. Volunteer mentors were defined as individuals who performed unpaid volunteer activities through, or for, a mentoring program (Raposa, Dietz, & Rhodes, 2017). Volunteers who had prior experience being a mentor were more likely to follow

through with a long-lasting mentoring relationship. These experienced individuals commonly have a well-defined set of realistic expectations about what the experience will entail (Grossman et al., 2012). Mentoring programs, supported by volunteers, need to be aided by training that provides support and guidance. Volunteer recruitment has often been a limiting factor in the growth of mentoring programs. This struggle has resulted in relaxed minimum screenings, reduced commitments, and compacted training requirements. These trends were inconsistent with the core values needed to establish and maintain high-quality mentoring relationships. Expanded searches for volunteer mentors has increased the proportion of high school and college-aged mentors (Raposa et al., 2017).

Corporate volunteers support many mentoring programs. Connections were developed between mentoring programs and nearby businesses to serve students in need. Individuals who volunteer typically have at their heart a motivation of altruistic and self-interested reasons. The strongest reasons to volunteer include a humanitarian concern for others, an attempt to utilize a new or existing skill, or enhancing their personal growth and development. School-based volunteer mentors can receive many positive benefits including feeling useful, growing personally, and sharing with friends an activity that is highly valued by others, all while reducing negative emotions. In some cases, parent volunteers support mentoring programs. Workplace initiated community engagement can take the form of schools matched with private sector companies. The focus of SBM programs that include corporate volunteer programs focus on the development of social and work-related skills as well as other key skills such as reading. Motives to volunteer in schools were characterized as directly assisting children and contributing to the community. Helping a child directly has been found more appealing than any other avenue, including simply donating money. Giving back to the community is also an overarching

goal with the additional benefit of supporting students in need. Mentors report benefits such as personal development, improved personal insight, and a sense of satisfaction. Corporate volunteers who had the opportunity to go into schools gathered a unique appreciation for the teacher's role through their involvement. In the future, it is critical that school personnel develop an understanding for what motivates volunteers to serve within a school and what is likely to retain their involvement with students in need. It is critical that school personnel hear these voices (Tracey, Hornery, Seaton, Craven, & Yeung, 2014).

### **Symbiotic Relationship**

The mentoring relationship is symbiotic in nature due to the reciprocating benefits to both the mentor and the mentee. Both individuals experience the effects of the partnership through various means. The relationship has benefit in that participants may experience both the reduction of risk factors and promotion of protective ones in order to maximize the benefits to both individuals. The under-researched side of the symbiotic relationship is the potential for personal growth and transformation of mentors through their involvement in the mentoring relationships (Weiler, Zimmerman, et al., 2014).

The symbiotic relationship is represented in research by the concepts of co-learning and reciprocity. All terms imply a relationship based on the principle of mutuality. Adult mentors and high school aged mentees bring different perspectives and experiences to the relationship. These ideas and expertise promote co-learning and allow reciprocity to occur through a collective and reflective mentoring process (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). The strength of the relationship between the student and the mentor has been found to directly influence the effectiveness of mentoring (Guryan, 2017).

The symbiotic relationship is also represented in mentors' interpretation of their mentees' openness. When mentees sought support for family, school, or personal concerns, mentors were motivated to respond with emotional support. More so than the extent a student is at risk, the motivation of the mentor and his/her self-efficacy drives relationship quality (Karcher, Nakkula, & Harris, 2005). Hallmarks of an educator with a high sense of self-efficacy were that they could overcome problems through time and effort and that they were more inclined to create a dynamic, student-centered learning environment (Swan, Wolf, & Cano, 2011). Critical to the mentoring relationship is the mentor's self-efficacy beliefs because this judgement on his or her capabilities "affects the effort they invest in teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 783).

Within business and industry studies, mentoring has a long-standing role in the nurturing of staff and, for both the mentor and mentee, can be integral to career advancement (Ehrich et al., 2003). Individuals may experience mentoring at various life stages and through varying formats such as youth mentoring, academic mentoring, or workplace mentoring (Eby et al., 2008). All types of mentors were exposed to and effected by the relevant issues in their broader community. These individuals were encouraged to think critically about what these realities mean for their mentees, themselves, and their community. The most beneficial mentoring relationship explicitly aims to provide a mutually beneficial experience for both recipients and providers (Weiler et al., 2013).

Interdependence is a concept closely intertwined with the symbiotic nature of mentoring relationships throughout the literature and occurs through the exchange of information, expression of emotions, negotiation of goals, and regulation of behaviors (Pryce & Keller, 2012). The student feels the positive impact of a teacher mentor, but there are also direct repercussions

felt by the teacher mentor as well. The pride of accomplishment, perseverance, and student outcomes was observed to be readily apparent on the faces of the participants as they spoke about their experiences. The researcher believed that she might have recognized the students' need for human connection, and they realized the same for themselves by engaging in deeper and more intensely personal relationships with their mentees (Augustine, 2014).

The interpersonal experiences within the dyad were indicators of relationship development as well as drivers of relationship growth, change, or decline (Pryce & Keller, 2012). In a study conducted by Slack et al. (2013), school-based mentors felt that entering into a mentoring relationship was a good experience for them and that they made a difference in their mentees' personal and academic life. The mentors reported positive feedback about their role in helping their mentees realize their full potential through encouragement, goal setting, in-depth conversations about their future, helping them see options in life, and dealing with challenging situations.

### **Duration**

Longevity is consistently talked about in the literature as an important factor underlying beneficial mentoring relationships (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Long-term relationships provide more opportunities for stronger and more influential bonds to develop between the mentor and the child. Students involved in a SBM program that ended the year in an intact relationship demonstrated significant academic improvement in relation to students who had a mentoring relationship terminated prematurely. Duration of a relationship is associated with closeness between the mentor and mentee as well as an overall strong indicator of program effectiveness. The largest positive benefits on the mentee were evident in youth who had a one-

year or longer relationship with outcomes becoming progressively stronger as the relationship persisted over longer periods of time (Grossman et al., 2012).

Duration tends to imply the development of a close relationship and a strong program; the match length of a relationship is considered one of the best benchmarks of overall program effectiveness. Adults who volunteer to serve as mentors typically enter into a relationship with a strong desire to make a positive difference in the lives of young people. Unfortunately, volunteers can become easily discouraged if the experience does not match their expectations (Rhodes, Schwartz, Willis, & Wu, 2014). A research study by Grossman et al. (2012) examining match duration and the role of re-matching suggested that SBM relationships could benefit youth in terms of school-related outcomes. School-related outcomes were particularly positive when relationships endured over time. Teachers rated the achievement of youth in intact mentoring relationships almost half a point higher on a one to five scale following a five-month consistent relationship. Youth that were in a six-month or longer relationship with a mentor were found to be less likely to skip school. More specifically than just the amount of time in a relationship, the integrity of the original match matters to produce promising results.

Qualities of an effective mentoring relationship include the mentees reporting frequent contact with their mentor, developing an emotional closeness, and participating in the relationship for a long period. The strength of the interpersonal bond facilitates the formation of a strong, long-lasting relationship. The first thing that needs developed is the strong emotional connection. Once this is established through consistent meetings, the mentor and mentee can move ahead with improving academic competence, increasing self-esteem, or enhancing interpersonal relationships (Rhodes et al., 2005).

The qualities of closeness and mutual caring take a long period to evolve in a mentoring relationship. Benefits developed through the process of developing relationships include the possibility to positively influence how youth think about and approach other relationships. These benefits may only accrue over a long period through the process characterized by a series of small wins that emerge sporadically over time (Rhodes et al., 2006).

### **Connectedness**

A close, trusting relationship lies at the heart of the change process that helps students reach their maximum potential. More than a long-lasting mentoring relationship, the actual quality of the relationship is important for bringing about personal growth. There must be some degree of trust and closeness for the relationship to be effective. The strength of the bonds that were formed over time provide a framework for mentees to improve in the areas of academic performance or self-esteem when paired with a dedicated, trustworthy, and consistent mentor (Rhodes et al., 2005). Connectedness includes perceived caring, quality of and satisfaction with relationships, and a sense of belonging. A relationship that exemplifies the characteristics of connectedness with parents, family members, teachers, school staff, and other caring adults can protect adolescents from a range of poor health outcomes and promote positive development (Sieving et al., 2016).

Connectedness in a quality mentoring relationship is marked by a strong emotional connection. These types of close and enduring relationships between a mentor and mentee were characterized by the mentee as authentic, regular companionship, and influenced by acts of empathy (Rhodes et al., 2006). Mentoring relationships that were the most successful were typically characterized as close, consistent, and enduring. Closeness refers to the bond between the mentor and the mentee. Consistency refers to the amount of time the individuals spend

together with relationships lasting more than one year being linked to positive youth outcomes (Fernandes-Alcentara, 2015).

### **At-Risk Students**

Placing the mentor at the center of the discussion about mentoring relationships helps to address the research gap, but depicting only their experiences lacks the needed context.

Mentoring joins the conversation by helping to solve the at-risk student epidemic because it shows promise for increasing the engagement of at-risk students (Augustine, 2014). The full story would not be complete without describing the youth they mentored (Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014).

Researchers in many different contexts have defined at-risk students. Helpless children were described as engaging in maladaptive behaviors such as avoidance of challenges and a deterioration of performance in the face of obstacles. Helpless children viewed their difficulties as failures, as indicative of their own low ability, and as insurmountable obstacles. They view additional effort in the face of challenges as futile and as further proof that they had an inadequate ability level (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Suh, Suh, and Houston (2007) used the term *at risk* to specifically focus on a student's background and environment that in concert may lead to a higher risk of educational failure. At-risk students are therefore those who exhibit academic, behavioral, or attitudinal issues that lead to school dropout. Weiler, Zarich, et al. (2014) defined at-risk students as those at risk of reaching their full potential due to a variety of individual, familial, and environmental risk factors. Deutsch et al. (2013) argued that students needed mentoring because they were "at-risk for making poor academic, socioemotional or behavioral choices but who have leadership potential and are not receiving services" (p. 49). For the context of this study, at-risk students were viewed as a term with promise through a lens

respecting individual students' potential for future growth. Demographic features, home and community factors, and individual skill deficits also affect students. These students require intense, targeted, structured interventions with the potential to prevent future problematic behavior and intervention to help enhance certain core skills. Disruptive and delinquent behavior is a consistent indicator of at-risk status (McDaniel & Yarbrough, 2016).

Risk is specifically defined as the notion that exposure to certain conditions, or risk factors, increases the likelihood that a student will experience adverse consequences (Finn & Rock, 1997). Academic risk factors could include being a minority student attending an inner-city school, growing up in a low-income home, or coming from a home where English is not the primary language. Any of these factors could contribute to academic difficulty or cause a student to drop out of school. Risk factors were often directly associated with engaging in risk behaviors. Students falls short of reaching their full potential when risk behaviors such as skipping class, skipping school, not attending to the teacher, or not completing required class work or homework impeded their learning (Finn & Rock, 1997).

The transition to adolescence is a critical step as students are increasingly susceptible to emotional and behavioral difficulties (Erdem et al., 2016). Risk factors could also include the stressful environments at home and at school as well as the existence of behavioral problems, such as poor academic performance or misconduct (Raposa et al., 2016). Slack et al. (2013) added that students were at risk of reaching their potential because of a combination of low grades, poor attendance, discipline referrals, low-test scores, personal/social concerns, and family dynamics. Mentoring programs have been developed and tested over time as a response to divert youth away from pathways that lead to antisocial behavior and crime (Whybra et al., 2018).

Weiler, Zarich, et al. (2014) promoted resilience and the strengthening of social bonds to maximize the opportunity for at-risk youth to achieve life successes. This universal and fundamental need to belong can be met through mentoring relationships, and it may be an important driver of affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes for mentees (Eby et al., 2008). The promotion of resilience and life success through strengthening social bonds, increasing academic engagement and performance, decreasing substance abuse and delinquent behaviors, and improving sense of self can happen through the mentoring relationship (Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014).

Mentors may model caring relationships and provide support for youth while challenging negative views youth have about themselves and their relationships. Youth may build stronger and supportive relationships with their mentors when they meet more often and consistently perceive a greater amount of mentoring support (Erdem et al., 2016). High school students undergoing the transition from adolescence to adulthood face a unique set of trials. Challenges such as identity development and an increased responsibility to handle the domains of education, work, and social life can impede health-related outcomes. At-risk students paired in a supportive mentoring relationship have the potential to improve their chances of succeeding in public health goals and objectives (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Simões and Alarcão (2014b) found that the combination of teaching and mentoring had a direct impact on reducing mentees' unexcused absences, improving student grades, and improving overall school achievement. There were a limited number of studies into mental health early interventions and improved academic outcomes for at-risk students. This desperate need indicates that continued scientific inquiry is needed (Iachini, Brown, Ball, Gibson, & Lize, 2015). An example of research into professionals mentoring at-risk youth was studied through a

structured, 12-week program called Campus Corps. The authors noted that the specific strategies used by Campus Corps mentors may not be applicable to all settings and that future research is needed in a more traditional one-on-one mentoring model (Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014).

Lakind et al. (2015) performed structured interviews with professional mentors to investigate their sense of how they performed the mentoring role. The authors advised future research into less intensive mentoring models, the training and support for other providers, settings, and service models, and thus developing a fuller and more nuanced understanding of mentors' relationships with at-risk youth. In a recent dissertation completed by Augustine (2014), recommendations were made to focus future research on understanding the complexities of the mentoring relationship with an emphasis on short- and long-term benefits to the adult mentors. There is also a specific calling for a further investigation into teachers who carry over their attitudes and strategies developed from mentoring at-risk students to their classroom climate and instructional strategies for all students.

Dweck and Leggett (1988) characterize children who typically provide a maladaptive or helpless response as avoiding challenge and performing poorly in the face of obstacles. Helpless children view their difficulties as insurmountable failures, indicative of their low ability. Additional effort is thought of as a futile attempt to succeed. Dweck (2012) shares in three research studies that these same helpless students were predicted to hold a significantly heightened desire for aggressive retaliation and a heightened intention to engage in aggressive retaliation following a bullying scenario. Students with this fixed mindset were more likely to hold negative feelings about themselves such as shame, to view the bully as a bad person, and to express hatred. Studies by DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) into formal mentoring programs described stronger effects when the program served youth who were experiencing individual and

environmental risk. The researchers attributed this to programs being precisely designed to meet the needs of specific at-risk populations.

Many youth who are identified to be a part of a mentoring program come from single-parent homes. These same youth may also have experienced relationship loss. These individuals may feel vulnerable to, or responsible for, problems in future adult relationships (Grossman et al., 2012). A research study completed Slack et al. (2013) identified students at risk when they had low grades, poor attendance, discipline referrals, low-test scores, personal/social concerns, and family dynamics.

### **Mentors as Servants**

At the heart of a mentoring relationship intervention for students at risk of reaching their full potential is a caring relationship (Grossman et al., 2012). Educators can serve as mentors through their selfless and caring actions of volunteering to be a teacher mentor (Augustine, 2014). One of the overarching goals of education is to assist learners in reaching their objectives in such a way that they will function as autonomous, socially responsible thinkers (Mezirow, 1997). Educators need to view themselves as advocates, consultants, and collaborators in order to help at-risk students achieve academic, career, personal, and social development goals. Educators may serve the needs of at-risk high school students by spreading an optimistic view about the future, increasing aspirations, and forming positive outlooks. Effective mentoring has the greatest impact when caring, committed adults take a proactive role in upholding the integrity of mentoring relationships (Suh et al., 2007).

SBM programs have expanded rapidly in recent years because they are an efficient way to provide mentors to assist at-risk youth in achieving this objective (Wasburn-Moses, Fry, & Sanders, 2014). SBM programs could provide a structured format for the mentor and

student to have conversations about their relationship. For example, the mentor and student could share what the relationship means to them, discuss the ways in which their needs and expectations were or were not being met, reminisce about their positive experiences, and celebrate their successes. Regularly scheduled and structured opportunities could prevent relationships from stagnating or stalling, and help to achieve breakthrough moments that lead to socially responsible thinkers (Pryce & Keller, 2012).

Potential benefits of mentoring through the school-based context can be realized because it offers the most value in terms of improving work performance and attitudes toward school while decreasing withdrawal behavior (Eby et al., 2008). Mentors with educational experience may be better prepared to facilitate improvements in mentees' perceived competence in learning and to achieve mentoring goals related to school outcomes (Simões & Alarcão, 2014a). As stated by Grossman et al. (2012), it is only in the context of enduring, intact SBM that youth make gains in their academic performance.

Nonparent adults who function in the role of a mentor can fill the critical role of a support figure who promotes learning and competence, provides exposure to positive social norms, increases self-efficacy, and helps at-risk students reach their full potential (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Teachers may effectively deliver SBM, and when they service in the role of mentors, they can help to better contextualize some of the implementation stages of the overall program (Simões & Alarcão, 2014c). These benefits combine to potentially transform school-based mentoring into a privileged relational context with which to tackle the negative or weak perceived competence in learning of vulnerable students. This may ultimately result in positive school performance becoming integrated into the mentee's personal value set. Such a structural

change in the case of mentored students' core beliefs may arrive the quickest and with most force when mentors have a background in educational roles (Simões & Alarcão, 2014a).

High-stakes academic testing has risen to the forefront of public education through the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This has led to an increased pressure on schools to raise their academic performance. SBM programs have expanded since 2001 in the hope that mentoring relationships can improve student academic performance (Schwartz et al., 2012). In the context of general pressure to meet intensifying academic standards, many mentoring programs were narrowing their focus to overly structured, academic activities (Grossman et al., 2012).

Within the transition from general student focused growth to academic performance focused, some programs seem to have fallen prey to trivializing the core value of cultivating a caring relationship. A placeholder mentality has emerged in some programs in which the most important program goal is simply to get youth off waitlists and into relationships. This produces a mentor-youth bond that is interchangeable. Caring relationships that endure over time hold potential benefits but need sufficient program resources to ensure reasonable levels of screening, training, and post-match mentor support (Grossman et al., 2012).

Building a relationship between a teacher mentor and student mentee, including recognizing and respecting cultural and gender differences, is critical in developing a successful relationship. Effective mentoring is achieved when the mentor serves to foster a caring and supportive relationship, provides clear guidelines, and models self-awareness and self-confidence. Mentors can reach the point of maintaining an effective relationship when they consistently focus on the needs of the student (Slack et al., 2013). The critical figure in

the process of growing an individual is not the youth living through it but those in close proximity who care about their progress.

### **Summary**

Meaning is individualistic and found inside the mentee and school-based mentor rather than prescribed by external influences such as written texts and speeches; however, that meaning becomes significant to the learner through critical discourse with others (Kitchenham, 2008). Although much research has explored the effects of mentoring on mentee outcomes, relatively little attention has been paid to the benefits received by mentors (Ragins & Kram, 2007).

Mentoring rests on a foundation of a positive and trusting personal relationship between a student and an adult (Slack et al., 2013). Quality mentoring relationships can thus influence mentors' and mentees' interpersonal skill development (Ehrich et al., 2003). Those students who stand at risk of reaching their maximum potential deserve the care and support that comes from a school-based mentor capable of establishing this type of positive, trusting, influential relationship. A servant educator can mentor by challenging negative views that youth may hold of themselves and demonstrate that positive relationships with adults are possible. In this way, a mentoring relationship can become a corrective experience for youth (Grossman et al., 2012). Much less is known about the impact of mentoring on the mentors themselves (Wasburn-Moses et al., 2014). Specifically, research is needed to understand the experiences of the school-based mentors who mentor at-risk high school students.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The goal is to produce a textural description of each relationship in its setting and context before the resulting abstract themes are identified and developed (Creswell, 2013; Pryce & Keller, 2012). In this chapter, the design, guiding questions, setting, and participants are provided to set the foundation for the study. This is followed by details about the procedures, the role of the researcher, data collection, and data analysis to follow through with the phenomenological research design. Finally, processes for ensuring trustworthiness and considering ethical ramifications are delineated.

### Design

In comparison to quantitative research, qualitative research has many merits, including greater ecological validity and rich, descriptive accounts of real world phenomena (Allen et al., 2008). Qualitative research begins with a set of assumptions and the application of a theoretical framework to inform the study of a problem. A qualitative research design was chosen as the structure of this study to produce thick, rich descriptions of the voices of the mentors of at-risk high school students (Creswell, 2013). More specifically, the study followed a phenomenological design to produce the essence of the experiences of mentoring at-risk high school students from the perspective of the mentors. This human science approach naturally fits with this purpose because of the sensitivity needed to understand these lived experiences. The tenets of phenomenology and TLT were combined into an inseparable activity to textually reflect “on the lived experiences and practical actions of everyday life with the intent to increase one’s

thoughtfulness and practical resourcefulness or tact” (van Manen, 1997, p. 4). The resulting description of how mentors orient a lived experience produced the essence of the mentoring phenomenon (van Manen, 1997).

The real life phenomenon of mentoring at-risk high school students was investigated by looking at a very specific group of participants. These participants held the distinguishing factors that they were volunteer school-based mentors, active members of their high school SAP core team for at least three years, and responsible for mentoring at-risk students. A transcendental phenomenological approach to the qualitative study allowed the mentors to reflect on their beliefs, attitudes, and growth experienced while living through the same shared phenomenon. Their reflection of the shared experiences was the focus of extensive interview questions, the use of a reflective writing opportunity, and follow-up focus group discussions. The resulting qualitative data was used to describe the essence of mentoring at-risk high school students through textural and structural descriptions. The phenomenological writing structure allowed data analysis to be done in such a way that it led to a deeper understanding of participants’ beliefs, attitudes, and needs while the researcher’s interpretations were bracketed out (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Research Questions**

Throughout qualitative research, the central questions are described as open-ended, evolving, and nondirectional (Creswell, 2013). The following research questions (RQ) guided the investigation into the lived experience of school-based mentors of at-risk high school students:

**RQ1:** How do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, describe their experiences?

**RQ2:** To what extent, if at all, do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, experience transformation?

**RQ3:** What do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, identify as contributing factors and/or obstacles to experiencing transformation?

### **Setting**

This study focused on individual SAP core team members volunteering to mentor students in high schools across Oakridge County, Pennsylvania (a pseudonym assigned for confidentiality). Participants were identified through contact with the Saint Vincent College Prevention Projects Executive Director. The members of each school's SAP core team are committed to identifying issues that pose a barrier to students' academic achievement (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2016); the SAP core team members take on part of this responsibility by mentoring at-risk students.

Oakridge County is comprised of individuals who have attained education levels across all ranges of the spectrum. Of the population over 25 years old, 9.7% report that they have not finished high school nor obtained a graduate equivalency degree while 49.3% have attained at least some college schooling (OverdosefreePA.org, 2018). In regard to poverty rates, Oakridge County is made up of 9.8% of their population falling below the poverty threshold for an individual of \$11,139 (OverdosefreePA.org, 2018). Drug abuse is also a disturbing trend with records confirming at least 189 overdose deaths in 2017 (OverdosefreePA.org, 2018).

Oakridge County is made up of 17 independent school districts each with a single high school. There were two additional public school districts that overlap into Oakridge County

(with their high school placed outside of the Oakridge County boundaries) to a small degree and thus were not included in this study. The rationale for selecting this high school setting starts with Pennsylvania schools being required to have a SAP team as part of their educational offerings. The sites of data collection through interviews were appropriate for a private interview and comfortable for the participants; examples include a teacher's classroom, office space in a high school, or over the phone. The interview sites had desks or tables and chairs in which the private conversation took place.

### **Participants**

The pool of potential participants for this investigation was selected from the 16 public high schools housed within Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. Although 19 public high schools draw students from Oakridge County, two of the high schools are located outside the boundaries of Oakridge County and predominantly draw students from adjacent counties; an additional high school was excluded to avoid any potential concerns of power imbalance as the researcher is employed there. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A), contact information was requested from the Saint Vincent College Prevention Projects Executive Director for all high school SAP core team members in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. A brief demographic questionnaire was shared via email and participants were asked to click on a provided link. The questionnaire (Appendix B) included inquiries to help identify employer, current position, years as a professional educator, years as a SAP core team member, and recognition that they have been impacted through significant mentoring relationships and were employed at a high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania.

Purposeful sampling was employed to determine the participants for this study (Creswell, 2013). The criteria for selection from the target population were educators who volunteer

mentor at-risk high school students as SAP core team members who have mentored at-risk students for at least three years. Included in the study were 15 participants in order to reach thematic saturation (Creswell, 2013). Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) noted that data collection can cease when there is a lack of any new emerging data as this indicates that saturation has been achieved.

### **Procedures**

A critical step prior to data collection and analysis was receiving Liberty University IRB approval. The IRB application was submitted, adjusted as needed, and approval granted as the first step in this process. Following receipt of IRB approval, the demographic questionnaire, individual and focus group interview questions, and reflective open-ended writing prompt were piloted with the researchers SAP core team colleagues. The intention of this is to refine data collection plans and logistics of the field inquiry (Yin, 2014). Approval from the Saint Vincent College Prevention Projects Executive Director was sought to engage high school core team members in the study. Permission was obtained on official letterhead from the Saint Vincent College Prevention Projects Executive Director before the recruitment of participants began. Participants' contact information was obtained from the Saint Vincent College Prevention Projects Executive Director and an email was sent to participants asking them to click on a provided link to submit a demographic questionnaire. The purpose of the study was communicated as well as specifics about the data collection procedures. Responses were collected and stored in an electronic spreadsheet. Once selected as part of the study based on the aforementioned criteria, all participants signed informed consent documents prior to data collection (Appendix C).

All school-based mentors selected as participants were interviewed in person or via a telephone conversation. For the focus group sessions, based on geographic proximity and schedule availability, participants were invited to meet at an agreed upon school office conducive to private conversation. Recording procedures for the interviews and focus group sessions included the recording of audio using multiple electronic devices. Before starting these interviews, the formality of the interview situation was reduced by attempting to make it more of a relaxing and informal process. The participants were continually reassured that confidentiality would not be breached (Koch, 2006).

All individual and focus group interview sessions were transferred from audio to written content through transcription, and participants were provided an opportunity to review the transcripts. The follow-up reflective written exercise was sent via email to each of the participants. Collected data from this reflective exercise were written electronically and returned to the researcher. An electronic reflective journal, kept by the researcher, was regularly added to throughout the data collection and data analysis process.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The assumptions that I inherently brought to this study were strongly influenced by my journey. I grew up in a solid, Godly household, with amazing parents and siblings supporting me. I was mentored throughout my early years by coaches, youth group leaders, and family members. Academically-gifted and athletically-driven peers surrounded me during my middle school and high school years. I attended Grove City College where I was mentored by football teammates, fraternity brothers, coaches, and professors committed to academics and Christian ideals. I taught and coached for five years at the high school level; during that time, I was more focused on challenging and encouraging the already most successful students.

Through my introductory administrative role as an assistant middle school principal, I became a SAP core team member. I continued serving at-risk students as a SAP core team member when I transitioned to an assistant high school principal, and again now, as a high school principal. This eight-year involvement as a mentor to at-risk students (six at the high school level) has changed my life. At times, I have been consumed with the process because of the reciprocating benefits I have experienced along with the tangible evidence of success I have seen in students. The journey of identifying, supporting, recommending services, and mentoring at-risk students has broken me to my core and changed many of my beliefs and actions.

The lens through which I view students at-risk has changed from one in which I saw them at risk of failing, at risk of being a behavior problem, at risk of being a drain on society, and at risk of causing me headaches. I now view the individual through the lens of at risk of reaching their maximum potential. Value and perspective changes have come about through time spent in their homes, apartments, and trailers, personal funds spent on food, heating oil, and clothes, and energy spent finishing class presentations, working through Algebra problems side-by-side, and finalizing college plans. Tangible side effects of this perspective have changed the ways in which I motivate, encourage, and discipline all students with which I interact in my role as a principal, father, and youth group leader.

The experiences of the SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor these students was placed at the center of this research study. I bring inherent biases and prejudgments with me to the study as an educator, building administrator, and volunteer SAP core team member in the high school in which I work; these biases were set aside through the Epoche process (Moustakas, 1994). The whole of these professional mentoring experiences has formed the philosophical assumptions that I bring to this study. I hold the ontological assumption that reality is multiple

as seen through multiple viewpoints on an issue (Creswell, 2013). The epistemological assumptions that the nearer that I can situate myself to the phenomenon the greater I can understand what the mentors know to be true guided my qualitative data collection and analysis as I described the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The narrative created through this study was shaped by my axiological values including the intrinsic value of a person. Methodological assumptions include holding the phenomenon of SBM of at-risk high school students tightly as the focus, while understanding that the study is an inductive and emergent process (Creswell, 2013).

The participants and I have a mutual connection and may identify with a shared lens through which we view at-risk students, but I do not have a personal or professional relationship with other high school's SAP core team members. The limit to the relationship is that we all volunteer as school-based mentors under the same Oakridge County umbrella within different stand-alone school districts and their respective high schools. The setting for interviews and focus group discussions were chosen with participant input to assist in avoiding any bias.

The qualitative research undertaken in the study began with a set of assumptions and the application of a theoretical framework to inform the study of a problem. At its foundation, this type of research is derived from first-person reports of life experiences with the researcher (i.e., me), acting as the human instrument to give existence its essence and the instrument who returns essence to existential life (Moustakas, 1994). The values built over time through life experiences have informed the biases and assumptions I brought to this phenomenological investigation as the human instrument. My role as a researcher was specifically to conduct semi-structured interviews, facilitate focus group discussions, collect writings that share a reflective student experience, and analyze data; as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, I

employed this process to develop an understanding of mentoring at-risk high school students from the perspective of the mentors.

### **Data Collection**

Researchers must triangulate their data from one of the selected methods of data collection by seeking corroboration from other types of collected data (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006). This process of gathering multiple measures of the same phenomenon helped the researcher develop convergent evidence and strengthen the construct validity. This triangulation produced an increased confidence in rendering the participant's perspective accurately. Critically important to quality data analysis is that the chosen processes are conducted with excellence. The data analysis process exhaustively attended to all the collected data. Analysis addressed the most significant aspects of the study without losing focus on the phenomenon through the creation of a descriptive framework of the multiple cases. Finally, personal background, beliefs, assumptions, and prior knowledge were applied to demonstrate awareness of current thinking and discourse (Yin, 2014).

Researcher reflective journaling throughout the data collection process formed the foundation for the Epoche, or a way to set aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things (Moustakas, 1994). Koch (2006) recommended that a field journal be maintained as a means to transcribe the researcher's perspective, or horizon. Epoche journaling recorded the horizon from which the researcher operated and was transparent to the researcher as data was collected (Moustakas, 1994). Completing a reflective field journal encouraged reflexivity, an opportunity to thoughtfully analyze the research experience and the relationship between the researcher, the participants, and the actual research process (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). From the

researcher's perspective, field journaling was also used to add to the data pool when including thick description of constructs (Deutsch et al., 2013).

## **Interviews**

Van Manen (1997) described interviews as a necessary route to determine a personal life story. Interviewing helped to explore the experience and gather the experiential narrative based on the perspective of the mentor. One-on-one interviews served as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with the participants about the meaning of their experience. Qualitative data was collected by interviewing SAP core team members who volunteer mentor at-risk high school students to develop a rich and deep understanding of their experiences.

Semi-structured interviews allowed the selected participants to share their mentoring stories in their own words while still focusing on the research questions (van Manen, 1997). Interviews that were semi-structured were critical because they allowed the researcher to follow-up on interesting or important issues in real-time with the participant (Smith, 2004). A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D) included a combination of open-ended questions and probes that gauged experience, opinions, values, feelings, and knowledge, which were developed from the literature presented in Chapter 2. These interview questions were piloted with members of the SAP core team in the school where the researcher works to verify word choice and application to the phenomenon. Standardized, open-ended interview questions included the following:

1. Describe yourself, your job, and what you do in your role as mentor.
2. How long have you been in your current position and in the field of education?
3. How long have you been a SAP core team member?
4. How do you define an at-risk high school student?

5. How do you define a mentoring relationship?
6. What is the role of the school-based mentor of at-risk high school students?
7. What impact do you believe that you may have on student academic/personal/social success?
8. Without mentioning their identity, describe one of your most memorable mentees and your relationship with that student.
9. In what ways has mentoring affected you?
10. Have you been transformed through mentoring at-risk high school students? If so, how?
11. Is there anything else significant about mentoring that you would like to share?

The main purpose of these 11 interview questions was to obtain the unique description of developing a mentoring relationship held by the mentor caused by mentoring at-risk high school students. Interview questions one through six were developed to identify the role of the school-based mentor and posed with the intent of collecting evidence of the perspective of mentoring directly from the mentor's perspective. This collection of introductory questions were intended to develop rapport through a social conversation and support RQ1. With each individual participant, this question set was aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). Interview questions seven and eight were drawn from research detailing SBM programs and support RQ2. SBM is an efficient way to provide mentors for assist at-risk youth to achieve the objective of social and academic growth (Wasburn-Moses et al., 2014). SBM programs could provide a structured format for the mentor and student to have conversations about their relationship. Regularly scheduled and structured opportunities could prevent relationships from stagnating or stalling, and help to achieve breakthrough moments that lead to socially responsible thinkers (Pryce & Keller,

2012). Questions 9–11 focused on potential transformation that mentors experience as they engage with at-risk high school students and support RQ3. Transformation thus occurs by critical self-reflection of the assumptions, and a resolution happens only after the problem is redefined. The original foundation of transformative learning has stayed consistent with depth added to include the processes of meaning scheme and meaning perspective, renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships, types of reflection, habits of mind and points of view. If a learner rationalized a new point of view without dealing with the deep feelings that accompanied the original meaning scheme or perspective, perspective transformation could not occur (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2003). All of the interview questions were developed to guide the investigation into the lived experience of school-based mentors of at-risk high school students. The data collected from the participant feedback to the interview questions helped answer the research questions:

1. How do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, describe their experiences?
2. To what extent, if at all, do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, experience transformation?
3. What do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, identify as contributing factors and/or obstacles to experiencing transformation?

### **Focus Groups**

Smith (2004) advises that focus groups can be beneficial to phenomenological studies to establish themes. The data collected from the conversational focus groups is dependent on the

phenomenon being discussed, the researcher's facilitation skills, and the characteristics of the participants. In this study, the participants were grouped into several small focus groups to keep the size small enough to allow them to discuss their personal experiences in sufficient detail and intimacy (Smith, 2004). Standardized open-ended focus group questions adapted from Moustakas (1994) include the following (see Appendix E):

1. Describe briefly the nature of your mentoring relationships with at-risk high school students.
2. Select one episode, event, or situation in which your own sense of transformation stood out.
3. Describe the qualities of this at-risk high school student who awakened in you feelings of transformation. Develop a unified descriptive portrait of this symbiotic relationship. To develop this descriptive portrait, share the most frequently cited, or dominant, qualities of at-risk students that awakened in each of you feelings of transformation. The resulting composite portrait represents the core qualities or meanings that will enhance the understanding of the mentoring relationship (Moustakas, 1994).
4. Look over your descriptive portrait and determine whether you have included everything of significance. Elaborate on the description, if needed.

The first focus group question collected anecdotal data pertaining to RQ1. Suh et al. (2007) used the term *at risk* to describe a student's background and environment that in concert may lead to a higher risk of educational failure. Students who were at risk were therefore those who exhibit academic, behavioral, or attitudinal issues that lead to school dropout. Weiler, Zarich, et al. (2014) defined at-risk students as those at risk of reaching their full potential due to a variety of individual, familial, and environmental risk factors. Mentoring relationships have the inherent

potential to facilitate growth in the health and well-being of youth (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). The second focus group question supports Research Question 2. The interplay or internal dialogue involving individuals assessing their beliefs, feelings, and values is called discourse. Having an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, bracketing out taken for granted frames of reference, and seeking common ground were skills relevant to participating in meaningful discourse. Transformative learning emphasizes critical learning and critical self-reflection to assess what has been taken for granted and develop a more dependable working judgement. To reach the most powerful discourse, the highest level of reflective judgement must be accessed wherein individuals can offer a perspective about their own perspective. This is an essential condition for the type of transformative learning that occurs when the critical reflection of assumptions take place independently or through in-group interaction (Mezirow, 2003). The third focus group question guided the participants to collectively recall information related to RQ3. Mentoring relationships were symbiotic in nature due to the reciprocating benefits to both the mentor and the mentee. Both individuals experience the effects of the partnership through various means. The relationship has benefit in that participants may experience both the reduction of risk factors and promotion of protective ones in order to maximize the benefits to both individuals (Weiler, Zimmerman, et al., 2014). The symbiotic relationship is defined by the concepts of co-learning and reciprocity. Adult mentors and high school aged mentees bring different perspectives and experiences to the relationship. These ideas and expertise promote co-learning and allow reciprocity to occur through a collective and reflective mentoring process (Zeldin et al., 2013). The strength of the relationship between the student and the mentor has been found to directly influence the effectiveness of mentoring (Guryan, 2017). The fourth focus group question adds breadth and depth to RQs 1–3 as outlined above.

### **Reflective Writing Opportunity**

In addition to data collected from interviews and focus groups, participants were asked to complete a written reflection of a mentoring relationship. Data collected from the interviews were combined with a deeper exploration of their experience through a reflective written exercise to achieve triangulation. An open-ended prompt for participants to answer in written form further developed their perspective to mentoring relationships (Appendix F). The prompt stated: “Share a deeper exploration of your experience as a Student Assistant Program (SAP) core team member responsible for mentoring at-risk high school students. Discuss your mentoring relationship with a specific student that helps to recall personal and professional transformation you have experienced. In your response, please do not share any information that would identify a particular individual, school, or district.” This follow-up to the verbal discussion was an opportunity for the participants to share their perceptions of transformation through a meaningful mentoring relationship. This reflective writing exercise was emailed to all participants and collected electronically. Participants shared the story of mentoring a particular student that influenced their personal and professional transformation (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected in this study was analyzed through a constructivist worldview. Data were subsequently classified through a tagging and grouping process that supported the purpose of describing the perspectives and experiences of the individuals who engage in the SBM of at-risk students (Baptiste, 2001).

A demographic questionnaire was used to collect data for purposeful sampling and descriptive purposes and categorization purposes. This data also served as verification of the shared phenomenon. Qualitative data resulting from the semi-structured interviews, focus

groups, and follow-up reflective writing opportunities were analyzed through a transcendental phenomenological lens to develop strong, plausible, and fair arguments supported by data. The researcher had interviews and focus group sessions transcribed by a paid transcriptionist. The software program ATLAS.ti was employed to organize codes and themes and assist in conducting data analysis. The software program was implemented in order to provide a systematic way to store and analyze data collected through the semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and follow-up reflective writing opportunity.

Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate engaging in the recursive process of thematic analysis through the entire coding and analysis process. The researcher was intimately familiarized with the data through an immersion of collected data. Initial codes were generated with the core research questions in mind. Clusters of meaning were developed out of the significant statements and turned into themes. Significant statements highlighted and annotated in the text were grouped into meaning units or themes. This was important to develop because themes were the foundation for describing what the phenomenon is and how it was experienced (Creswell, 2013). Themes were then reviewed and refined to represent the essence of each.

Data was read repeatedly and the researcher regularly engaged in reflection to uncover the thematic aspects, isolate thematic statements, and interpret the essence of the phenomena through rich and descriptive text (van Manen, 1997). The resulting description was narrated in line with a transcendental phenomenological interpretation of the essence of mentoring at-risk high school students (Creswell, 2013; Shosha, 2012). This went beyond a description and made an argument in relation to the three research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rich and thick descriptions of the phenomenon added to the trustworthiness of the data. A description of the participants' views was explained in detail, while keeping their identity confidential, and

providing details when writing about the themes. This is important because readers will be able to transfer the themes developed in this study to other mentoring experiences because of shared characteristics. The use of 15 participants who experienced the same phenomenon also provided validity to the findings as perception of the experience is triangulated (Creswell, 2013).

Throughout this process, participants had the opportunity to check their transcriptions and the themes as they were revealed to provide feedback.

### **Trustworthiness**

To conduct a trustworthy qualitative study, procedures for increasing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were implemented with fidelity. In order to fully validate the research, it was critical to engage in processes that authenticate the study. The researcher clarified research bias by sharing experiences and biases from the perspective of the researcher about the transformative value of mentoring. Bracketing out personal perspectives from the outset provides a context for readers to view the study (Creswell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) further describes this as engaging in the Epoche process. A researcher must engage in a disciplined and systematic effort to set aside prejudgments to separate the study from preconceptions, beliefs, and knowledge from prior experiences. Trustworthiness in the study was enhanced as the researcher was completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening as the researcher participants described experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Member checks were also performed, as participants were invited to assess the credibility of the findings and interpretations. It was important to allow the participants to see the preliminary analyses of the themes in order to identify accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2013). Credibility is of critical importance and was pursued by clearly communicating self-awareness related to the phenomenon as well as consulting the participants themselves through member checking

opportunities. Dependability was accounted for by allowing the entire process to be audited. The investigation can be confirmed by collected data that is triangulated through interviews, focus groups, and follow-up surveys from the participants. Transferability was made possible when the context of the investigation was communicated in an explicit manner (Koch, 2006).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is of critical importance and was pursued by clearly communicating the self-awareness related to the phenomenon and communicating the researcher's training, experience, and status (Patton, 2015). The study's level of credibility was enhanced through the discussion of self-awareness included in the researcher journal (Koch, 2006). Multiple sources of evidence aided in producing high quality, converging evidence and thus helping to strengthen the construct validity of the investigation. Collecting data through systematic in-depth fieldwork in the form of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and reflective written experiences from the participants produced data triangulation. An expert review was conducted when the committee reviewed the interview questions. Participants reviewed transcripts of their interviews and the resultant themes to assist in establishing credibility as data was subsequently analyzed in a systematic and conscientious way (Patton, 2015).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability was accounted for by ensuring that the entire research process was logical, traceable, and well-documented (Patton, 2015). The study was reliable in nature as interview questions were reviewed by educators with experience mentoring in schools. The ability for peers to review the findings helped to guide the process. The dissertation committee provided external checks for how the research process was developing. Educators with experience in mentoring were encouraged to ask challenging questions and debrief at important points to keep

the researcher honest (Creswell, 2013). All interview and focus group questions were field tested to ensure need, fit, and reliability. Records of the data collection and analysis were explicitly shared to assist in potential audits of the study. An audit trail was created to provide evidence that the study is dependable (Koch, 2006). Objective evidence was established to demonstrate the data and interpretations were able to be confirmed (Patton, 2015).

### **Transferability**

The study consisted of clear and thorough descriptions to explain the setting and participants of the findings in order to allow future researchers to transfer the study across different settings or participant groups. Included in data collection were participants that represent a maximum variation of sites and background experiences using information gleaned from the demographic questionnaire. Transferability was made possible when the context of the investigation was communicated in an explicit manner (Koch, 2006).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The process of engaging in the investigation of a contemporary real-world phenomenon included the expectation that human subjects were protected with special care and sensitivity (Yin, 2014). To ensure research was conducted ethically and bias was avoided, several ethical considerations were followed. Approval was sought from the IRB of Liberty University before research was conducted. Permission was obtained on official letterhead from the Saint Vincent College Prevention Projects Executive Director before the recruitment of participants began. Participants were well informed as to the nature and purpose of the study. The voluntary nature of the study as well as their right to withdraw at any time was explained before a consent form was signed. Confidentiality was preserved with pseudonyms for all settings and for all individuals. Mentors and mentees were given pseudonyms to preserve their confidentiality.

Sensitivity of information was maintained by protecting electronic data in password protected electronic mediums. For physical data, paper copies were located in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office. The researcher was prepared to share a mental health helpline phone number for any participant perceived to be in need of assistance during the process. As mandated reporters employed in an educational setting, care was given to professionals choosing to mentor at-risk students. Participants were compensated for participating in this study as snacks and drink were provided at the time of the focus group discussions. The researcher avoided using influence or exasperating the power imbalance by not conducting the study with his home school district employees and not accepting participants with whom he had a personal relationship (Creswell, 2013).

### **Summary**

This study was aligned with the structures of a phenomenological study advocated for by Moustakas (1994). Phenomenology was specifically chosen to answer the three research questions through thick, rich descriptions of the shared phenomenon of mentoring at-risk high school students. Because of the nature of transcendental phenomenological research, it was an excellent fit for sharing the voice of school-based mentors of at-risk high school students. Multiple sources of data were collected and analyzed in order to produce the overall essence of the phenomenon. Data was collected through multiple methods supporting this approach such as semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and follow-up reflective writing opportunity. The collected data were analyzed through reflection and writing to determine a full phenomenological textural description of the participants shared, lived experiences. Trustworthiness is a complex concept that was established with fidelity through the inclusion of high standards of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The findings follow a phenomenological design to produce the essence of the experiences of mentoring at-risk high school students from the perspective of the mentors. A transcendental approach to the study allows mentors to reflect on their beliefs, attitudes, and transformation experienced while living through a shared phenomenon. In this chapter, I share the descriptive voices of the participants, the results section including theme development and research question responses, and a concluding summary.

### **Participants**

Ragins and Kram (2007) described mentoring as having the potential to be “a life-altering relationship that inspires mutual growth, learning, and development” (p. 3). A firsthand account of school-based mentors’ experiences provided an opportunity to reflect critically on the meaning of the lived experience. Reflecting on this shared mentoring phenomenon was the core of this phenomenological investigation.

The use of 15 participants who experienced the same phenomena provided validity to the findings as perception of the experience was triangulated (Creswell, 2013). Throughout this process, participants had the opportunity to check their transcriptions to provide feedback. A detailed description explains the participants’ background and roles. Described below were individual perspectives through the support of quotes and summaries. The researcher kept each individual’s identity confidential by using name and location pseudonyms throughout.

**Aaron**

Aaron was a high school principal and SAP core team member who influenced students for 24 years. He joined the SAP core team early in his career and has continually served. Aaron described mentors as individuals emotionally attached to students. He felt the best mentors were individuals who persevered through their own struggles. Mentoring motivated him to do more for students and not focus on the punitive aspect of being a school administrator.

As a mentor, Aaron feels like he has had a significant impact. His actions as an administrator and mentor have been transformed resulting in the development of a peer-mentoring program that provides additional resources and assistance to all incoming freshmen and new students. He worked to develop a family atmosphere for students who came from difficult home lives so that they now trust him and his staff. He reflected on his experiences:

It makes me feel good knowing that I'm having an impact. Even when kids come into my office now here at the high school . . . They need some guidance, they need to hear from some authority that we listen and we care. I genuinely feel good about what I do with the kids. I do. And that's the best I can describe it. It gives me satisfaction knowing that I'm helping. Really, truly.

**Becca**

Becca was a high school counselor with an undergraduate degree in marketing. She was a college admissions counselor before entering public education at Linshan High School 15 years ago. Becca explained that quality mentors were visible and consistently listened to students in need. To develop relationships, she would attend athletic and artistic events while regularly being visible and approachable. She shared that responsibilities of mentors include making

themselves available to listen to students in need and getting the students connected with the needed supports::

We have a mentoring program where kids can meet with those people. We have adults that meet with kids. I meet with kids without really—I don't want to say . . . I hate—this is a bad choice of words—like shoving something down their throat. But know that you're there to listen because there are kids that have some big problems.

Becca described being tougher on her own son because of what she experienced as a mentor. Over her career, she felt the problems students face have grown, specifically in the area of drug and alcohol abuse. She characterized herself as a shallow person, as someone who enjoyed school, had fun, was social, and did not value education. Her experiences have transformed the value that she places on learning and the impact it can have for a person's long-term future.

### **Clyde**

Clyde served as a special education teacher at Verdant Jr/Sr High School, supporting students in Grades 7–12. Of his 12 years in education, the first four were as an alternative education teacher with the Apple Hill day treatment home, and this experience coupled with cyber program knowledge, led him to assist the SAP team at Verdant for several years prior to receiving official training. His deep focus on relationships assisted him in understanding not only the inner workings of the school system but also the inner workings of dealing with at-risk students.

He focused his passion on modeling more than instructing, especially in the educational environment. Admitting that he struggled with the SAP core team because of its minimalist viewpoint, ineffective interventions, and emphasis on guidance and outside services, he sees

relationship building with students strenuous because at-risk students' home lives do not mirror with the advice or modeling that they see in school. His greatest joy is working with high school seniors, who, without his help, "otherwise wouldn't make it." He noted they succeeded in part because of his emphasis on the positives, goals, and supports that students do have, rather than focusing on the negatives.

### **David**

David was in his fourth year as the assistant principal of Farm Spur High School when interviewed. He started as a social studies teacher in a small, rural school for seven years before moving on to become an elementary, middle, and high school administrator for the past 12 years. He felt being a mentor has transformed how he views his upbringing. He realizes now how fortunate he was. He shared the story of mentoring an at-risk student and the personal transformation that it caused, reminding him to focus on what was important long term versus just in the moment.

As the leader of a SAP core team, he characterized this role as leading weekly meetings, hearing concerns, hearing updates, planning the initiatives, and working within the team.

I like to believe that through our SAP team being organized and having knowledge of what the outlets are, what the current updates are, I don't have to be the person with the name at the top of the letterhead. . . . As far as the success goes, I enjoy the fact when I see everyone working as a team, and I have a chance to be a part of that team even if it's something as simple as organizing the Google doc and sending it out. It's a clerical thing, but it's a big thing because it gets wheels in motion.

He expected mentors to let students know they were a support line while creating a comfort zone they may not have at home.

**Eli**

Eli was in his first year as principal of Jasper High School during the data collection. He began his career as a chemistry teacher and is now in his eleventh year as a building administrator. In his role as a mentor, as an administrator, and as a SAP core team member, Eli focused on dialoguing with students to help them grow. He described giving students a blank slate and getting to the root causes of misbehavior as a way of mentoring students:

My assistant principal was able to say, “You’re going to see that student all the time.” I try to come in to every new position and every new building with a very clean slate; I really don’t want to know that because I know students have been targeted. By the time they’ve made their way through this system, they’ve already been in here 9 years, 10, 11, 12 years.

Eli joined a SAP core team when he took his first administrative position. He described his transformation as more cognizant of different factors that affect students while improving his filter when communicating with students. Developing relationships was an exercise in getting to know students and understanding the factors that were putting them at risk. He described relationships as gratifying and amazing, while fulfilling a personal challenge to help all students graduate.

**Fred**

Fred worked his way from a social studies teacher and coach to athletic director to middle school principal to the role of principal of Finchley High School. When interviewed, he was in his 24th year in education. While not defining a student, Fred felt identifying factors of students at-risk included significant attendance concerns, underperforming compared to past performance,

struggling with mental health, and identifying with signs of more than recreational experimentation or use of drugs and alcohol.

Fred described himself as a champion for students, unwilling to give up. Fred takes this mentoring responsibility personally and shared that when a student fails to earn his diploma, “that’s on us.” As a mentor, he feels that he has experienced tremendous growth. He described now going to great lengths not allowing a student to quit: “Once we quit, everybody quits!” A goal of his SAP core team and staff in general was providing students with meaningful relationships with a caring adult at the school. He said that in a perfect world, mentors are the reason that some students get out of bed and show up to learn.

### **Grace**

Grace served Park Hill High School as the assistant principal. Grace was a relationally-driven person and emphasized organically-developed relationships to reduce the formality of mentoring. Students in need knew to whom and where they could go to get help. Grace felt rewarded through mentoring relationships as evidenced by the three plants students gave her when they graduated last year because she refused to give up on them.

In the past, she taught third grade for 18 years and has been a SAP core team member for eight years. She shared that being on the SAP core team at the high school level (as opposed to earlier elementary experience) has opened her eyes to students that need help. She described the SAP process as transitioning from a core team of people taking care of academic issues to individuals who support social, academic, and behavioral challenges. The students that Grace focused on building relationships with are “those who might slip through the cracks.”

**Hank**

Hank was in his 25th year as an educator and taught Advanced Placement United States History, sophomore government, and criminal justice classes. He enjoyed serving on the SAP core team for more than 10 years while listening and caring for students so kindness could spread.

As someone who took the time to lose a lunch or a plan, or to stay after school on my own without being asked, giving my time and listening was more beneficial to that student than anything else I could have done. . . . I got into teaching thirty years ago because I wanted to make a difference; it just so happened that the difference I would make did not involve setting the education world on fire as I thought. Rather, for every kid in need of help, for every kid with a drug or alcohol issue, I simply listened – and that was enough to keep most kids in school.

Hank hoped that building relationships and helping students was a mindset that would matriculate to the students.

He spoke of how mentoring students has increased his kindness and patience with different types of students. He shared when he was a younger mentor and wanted to do something nice for a student, it was altruistic. In today's society, the viewing of these same actions may be in a predatory way. He learned not to be a yeller, and improved as a listener, as that was often enough to keep students engaged in school.

**Isabella**

Isabella began her career in education as a choral teacher before becoming the principal of Hi-Ridge High School for the past 18 years. She noted enjoying the job, working with students, and being accessible to students and teachers. One of her chief concerns is students

falling through the cracks too easily due to the large student population in her school. She shared a goal of reconnecting with students, not as a friend, but paying attention to what the students need. She noted how difficult it could be for the team to identify needs because individuals and families are able to hide their struggles from the public eye.

The type of mentoring relationship that she looked to develop was often more than academic, but taking a personal, one-on-one interest in a student. She advocated for a mentoring process in which she works with students to help them find their own pathway through life. This type of a school-based mentoring relationship has led to the “tracking-up” of course scheduling changes, new clubs, and new athletic endeavors in many instances. She felt more compassionate as she gained more experience working with students in crisis.

### **James**

James functioned as the assistant principal of Kingsbury High School. He characterized some students as at risk for a day due to a life event, those at risk due to a specific event (car accident, death in the family, etc.) and those at risk due to factors that influence learning in the classroom. He specifically said that his leadership style has changed in a transformational way: “It’s unbelievable, even my wife would even tell you.” He described this style change as a move from aggressive or forceful in talking at students to a calmer, more calculated listener. He said that he is now much more comfortable letting students come into his office, vent, and work through situations together in a conversational way.

For James, the mentoring relationship is about a hope that he taught individuals to make better choices. He emphasized improved decision-making and proactively seeking help before making dangerous choices. He described a focus on teaching students to make good choices and this providing a safer mentoring environment. Not telling students what to do, and not intimately

getting involved in their lives, allowed for keeping a safe distance while being close enough to develop trust.

### **Kirk**

Kirk earned his doctorate in education and had been the associate principal at Guffey High School for nine years. He also served in the military reserves throughout his career. The biggest red flag he saw indicating a student was at risk of not graduating was his or her not consistently showing up for school. The SAP core team tried to intervene early on with students to get them engaged with an adult at school and back on the path to earning credits. He described himself as more patient, more open-minded, a better listener, and most of all, empathetic.

He thought he was a much better mentor than he was 10 years ago because of many tough battles. There had been particular students that affected his responses over the years and helped him become more resilient. This resiliency contributed to fighting through more battles and sticking with students in the school system before sending them to alternative placements, letting them quit, or giving up.

It's allowed me to fight through battles more; it definitely has. Where early on in my career, without a doubt, early on in my career, I was more structured. I'm sitting here, now I'm saying the opposite. I'd be "This way, or the highway." I'd be how my principal was with me, how my parents were with me. "Alright. It's not working, go," where you give up quickly. . . . We'll fight those battles even longer and longer and longer.

### **Lucy**

Lucy worked at Mickanin High School as a school counselor. Through that role, she characterized at-risk students as those who exhibit a sharp drop in behavior, grades, or

attendance. Her team and fellow mentors look for students who have drastic changes in friend groups or bizarre changes in their behavior. Developing strong relationships with students in need made her feel good and she mentioned that “I would do it again and again and again.”

Lucy shared the story of a student who changed her and her views on helping others. While working through disciplinary issues, suicidal episodes, and parent conflict, Lucy fought for her to succeed despite the collection of adverse conditions. Lucy took her dress shopping, purchased new shoes and accessories for a school dance, gave up her own graphing calculator, and kept working on building the relationship over a four-year journey. The experience transformed her in that she stepped out of the shadows of being a guidance counselor to a mentor willing to blur the lines. She went beyond the scope of her job description to meet the needs of a student.

### **Marcy**

Marcy was a school counselor for students in Grades 9–12 at Guinevere High School. She started her professional career in the mental health field as a case manager to coordinate services, a drug and alcohol liaison, and SAP liaison before transitioning to a role in the guidance department for 12 years. She described sleepless nights and stories of at-risk students she thinks about, worries about, and fears for their safety.

Marcy explained how many of her students do not have access to mentoring relationships outside the school environment. She shared how many great mentors she works alongside, because of their willingness to understand a child, may be walking a road of trauma or a road of mental health issues. Marcy described the mentoring relationship as follows:

An adult taking stock in a younger person...Somebody that's going to take the time to regularly meet with a younger person, ask them what's going on in their lives, provide

advice, be a good example for them in their own character and choices. Maybe lead them to resources to better themselves as they tell their story to the person and help them through some of those struggles.

### **Nate**

Nate had taught calculus, pre-calculus, and geometry at Jonah Junior/Senior High School for 11 years. He characterized those at-risk as individuals engaging in any type of behavior that would hinder their path towards graduation. Engaging with the SAP core team and at-risk students has changed Nate, but he still came across as a tentative mentor. Nate shared that he rarely opens personal lines of communication anymore and that “it’s a shame that it’s come to that way, but I just don’t want to...I draw the line.”

As a younger mentor, he felt more comfortable relating to what student were going through because of the small age difference. Now, with several years of experience under his belt and a different mindset, he now feels like it is not:

My place to give them— not that I felt like it was my place to give them advice in their personal lives, but I just feel think it is, yeah, a boundary line. Just what it appears to be on the surface; if somebody will walk by, and they just see you chatting with somebody. It’s like, the guards are up nowadays.

### **Olivia**

Olivia was a physical education teacher at Mockingbird School District. She had 17 years of experience at the junior high and 11 years at the senior high school. Children within the community she described as at at-risk are those struggling on a temporary or long-term basis. One on one conversations, checking in regularly, and giving students the confidence in having someone they can seek out and talk with characterized a mentoring relationship for her. Olivia

said mentors must consistently show students there is somebody in the school who cares about them.

She shared drastic changes in how she views students, their actions, and her response to these actions. As a physical education teacher, she engages in conversations, listens to the root of the problem, and responds by offering supports, privacy, and empathy. An awareness has changed Olivia as a teacher and person: “I listen much more closely to my students, understanding that maybe just one person being interested in them is all they need for the day to feel better.”

## **Results**

The three research questions guiding this study formed the foundation for the data collection and data analysis process. Through the data analysis process, the significant themes were revealed from data mined from each of the three data collection opportunities. The significant themes that emerged from this investigation were depth, breadth, enhancement, challenges, and the unexpected theme of future growth. The following section provides an explanation of theme development and supporting evidence for each theme.

### **Theme Development**

Using data directly from the participants’ perspective formed a foundation aligned to the concept noted by Zabloski (2010): “Phenomenology requires the researcher to show the reader what a participant’s life experience was like” (p. 79). Classifying data through a tagging and grouping process supported the investigation’s purpose. The generation of codes was a result of intentionally keeping the research questions at the forefront of the researcher’s mind. Established out of the significant statements were twelve diverse clusters of meaning (Appendix G). This was important to develop because the resulting themes were the foundation for

describing what the phenomenon is and how it was experienced (Creswell, 2013). Narrated in line with a transcendental phenomenological interpretation of the essence of mentoring at-risk high school students were five themes (Creswell, 2013; Shosha, 2012). Participants had the opportunity to review and provide feedback on each of the resulting themes.

**Depth.** Throughout each of the three data collection opportunities, probes asked participants to look inward and share their perspectives on personal transformation. Each of the participants touched on the depth of internal changes because of the shared phenomenon of mentoring at-risk high school youth. The sharing of participants' personal feelings of transformation demonstrated varying depths.

A few of the participants referenced little or no transformation to their role as a SBM of at-risk high school students. Providing the strongest arguments for the lack of transformation was Marcy's emphasis on caring for children as part of her "God-given nature." She spoke to her intuitiveness in identifying students with emotional and physical needs with mentoring being "second nature" for her. In discussing transformation in front of his peers during the focus group discussion, Clyde emphasized an epiphany moment never happened for him. He described internal changes in a more gradual way: "Rather, it has been a culmination of experiences with many individuals who seem to share common threads (background, behavioral/academic difficulties, etc. . .) that has changed my perspective and guides my approach to at-risk students." Lucy indicated in her interview that she had not experienced any sense of transformation through her work as a mentor. Interestingly, in her later reflective writing, Lucy shared that a student she went to great lengths to support emotionally and financially "changed me and my view to helping students." She went so far as to say, "This was the moment that I felt as though I had

been transformed because I tend to be a humble person who likes to do kind things in an anonymous manner.”

Many of the other participants referenced experiencing moderate transformation because of their time and effort spent mentoring students. In a focus group discussion expressing the impact on future education experiences, Aaron told the story of mentoring a female student and connecting with her and her young child. He described using this experience to help him gradually change, or evolve, as he worked with many other students. He said he was always caring and compassionate, but “I’ve evolved. I’m sure we all do. We age. We get older. We transform.” He wished he had taken the extra steps to get to the root cause of student at-risk behavior and building relationships with families.

Becca, Fred, Nate, and Olivia described their transformational experience as a changing over time. David and James spoke of transformation in terms of growth they experienced because of their mentoring relationships. The interview with James revealed growth through working with a student for several years and learning to adapt to what the student needed. David described a similar type of moderate transformation in both the interview and focus group session. He defined personal transformation as taking advantage of the opportunity to work with students and, “for me to learn and grow, and not necessarily learn about them, but self-reflection and what did I do well to help that kid, or could I have done better, perhaps.”

Some of the other participants shared major or in-depth transformation. During interactions during the first focus group session many of the participants agreed they had experienced major transformation; Marcy specifically said that all of her mentoring interactions have forced her to reflect and,

If you look at your journey that does play into how you deal with kids now because you've been touched by everybody that you've worked with along the way, whether good, bad, ugly, difficult. I think that does transform us where change happens in us individually.

In this same focus group, James shared the story of working to help an intelligent student reach his academic potential. He specifically referenced wracking his brain to seek creative solutions:

That to me awakens transformation in me . . . that really can force me to try to grow and change, is a kid that I see, and I don't know what the name is or the face is – that's the one that gets to me.

Marcy doubled down on her perspective of major transformation when she referenced that she had absolutely been transformed, saying, "Absolutely, there's no way you couldn't be." James also reiterated his extensive transformational changes when interviewed; he described an unbelievable personal transformation because of mentoring a female student through middle and high school.

**Breadth.** The transformation that participants referenced was wide-ranging. Transformation included an increase in selfless and caring actions, less black and white responses, and an enhanced advocacy for students. The sharing of diverse personal transformation represented the voice and perspective of the mentors.

Internal areas of growth included increased levels of care and selfless actions. Transforming into a more sympathetic individual was a perspective shared by Aaron, Becca, Eli, and Nate. Aaron spoke of the emotional attachment he built with certain students and how it motivated him to develop something special. Becca gave an example of a student scared of sharing information with youth service employees. She explained mentoring growth as she sat

with them to “have their back.” Eli said he improved in the area of trying to “understand where they’re coming from and what is the cause of their behavior.” Nate shared his experience of sitting in SAP core team meetings and gaining insight into what students are going through. He said that this helped him become more sympathetic to their struggles.

Grace, Kirk, and Olivia explained their transformation in the area of empathy. Grace talked about being a more empathetic individual. Exposing the reality of a student’s situation changed her view to “kind of look at it differently than you do other kids.” Kirk shared that mentoring at-risk students has made him “more patient...more open-minded...more willing to—I think empathy is the key word on that; being empathetic of everything that might be going on.” Olivia described transforming into a more empathetic person:

I can relate some of it to my first couple of years of teaching. You didn’t bother with problems; they were just problems. But SAP definitely opens your eyes to how to get kids to do things that you want them to be doing, so it definitely changed.

Olivia’s reflective writing characterized her empathetic transformation as something she has “developed (being a SAP team member) due to my awareness of what our students go through is my biggest transformation.”

Many of the participants described an increased amount of patience in dealing with students. Hank felt he had become “more kind and more patient with more people.” Kirk described himself as more patient and open-minded when students are dealing with issues. He shared how one particular student influenced “how I respond to certain students and situations, but he helped me gain patience.” Nate reflected back on first coming out of college, “I had zero patience at all. I can picture myself teaching...I’ve become much more patient.”

James described the development of patience in two distinct areas. One of the areas was becoming less aggressive and less forceful at the high school level because “that won’t work here because then we’re both going to be responding the same way, and students don’t get the safe feeling of being able to come here.” As an administrator responsible for disciplining students, he described his patience as growing to respond more calmly and in a more calculated manner. This has alleviated the battle of butting heads and mentee’s improved understanding of the needed disciplinary process.

Participants also felt that their increased patience made them better listeners. James explained listening more than he ever did in the past. Kirk explained his willingness to more consistently hear a student’s perspective on the challenges they have going on as a point of growth. Olivia describe changes in this way: “This awareness changed me as a teacher and as a person. I listen much more closely to my students, understanding that maybe just one person being interested in them is all they need for the day to feel better.” Nate has made it a point of listening to a student’s cares:

I make it a point now to not dismiss any student if they want to tell me about their plans for the weekend, or about the birth of their new niece, or about the job that they just applied for. I realize that I might be the only adult who will give them the attention that they deserve.

Many of the mentors brought up the caring act of increased compassion. Hank and Isabella referenced it several time throughout the researcher’s interactions with them. Hank believed if the SAP core team showed students compassion and caring, “that’s what they’re going to remember. And they’re going to send their kids here.” The way that he demonstrated this growth was in the manner in which he would “tak[e] my time to talk during my lunch or his,

before school and after school, and helping him with his homework, he would have dropped out. But I cared he said, and I was the only one who would listen.” Isabella, in a similar vein, shared that she had developed into a more compassionate mentor. She noted her growth as being “more compassionate because I’m less judgmental,” and “more attuned, just generally compassionate.”

Several of the participants felt transformation as they became softer or less harsh in dealing with the student behavior. Eli, Hank, and Isabella shared similar views on background information making them respond less black and white and more on a flexible, case-by-case basis. Eli described the change as follows:

Whenever I first got into administration, one of the things I always wanted to be was firm, fair, and consistent . . . you do this, you get this, you do this, you get this. That worked for about a month until you, just like what you said, whenever you find some of the background information and then you start dealing with the parents.

For Hank, growth as a mentor started when he learned how developing relationships with students did not come about through yelling at them to get his point across, because “these kids are going home and getting yelled at all the time. They have no place else but to come to school and have someone listen to them. And I’ve never yelled since then.”

Isabella described her response to student misbehavior now as “less harsh” and “our kids have changed, and you can’t be that way with them that way anymore.” Nate shared the perspective that mentoring students had softened him up in terms of how he spoke to and viewed students in need. Kirk shared early in his career he would explain to students how expectations needed to be met: “This way, or the highway.” He shared this worked for him as a child and this was how his parents and his high school principal treated him. The lack of success transformed him over time, and he now responds with compromises that are more creative in today’s system.

One of the most compelling areas of growth that several mentors shared as a result of their experience working with student in need was they had improved as an advocate or fighter for children. Several participants spoke or wrote with conviction about how they had transformed their attitude about making life better for students at risk of never reaching their full potential. Kirk described his personal growth that has “allowed me to fight through battles more.” Because of one specific mentoring relationship, he felt that never giving up on the student helped develop a resilience as a mentor that he has applied to many other aspects of his job. Marcy described the tremendous effort she had put into young people’s lives and how walking alongside students in their journey can help them get to greener pastures. She improved as an advocate to get community-based help to those in need. She further described, “I’ve become more savvy with community accessibility like the things that are out there for, let’s say, I’ve worked for families that are homeless and pulling every string that we can to get community resources to get their month’s rent, or getting them in that homeless shelter.”

David’s advocacy came about because of refusing to settle for just what is good enough for a student. He described helping to make life better for each specific individual he mentored. James drew upon personal experiences that he had battled through in the past to realize:

Now, the piece about the quitting, we’ve all struggled with things and had to work and persevere through it . . . for me that would probably be the most transformative for me because it’s the one thing I can relate to because I’ve had to work hard at different points in my life to be successful at things, sometimes against odds.

Additionally, Fred acknowledged that while he was likely never to quit on a student, being a mentor had taught him the following:

The longer I'm in this position and the more I get to interact with other educational professionals . . . unless it's a health, safety or welfare issue, we're going to operate like Emma Lazarus: "Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses." Once we quit, everybody quits. I think that that's probably the greatest— that most starts change.

**Enhancement.** A strong emotional connection drives a quality mentoring relationship. The definition of a close and enduring mentoring relationship is authentic, regular companionship, influenced by acts of empathy (Rhodes et al., 2006). Creating an environment for mentoring relationships to exist and flourish included intentional actions by the SAP core team members and the quality training they experienced. Many choices mentors made about their words and actions directly contributed to an enhanced environment for transformation. The following factors enhance transformational opportunities from the perspectives of the mentors.

Mentors identified contributing factors supporting a mentoring relationship. Fred explained, both in his interview and during the focus group, how important it was to select and develop a team of teachers who each individually focused on giving great effort towards building relationships. He felt a diverse team has value because they can provide many different perspectives and a collective wisdom. He also explained, "Those relationships occur organically are so much stronger than somebody's forced to sit down for 20 minutes." James's perspective was to develop relationships at the classroom teacher-level first. He believed in adults who know them best and see them consistently:

If you can get involved at that level and make a connection, whether it's the Tech. Ed. teacher, the Phys. Ed., teacher, anybody, and help the kid have a palace to go and talk, they don't always need to be then pushed out to an outside agency for counseling or other services if we can provide it ourselves.

Marcy described how the best mentors were school-based people who were accessible when students needed them. SBM created a safe place for students to get through difficult stretches. When their mentors were not available is when the student felt like they had nowhere else to turn. She described the best mentors as those willing to talk about the ugliness of life, and understanding:

A lot of life's barriers, or has some perspective on even mental health and the major family issues that arise in a young person, even if it's just that they've been through it themselves, not that they have, necessarily, formal training, but just someone that cares enough to walk that journey that they've walked through with somebody and try to help them to greener pasture.

David shared the importance of making sure "that we have all of the individuals working as a team. Teamwork is huge." As a mentor, he felt the most impactful thing he can do is be available, make a conscientious effort to promote positivity, and develop open lines of communication. Kirk shared the diligence that he places on creatively scheduling his team for the right mentor to match with the right student in need. He explained the importance of the team engaging in "the discussions about the social, emotional, and academic status of these identified students." He felt that this background information had dramatically helped create better mentoring relationships because he was able to align the mentor and mentee. Hank explained that SAP core team members should be selling who they are and what service they offer to students and their families. He wanted SAP core teams to become "champions of their districts!"

As a building principal, Aaron emphasized having high expectations for the mentors on his SAP core team. Their team goals are building connections, trust, and an opportunity to

develop one-on-one relationships. Becca emphasized that mentors needed to follow-through when they said they would, while providing support during the school day. A refreshing perspective was Isabella's always choosing students in need over paperwork. She explained her frustration with extensive paperwork she is now required to do and was adamant even if faced with discipline she would continue to prioritize meeting with and, "helping kids over completing paperwork!"

Grace shared her emphasis on being visible at athletic and co-curricular events so that students could see her outside the confines of her office and see the role of the assistant principal position in a different light. She also explained that she makes a point of engaging with the parents of students in need so she could collect as much information about the situations students were going through. Eli shared how he takes mentoring as a personal challenge to get to know students in a fresh light (not depending on the opinions of teachers or administrators who had dealt with a student in the past). He used this fresh start to engage with students in discussions to reveal the root causes of words, actions, and decisions so that he could walk through potential resolutions.

Many of these individual participants shared a major contributing factor to enabling their personal transformation and positively influencing the development of mentoring relationships was SAP core team support and training. The sharing of team support took place in various ways. David described himself as a "support line" for his fellow staff members so they could be the best mentor possible. Fred shared that his team has consciously been built to support a wide range of students. Building a team of diverse professionals could include the nurse, a learning support teacher, and a teacher who works with career and technology students, among others.

Grace shared the perspective of continually expanding the number of mentors on her team as a way to share the responsibility. She explained improving team supports by inviting,

I think, five teachers that year to go to get trained. We had meetings discussing what the warning signs were of kids that were at risk. We made them all aware of how you would refer someone to SAP team, and all the Phase 2 things, and what you need to do . . . we needed to make it a little more— people, they need to understand a little bit more about what this is.

Eli spoke to working with a staff willing to take on the additional layer of responsibility. He felt educators wanting to be on the team was a revelation and a good problem to have. He described a long-term vision of more mentors going through training. This would allow adding ancillary team members as an additional resource.

Training opportunities have set SAP core teams and individual mentors up for success in developing relationships. Many participants called out their formal SAP training as a seminal event that pushed them towards helping students in need. Aaron and Isabella called the training an intensive three days of training that had an impact on their outlook. Clyde referenced his foray into official training as part of his transition from mentor to leader of the team. David and Eli shared a vivid recollection of their trainings with David, recalling his experience through Saint Vincent College and Eli talking about training when he transitioned from teacher to administrator. Lucy specifically said the formal trainings helped her transition into being a school-based counselor. Follow-up and additional trainings achieves needed team support. Aaron, David, and Eli communicated that maintenance trainings had continued to support their SAP core team over a several years.

**Challenges.** Not engaging in close, consistent, and enduring mentoring relationships limits the mentors' potential for transformation. Many roadblocks hinder students at risk of reaching their full potential from engaging in this needed type of mentoring relationship. Mentors noted challenges due to the student's background, their own internal battles, and concerns outside of their control. The following section details the specific challenges students and mentors encountered.

Students not showing up to school was a challenge shared by many of the participants. Regularly engaging with students in need was a hurdle for mentors. Several participants shared this belief based on their shared experience of attempting to build a strong relationship with a student in need. Eli shared his belief that "the fact that they're not in school is putting them at risk." Fred described this challenge as, "Are there significant attendance concerns? Is there a change in attendance pattern that a student who, at the secondary level, who has historically come to school begins to miss school regularly. There's something else going on." A focus group discussion revealed Fred's thoughts:

One of the things that we try to get folks to realize is that this kid's going to carry the bags of whatever they're carrying through your door, but let's not be the one that puts the feather on that bag that makes it too heavy. When's the last time this kid had success? When's the last time somebody said, "Good morning?" Excuse my language; it ticks me off when a kid doesn't come to school. Absenteeism is another characteristic of an at-risk student. So, they come back, and then seven teachers say, "Here's your last 10 days' worth of shit." How likely is that kid to return tomorrow? We got them here; let's have a party prodigal-son style.

Hank was concerned with students who are missing tons of school saying, “Now, that’s a red flag that should be coming up to everybody.” In a similar vein, Kirk that, “Well, of course, if we have a student missing a lot of days of school, not showing up, that’s our biggest one. That’s our red flag, if they’re not showing up.”

Many of the participants identified factors that were lacking in relation to students having the opportunity to bond with a school-based mentor. Lucy and Olivia each cited on numerous occasions throughout data collection the lack of parent permission to engage with a SAP core team member. Lucy explained:

My concern is that they may be referred, but in our District only about 20 percent of the parents will sign for services! How many of these individuals who are not treated become problems outside of school? If only those referred would automatically have to participate in SAP services such as the thematic groups in which we contract with a local College. Or even participate in cognitive therapy whether group or one on one with our in-school therapist.

Olivia explained in her interview that parents do not want the school getting into their business:

If the parent won’t sign off, that kid can get no services. Often, parents are the reason why the kid needs services. So, that’s a big— I don’t know how we can fix that, but that’s a big issue. The parent obviously isn’t going to sign off if it’s going to get them in trouble because they don’t want their kid talking about the problems they’re having.

Clyde and Marcy also spoke to parental permission challenges. Clyde described the challenging population that he educates as struggling with relationships. Those identified as needing extra support, “we know right away, we’re not going to be able to get ahold of mom. Mom’s not going to sign the paperwork.” Marcy connected parental refusals to a stigma the

family does not want to have, saying, “I think when they refuse it, there’s things that they don’t want shared . . . And also, they don’t want people to know their family stuff. That’s a big part of it.”

David wrote of his concern of getting parent approval from the mom of a certain student that needed his mentoring to establish improved attendance and goal setting. Isabella looked at the challenge of parent involvement in a complex way explaining, “A lot of parents really protest and resent the involvement of their children in SAP, and that’s a problem.” She further explained:

Sometimes we found it’s a reflection or we’re criticizing the parents’ habits, which are aberrant habits. We’re sitting there saying, “Your kids using drugs. Your kid needs to go into treatment. Your kid’s not successful. You’re kid’s not able to function,” but a lot of times, that’s the situation in the home. So, when we’re criticizing the habits of the child, we’re also criticizing the habits of the parents. I think sometime they resent that. They don’t want the light shed on their habits, so it’s pretty complex.

Many participants described mentoring as holding a negative connotation for select students and select families. Hank called this hurdle a stigma that each individual team would have to overcome in order to get students the help they needed. James described overcoming the SAP mentoring stigma when he explained, “We made the video for that reason, just to get people to take the stigma down and get all the teachers to realize, hey, ‘What do they do? They help kids, right?’ We all knew that, but it was amazing that staff members were like, ‘There’s this SAP thing.’”

Marcy saw the stigma applied to SAP when parents would refuse to follow through on signing paperwork. She explained that the community was,

Less receptive also to receive services because it carries a stigma with them . . . Yeah, the stigma for sure. That family does not want to have— And also, they don't want people to know their family stuff. That's a big part of it.

Olivia described the name of SAP as being a stigma. In the interview she said,

I think part of it is there is a stigma, too. I'll tell you what? The name doesn't help much. Everyone makes fun of the name "SAP," "Oh, you're SAP'd, you're SAP'd." The kids joke around about it, and they don't want it when they hear it. And then the other one is the parents don't want the school getting in their business.

In the focus group session, she clarified to her peers,

Well, the name; that's all we hear about is the name, the kids make fun of the name constantly at our school. "SAP. You're SAP." That is a very big frustration when they're making fun of a program simply based on this.

A history of poor relationships was also a major area of concern shared by Clyde, David, James, and Nate. Clyde and David brought this up in the first focus group with Clyde saying, "This kid has terrible relationships. The relationships are just terrible from them. It's the common thread they have with their parents, with their teachers in their home, school, whatever. All of their relationships are poisonous." David explained many students he worked with had some "staff members who they couldn't trust, or couldn't relate to, and have had less than positive experiences in the classroom." In that same focus group session, James referenced an inability to establish relationships with comments focused on not developing too personal of a relationship:

Talk about the relationship piece and you want them to build the relationship, but there's that fine line of not getting into too much personal details. So, we really try to coach our

staff members because we ask them to do that. We ask them to build these relationships. So, we've asked them to really focus on the decision-making process, and use that as an overarching thing for all situations that come up, whether it's experimenting with something from a sexual standpoint, or with drugs and alcohol. Just focus on the decision-making process and say, "Hey, there's always ways to make decisions, and we can do them better," and talk through that process repeatedly, and it helps to navigate you out of many personal conversations.

Nate shared in both his interview and focus group session a concern for students who struggled communicating with a school-based mentor.

Many of the participants described an uncomfortable feeling towards working closely with at-risk high school students. Grace described experiencing an awkward feeling when relationships got too personal or too serious. Nate and Olivia described a similar lack of comfort when engaging with students. Olivia gave an example of not knowing what to say when she saw students in need and Nate said, "That's personally all I feel comfortable doing. I don't even want to open up the lines of communication. It's a shame that it's come to that way, but I just don't want to—I draw the line." Kirk explained in regards to his SAP core team,

Some don't feel comfortable with creating those relationships and having those discussions. All they want to do is teach their subject area that they've been trained on. They struggle with that. They'll be the first sometimes to tell you that they weren't comfortable. Twenty-five percent of our staff wasn't comfortable with the advisories.

Various participants also shared a general lack of effort from mentors in understanding the process, taking action, and caring to get involved in supporting a student in need. Lucy, Nate, and Olivia focused comments on mentors needing to improve their understanding of the

SAP processes. Lucy described a battle with frivolous referrals that waste the time of the mentors:

We have a couple of teachers I'm specifically thinking of that will refer differently. "He didn't do his homework for the third time." Do you know what I mean? There are some of these that really would take classroom management that would help those students rather than to have them— they don't all need to have therapy.

Nate shared the following about his peer mentors:

Not fully understandable enough about what SAP does, though. I feel like everyone could have a little bit more training on it because a lot of our teachers refer students for things that are just straight disciplinary reasons. Maybe their behavior manifested from something else going on that needs— But if somebody is just specifically, I don't know, just won't do their work or just being basically a straight discipline problem, we get that a lot...I just don't know if they know well enough what actually happens.

Olivia shared a similar concern saying, "Our teachers, too, are a little confused with SAP. We'll tell them, but it has to be done more often than— we don't do it every year, and I think it needs to be done at least every year."

Hank shared a concern that many students need help but few peers want to deal students on an individual level. James explained some teachers would not be good mentors; "staff members that don't have a track record of making good decisions themselves, that's not the person you want mentoring." Nate described those he works with as keeping their distance from students in need and not wanting to get too involved. This concern stemmed from a belief that, "You don't want to get too involved. You don't want to make that connection that seems like it— I don't know— leads to other things in some rare instances."

Eli, Kirk, Lucy, and Olivia also touched on the concern of mentors not willing to take on the responsibility of caring for students. Eli described unwilling staff members he worked with and Kirk described some mentors “that just want to come in seven to three and do their time, and do a great job at it; don’t get me wrong. But they don’t want to extend themselves and put themselves out there.” Lucy provided an example of a general lack of interest in doing more than just checking in with students, and Marcy characterized some of her peers as those who “just don’t want to take the time to get vested in all that. Some people can’t handle knowing all of that.”

Throughout many of the data collection opportunities, Hank and Isabella consistently shared a concern of how dangerous it was in today’s society to engage in a mentoring relationship with a student. Hank called SBM a “danger” and listed a fear due to experiences. He initially said, “Between the court cases and in loco parentis, it’s such a gray area anymore. I don’t know. I really think that we don’t do enough because I think districts are afraid to do enough.” He also explained, “

Whether it’s a student who’s at risk, or just a student in general, it used to be that you can do something nice, and it was altruistic or predatory. The social media dangers, “These young teachers need to be afraid. Even the old teachers; we need to be afraid because just one. . .”

Sharing a similar belief, Isabella described rumors of a teacher engaging in predatory actions with a student as a danger to relationship building. She said at her school, “Teachers are – some of my really good teachers that would like to extend themselves are afraid to do that because they’ll be accused.”

Logistics were also a serious roadblock to developing relationships with students in need. Isabella called this a difficulty with structure and logistics in her interview. Concerns ranged from doing a disservice to students because of lack of mentors, time, and availability. Marcy's logistical concerns were that students did not get the mentoring they need because "that process just becomes too overbearing. It becomes more of a barrier to the families, to the students." Eli shared with his peers during a focus group session how frustrated he was with the added layers of responsibility that he assumed as a SAP core team member. These logistical frustrations had led many of his fellow teachers to quit the team. He said, "Because that was just another thing that we have to do. It's just another layer of responsibility. It never helps whenever there's contract negotiations coming up and things like that because nobody wants to do anything extra."

Aaron discussed the logistical hurdle of creating built-in mentoring time. He believed devoting part of the day on an intermittent basis could really help both the mentors and the students in need build a better relationship. Clyde said, "It's tough to get the feedback you need from all the sources. It's tough to have time to do this sort of thing," David said, "available is a key thing," and James explained, "When I think of our SAP mentoring program, often I realize that time is not on our side. Sometimes, you can see a need for a student and know that by the time we actually connect the student with services, additional problems will have occurred." Kirk shared the struggle of mentors finding meaningful time to engage in the requisite mentoring relationships with students writing, "With all districts, the same problem arises in each regarding time to not only meet as a team, but time to adequately assess and monitor students."

**Future growth.** Participants shared ideas about the future of mentoring within schools. This unexpected theme focused on a hope for many participants and a focus on needed philosophical and practical shifts. The participants spoke of establishing a certain culture,

making students the top priority, mentoring as a non-negotiable, and a cyclical focus on the SAP process.

Fred, Hank, and Isabella devoted many comments towards a cultural shift. Fred's interview included a pertinent quote:

The extent to which we can have every kid, have a great day at school every day, and therefore a great four-year experience at Finchley to create opportunities for them to shine and thrive and learn. I think it's really been that cultural shift.

He also was credited as saying, "When we fail a kid, that's on us," and,

Changing the conversation to, though it's never going to be 100%, I'd like it to be, but the overwhelming majority of our staff is where we walk through these doors every day, we are a service industry.

Hank spoke to building a school district that valued the SAP core team and mentors in particular. He said that schools needed to develop a culture of "celebration . . . even the smallest thing" and that, "those teachers should be celebrated within the culture as being someone who those kids can go to." Isabella explained her belief in changing the conversation within the mentoring community from seeking immediate results to doing their best in the moment because, "sometimes the impact is not immediately obvious. You see it down the road in the community."

Participants also voiced a shift towards students being the top priority. Isabella advocated for action that matched the philosophy that students are the top priority within a school. Fred stated, "There's only one reason this place is here, and that's for the kids. The expectation is that we have a student-centered approach and that we communicate that to the kids." He depicted a future where educators are "the person that holds high expectation and

believes that that student can achieve them, and in a perfect world, that's the reason the kid gets out of bed to come to school.”

Placing the focus on the learners also meant that educators needed to listen to students' feelings, perspectives, and barriers. Becca and Hank touched on this several times throughout data collection opportunities. Becca explained her belief that a strength of a team can be mentors who listen and students with big problems need mentors who are there to listen, able to comfort students at-risk, and not in that role to talk at students. In his reflective writing, Hank described himself as a model for team growth in this area, explaining:

As someone who took the time to lose a lunch or a plan, or to stay after school on my own without being asked, giving my time and listening was more beneficial to that student than anything else I could have done . . . I got into teaching thirty years ago because I wanted to make a difference; it just so happened that the difference I would make did not involve setting the education world on fire as I thought. Rather, for every kid in need of help, for every kid with a drug or alcohol issue, I simply listened, and that was enough to keep most kids in school.

In addition to the emphasis on students as the priority, many participants shared the belief that adult mentors were of critical importance to the mentoring relationships. James defined this as a need for everyone within the school setting to fulfill the role of a mentor. He explained that, “for us, mentoring is big. We believe in it.” Hank concurred saying, “I think it's a necessary tool that all teachers are mentors.” Grace said, “I think it's very important, that mentor relationship, because we've already had situations where some of our students knew who they go to, and they did.” Similarly, Kirk explained, “I think that's what we want, and hopefully we all can be, at

times, a mentor to all the students.” Fred put the importance of mentors in context with a culture where “the adults are the least important people in this building.”

Needed change in SAP approach, structure, and process to achieve better mentoring relationships was a belief shared by the participants. Clyde described a needed shift towards interacting with individual students as opposed to adopting a cookie-cutter approach. David shared his frustrations and noted the process could improve so because “we’re constantly up against seeing nothing really after your referral. It looks like they just are thrown into the void. Nothing tangible.” Eli advocated for changes to the SAP core team structure to allow additional systems and safety nets. James advocated for a streamlining of the SAP process. He described how the educators he works with currently engage with the cumbersome SAP procedure:

Handle it mostly at our teacher level. Then our counselors sit in there in those meetings, and they actually end up running the meetings. Then, the kids that get involved repeatedly, when you start seeing a name come up over and over again, then you get more involved as far as once a week, we do get together with our SAP liaison . . . talking about a kid for 40 minutes or whatever, and you’d come back the next week and have the same conversation. Really, nothing was occurring between the meetings. So, that’s where our frustration reached its peak of saying, “we have to do something better for the kids.”

Many of the mentors shared goals focused on future trainings for the mentors as a point of emphasis. Olivia explained how she hoped for future trainings that would help mentors and all educators understand how to handle students in need, whom to refer, and how to refer. Marcy advocated for staff training:

In being able to recognize that that kid is not just not doing work, that there’s more to that, that it’s not about them, which is what a lot of professionals get hung up on. It’s not

about you and math, it's about this person and all the stuff that they're bringing into the classroom. I couldn't even imagine focusing some of them when they have stories like that as a young person.

Kirk called for induction training for young teachers. He hoped early in each person's career they would learn to fight the battle of not letting students drop out, how to have tough conversations with students and their parents, and how to be more empathetic.

### **Research Question Responses**

Engaging with a specific group of participants explored the real life phenomenon of mentoring at-risk high school students. The sharing of the voice of the individual participants provided a rich description answering the research questions. The themes and their participant narratives supported each of the research questions.

**Research Question 1 response.** RQ1 asked, How do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, describe their experiences? The construction of this question gathered information from the participants' shared experiences. The response to this question is the intimate story of school-based mentors' views and actions woven throughout the context of mentoring at-risk students.

This narrative supports the response of each individual participant and their collective voice as a description of the shared phenomenon. Participants described their experience with this phenomenon as transformational, fulfilling, dangerous, and impactful. Their reflection on these shared experiences and the resulting transformation are the fabric of the overarching themes: breadth, depth, enhancement, challenges, and future growth.

**Research Question 2 response.** The following is a collective response to RQ2: To what extent, if at all, do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public

high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, experience transformation? The participants' development of a symbiotic mentoring relationship contributed to transformation to varying depths and breadth. Transformational experiences challenged the depth and breadth of an existing way of thinking, believing, and acting related to mentoring at-risk high school students.

Throughout the data collection opportunities, probes asked participants to self-reflect and share their perspective on personal transformation. Each participant referenced a level of depth of internal changes because of the shared phenomenon of mentoring at-risk high school youth. The sharing of participants' personal feelings of transformation represented little transformation, gradual changes over time, and major transformation.

The scope of transformation participants referenced covered a wide-range of life experiences. Transformation included an increase in selfless and caring actions such as sympathy, empathy, patience, and compassion. A decrease in black and white responses supported the theme as mentors described less yelling and a softer reaction to student misbehavior. Finally, supporting this theme was an enhanced advocacy for students.

**Research Question 3 response.** The following is a shared response to RQ3: What do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, identify as contributing factors and/or obstacles to experiencing transformation? Themes and supporting data that specifically answer this question are the contributing factors of enhancement and challenges. Support for these themes were cultivated from the collected data taken directly from the participants' shared life experiences.

Participants shared enhancements to experiencing transformation across all collected data. A core factor included creating an environment for mentoring relationships to exist and flourish. Participants explained being visible, accessible, giving great effort towards building

relationships, and choosing students over paperwork. Intentional actions by SAP core team members and quality training they experienced contributed to an enhanced environment for transformation. Training opportunities have prepared individual mentors for success in developing relationships.

A consistent area of feedback from the participants was the shared theme of challenges to experiencing transformation. The participants described the difficulty of engaging in close, consistent, and enduring mentoring relationships as a core factor limiting their potential for transformation. Roadblocks included student's background limitations of not showing up for school, lack of parental support, and a history of poor relationships. Mentors' also had to work through their own internal battles such as a lack of understanding the process, an inability to engage with individual students, and a concern for putting themselves in a vulnerable position. Additional contributing factors that limited transformation were the logistical hurdles of structure, time, and availability.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. Individual portraits and overarching themes produced a transcendental phenomenological description depicting the findings of Chapter Four. This produced think, rich individual portraits of the collective participant beliefs, attitudes, and internal transformations. The resulting qualitative narrative described the essence of mentoring at-risk high school students through the themes of breath, depth, enhancement, challenges, and future growth. Textural and structural descriptions of the themes answered the research questions.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The problem that necessitated this study is that no known studies give a voice to the school-based volunteer mentors of at-risk high school students. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based volunteer mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The conclusion is an outgrowth of the participants' descriptive voices used to explain how the findings of this qualitative investigation support the literature framework in Chapter 2 and the findings in Chapter 3. In this chapter, I expound upon: (a) a summary of findings, (b) a discussion of the findings in light of empirical literature and theory, (c) an implications section, (d) study limitations, and (e) recommendations for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

The summary of findings succinctly answers each of the research questions. The subsequent research questions guided the investigation: (a) How do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, describe their experiences? (b) To what extent, if at all, do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, experience transformation? (c) What do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, identify as contributing factors and/or obstacles to experiencing transformation? The study's findings answered the research questions through the emergence of five themes.

The participant narrative answering RQ1 was the descriptive voices of the participants. Woven throughout the findings was a detailed description of mentoring relationships and the

mentor's dialogue of transformation. The mentors described their volunteer work and the transformation they experienced in layers of diverse ways. The narrative explained the participants' background, training, and diverse roles. In the findings, participants described the unexpected theme of an advocacy for future mentoring growth. Participants shared ideas about the future of mentoring within schools. Hope for many of the participants touched on philosophical and practical shifts to support them and help students. The participants spoke of establishing a certain culture, making students the top priority, mentoring as a non-negotiable, and continual growth in the SAP process to effect change.

In the findings, the overarching themes of depth and breadth held specific answers for RQ2. Illumination of these overarching themes was in relation to the mentors' transformational perspective. Environmental and experience factors combined with the willingness to be transformed produced dimensions of depth and breadth. Mentoring relationships led to personal and professional transformations to varying depths and in many different capacities. Findings indicated that mentoring challenged the participants' existing way of thinking, believing, and acting.

The findings revealed the central themes of enhancement and challenges as a core response to RQ3. Creating an environment for mentoring relationships to exist and flourish included intentional actions by the SAP core team members and the quality training they experienced. Choices mentors made about their words and actions directly contributed to an enhanced environment for transformation. Numerous roadblocks hinder students at risk of reaching their full potential from engaging in mentoring relationships. Mentors noted challenges due to the student's background, their own internal battles, and concerns outside of their control. Without a strong mentoring relationship, mentor transformation was limited.

## Discussion

Empirical literature and a theoretical framework set the foundation for this study. In this discussion section, the findings illuminated core literature components. Findings indicated empirical research into mentoring, symbiotic relationships, and at-risk students deserved additional exploration. An additional focus was on results aligned to theoretical literature.

### Empirical Literature

**Mentoring.** This study corroborated previous mentoring research. The findings of this study supported the core assumption that the mentoring relationship is reciprocal (Ragins, 1997b). There were specific examples of breadth and depth of mentor transformation and positive student growth. For mentors to intervene and produce gains, a close relationship developed over an extended period of time (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). The quality and longevity of a mentoring relationship, as well as the quality of previous relationships, play important mediating and moderating roles in the efficacy of mentoring (Rhodes et al., 2006). These empirical concepts were supported in practice through this study's findings. The perspectives shared by the mentors into the overarching theme of enhancements specifically addressed the quality and length of relationship while also corroborating the impact of previous relationships.

This study extended existing mentoring research. Empirical research presented in Chapter 2 described programs that could effectively capitalize on the potential to influence a range of developmental outcomes positively (Rhodes et al., 2006). This study added depth to specific positive outcomes such as selfless and caring actions, less black and white responses, and an enhanced advocacy for students. The overarching enhancement theme contributed research findings that extended details of transformations and skills related to interacting with

mentees (Ragins, 1997b). In past research, studies characterized close and enduring relationships as authentic, regular companionship, and influenced by acts of empathy (Rhodes et al., 2006). This study extended acts of empathy to a more tangible level by drawing out financial investments, student advocacy, and changing responses to student misbehavior.

Ragins and Kram (2007) called for additional mentoring research to bridge the gap between research and practice. This study shed new light on school-based volunteer mentors at a practical level. The extent to which a mentoring relationship benefits the mentee through factors such as a sense of personal fulfilment and satisfaction is briefly discussed within mentoring literature (Ragins & Kram, 2007). This study provides many participant perspectives in this area as they collectively described mentoring relationships as gratifying, while fulfilling a personal challenge to help students graduate and succeed.

**Symbiotic relationships.** A core assumption of existing research is that the mentoring relationship is reciprocal. Mentoring is a symbiotic relationship developed by both members and has outcomes for both parties (Ragins, 1997b). The under-researched side of the symbiotic relationship is the potential for personal growth and transformation of mentors through their involvement in the mentoring relationships (Weiler, Zimmerman, et al., 2014). The strength of the relationship between the student and the mentor has been found to directly influence the effectiveness of mentoring (Guryan, 2017). The findings of this study corroborated the empirical literature about symbiotic relationships. Participants thoroughly described outcomes and transformation that they experienced. References were shared through the theme of enhancement to discuss the strength of the relationship. Findings in the themes of depth and breadth supported the personal growth and transformation experienced as a direct impact of the mentoring relationship.

The findings of this investigation extended research specifically in the field of mentor self-efficacy. Research explained how a mentor's self-efficacy drove relationship quality (Karcher et al., 2005). Additional studies described how critical the mentor's self-efficacy beliefs were. This judgement on their capabilities "affects the effort they invest in teaching, the goals they set, and their level of aspiration" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 783). Through self-reporting data collection opportunities, the participants in this study expressed concerns that hinder self-efficacy. A lack of training, awkward or uncomfortable feelings, the perception of danger, a lack of effort, and an unwillingness to engage in caring for students in need arose as an extension of this core concept.

In a previous study, the pride of accomplishment, perseverance, and student outcomes were apparent on the faces of the participants as they spoke about their experiences (Augustine, 2014). Participants described themselves as fulfilled and lauded the good feeling that mentoring students provided for them. The findings of engaging in deep and intensely personal relationships with their mentees helped this study shed new light on the dyadic nature of mentoring relationships.

**At-risk students.** This study corroborated research findings aligned with defining at-risk youth. Researchers in many different contexts and the participants both defined at-risk students with similar terminology. Suh et al. (2007) used the term at-risk to focus on a student's background and environment that may lead to a higher risk of failure. Weiler, Zarich, et al. (2014) defined at-risk students as those at risk of reaching their full potential due to a variety of individual, familial, and environmental risk factors. Deutsch et al. (2013) argued that students needed mentoring because they were "at-risk for making poor academic, socioemotional or behavioral choices but who have leadership potential and are not receiving services" (p. 49).

Slack et al. (2013) described students at-risk of reaching their potential because of a combination of low grades, poor attendance, discipline referrals, low test scores, personal/social concerns, and family dynamics. In the findings of this study, a description of at-risk students was woven throughout the themes answering the research questions. Participants corroborated at-risk student terminology with examples of barriers to learning that were making students at risk of reaching their full potential.

The findings provided a novel contribution to the field of at-risk students. Researchers shared the need for additional studies in the school-based volunteer field. Specific strategies used by Campus Corps mentors may not be applicable to all settings. The researchers implored future researchers to study the traditional one-on-one mentoring model (Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014). Lakind et al. (2015) performed structured interviews with professional mentors to investigate their sense of how they performed the mentoring role. The authors advised future research into less intensive mentoring models, the training and support for other providers, settings, and service models, and thus developing a fuller and more nuanced understanding of mentors' relationships with at-risk youth. Augustine (2014) made the recommendation for future research to focus on understanding the complexities of the mentoring relationship with an emphasis on short- and long-term benefits to the adult mentors. The findings of this study contributed novel findings by soliciting the school-based volunteer mentors to self-report experiences related to transformational mentoring relationships. A gap was filled as this study addressed a one-on-one mentoring model led by volunteer educators. The structure of the SAP core team enabled participants to provide feedback on their role as a mentor. The findings revealed numerous benefits to the mentors including increased patience, better listening skills, and an increase in acts of selfless care.

This study shed new light on the voice of the mentors in two specific areas. As was explained in the literature review, placing the mentor at the center of the study addressed the research gap. The thick, rich description of the mentors' experience of mentoring and the youth they mentor completed the full picture (Weiler, Zarich, et al., 2014). Depicting a full view of their experiences provided the needed context to understand additional empirical literature. Engaging at-risk youth by school-based mentors also illuminated the dropout epidemic. The full story of mentoring helps to shrink the at-risk student epidemic because it shows promise for increasing their engagement (Augustine, 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study corroborated the foundational components of transformational learning theory. The internal development of the mentors was uncovered through critical discourse shared via the interview, focus group, and open-ended writing opportunities. Throughout data collection, it was evident that the participants had regularly assessed their beliefs, feelings, and values specifically about internal growth. Sharing past stories of mentoring and the effect it had was an example of the mentors engaging in the intrapersonal and interpersonal process. This supports the theoretical framework of this study as discourse is devoted to assessing reasons presented in support of changing interpretations (Mezirow, 1997).

Mezirow (2003) discussed self-reflection as a core precept of transformation learning theory. Support for this component of the theory came in mentors' assessment of what they had taken for granted. Findings helped to develop a dependable working judgement of their self-reflection. Mentors reached a high level of reflective judgement when they shared the story of their perspectives about their own perspective. This corroborated the belief that

transformative learning occurs when the critical reflection of assumptions take place independently or through in-group interaction (Mezirow, 2003).

Findings of this study shed new light on transformational learning theory. Mezirow (1997) developed transformational learning theory by studying U.S. women returning to postsecondary study or the workplace following an extended time out on leave. The focus on school-based volunteer mentors extended his original research focus to a new area of interest. Mezirow and Dirkx (2006) explained in theoretical literature growth and adjustments to transformational learning theory over time. The overarching themes developed in this study added concepts to transformative learning similarly to how constructs have continually been added to the theory (Kitchenham, 2008).

### **Implications**

The findings of this qualitative study held theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. These inferences extend the findings of the study to practical areas of application for stakeholders. The findings hold implications specifically in the areas of mentor benefits, lessons for leaders, and strategies to adopt.

### **Mentor Benefits**

The extrapolation of mentor benefits and the potential impact could be culture changing for the entirety of public education. Mentors benefits hold the power to transform individual mentors as well as the at-risk students with whom they develop relationships. The findings of this study consistently support practical outcomes associated with mentor transformation. Empirical research by Weiler, Zimmerman, et al. (2014) referenced beneficial outcomes in a general sense, but this study provided specific internal belief conversions.

Mentors shared a focus on and a hope for additional mentoring benefits for themselves and the students they served. These findings held implications for needed philosophical and practical shifts and the resulting potential for mentor benefits. Descriptive benefits developed through this study provided a more nuanced understanding of relationship variations (Rhodes et al., 2005). Understanding the nuances of relationship benefits may draw conclusions for recruitment of additional mentors and needed resources.

### **Lessons for Leaders**

The mentors shared criticisms and commendations that can provide lessons for educational leaders. Most of the participants were teachers or counselors who mentored students and assisted on the SAP core team but did not describe themselves as leaders. Feedback they provided included the struggle of leaders not being present as fellow mentors, constantly changing expectations on them, and the lack of support not celebrating mentors like they deserved.

Conclusions drawn for administrators and SAP core team leaders hold empirical implications. These individuals have a critical role in developing an environment that allows mentoring relationships to thrive. Study implications demonstrate administrators must create professional development opportunities that teach educators to fight the battle of not letting students quit, how to have tough conversations with students and their parents, and how to be more caring. Learning from objections about a lack of flexible time should motivate leaders to construct schedules for a school-based mentoring environment to succeed.

Many participants described the strengths of their SAP core team and the amazing feelings of transformation they experienced. Positives of the program frame implications for educational leaders to adopt servant leadership ideals. With a deeper understanding of mentoring

relationships, leaders can use the SAP program to effectively capitalize on its potential to influence a range of developmental outcomes positively (Rhodes et al., 2006).

### **Strategies to Adopt**

Another implication resulting from this study is an advocacy for strategies SAP core teams should adopt. Mentors have a heart that cares for students when they make the choice to intervene and assist students at risk of reaching their full potential (Grossman et al., 2012). Educators can serve as mentors through selfless and caring strategies they employ as volunteer school-based mentors (Augustine, 2014). Intervening and developing caring relationships requires willpower, effort, and structures in place to prevent personal exposure. The findings of the study provided support for the implication of what school-based mentors themselves identified as effective strategies (Slack et al., 2013).

Participants brought theoretical implications to the forefront through references to the overarching goals of education. Strategies the mentors adopted included improving students' communication skills, ability to build relationships, and self-advocating for assistance. This implication connects strategies to theoretical developments as at a deeper level they were helping the students function as autonomous, socially responsible thinkers (Mezirow, 1997).

The findings extended the underpinnings of transformational learning theory as this study provides significance to the changing voice of the mentors. The educational context of the study has expanded the mentoring field dominated in the past by business and community-based studies. Education strategy implications and mentors' critical reflection influenced their worldview and personal or professional growth (Ragins, 1997b).

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are restrictions I set to focus the collected data on the purpose of the study. Boundaries were established as a way to focus the study more specifically on the experiences of mentors of at-risk high school students. Boundaries were defined through purposeful sampling of mentors who worked with high school students, served on their SAP core team service for a minimum of three years, and were employed in a school in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania. The purpose for these delimitations was to ensure collected data could provide specific results aligned with the transcendental phenomenological design.

The inherent limitations to this study come from two core factors. These intrinsic limitations may have challenged my ability to conduct a trustworthy qualitative study. My own potential for bias is a significant limitation. The framework of this qualitative study had fundamental limitations as well.

Bias revealed through research and interviewing skills and acting as the instrument for data analysis could potentially limit the trustworthiness of the study. My pre-existing research skills were primarily in quantitative investigations and I aligned with quantitative ideals before developing an interest in qualitative research. I came to this decision because I was looking to challenge myself and believed it would benefit me as an educational leader. Interviewing skills were weak but enhanced through forced practice in earlier coursework and the process of piloting the questions with peers on my SAP core team.

Acting as the instrument for data analysis was initially a struggle limited by the assumptions that I brought to the study. I explicitly set aside my assumptions to fully understand mentoring at-risk high school students from the perspective of the participants. Constant journaling helped me set aside the inherent biases and prejudgments that I brought to the analysis

(Moustakas, 1994). Engaging in this Epoche process aided in making the results as valid as possible.

Partiality may have been a limiting factor because of my personal or professional connections with some of the participants. There were no familial connections and I had no past working relationship with the participants, but I did have second or third-hand personal or professional connections. This could have influenced the manner in which I shared the participant voices.

There are limitations specifically associated with my choice to conduct a qualitative study aligned with a transcendental phenomenology. Data collection was limited to the lived experiences of 15 participants. While the depth and amount of data from the 15 participants produced thematic saturation, it did limit the breadth of data received. Only viewing the phenomenon from this limited sample may have left a gap in the collected data.

Subjectivity was a limitation because of reliance on self-reporting. The participants provided data through interviews, focus group sessions, and a reflective open-ended writing prompt. While I had to trust each participant to share accurate information, personal bias clouds data collected solely via self-reporting measures. This reliance on the mentors' perception of their transformation may limit the reliability of the study results. Mitigation for this limitation was achieved through opportunities for member checking and data triangulation.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Reflecting on the findings, implications, and limitations of this study, it is evident that additional gaps still exist. In the future, researchers should use conventions of this investigation to ease areas of mentoring and transformational learning tension. Below are a set of recommendations and directions for future research.

**Add Knowledge**

A gap still exists in the area of mentors engaging with different aged groups of at-risk students. I recommend a follow-up study focusing on the perspectives of the mentors of middle school students. The mentoring relationship may be drastically different and have a different impact on the breadth and depth of transformation. This different perspective may add an additional layer to the knowledge base of mentoring and transformational learning.

Another existing gap is in the area of transformation resulting from the mentoring of students in varying levels of need. This may add individual and collective voices while expanding this emerging knowledge base. Mentors in this study engaged with high school students who were at-risk for a wide-range of contributing factors. I recommend repeating this study with the limiting factor of mentors of students at risk of dropping out of school, at risk due to a death in the family, or at risk due to substance abuse. The study of various at-risk factors could produce meaningful results.

Future research may expand knowledge of transformational learning theory. The framework built on transformation learning theory and the active process of mentors changing their frame of reference may continue to develop over time. I recommend designing and carrying out a case study centered on a specific mentor. The findings may produce an understanding of their engagement in resulting transformation as a result of a symbiotic mentoring relationships. This may also reveal deeper insight into the application of transformative learning theory.

**Improve Practice**

Professional development training holds the potential to improve mentoring practice. I recommend repeating this study with the addition of an expanded line of data collection.

Additional interview and focus group questions related to the unexpected theme of advocacy for future growth could improve mentoring practice. It would be critical for a future researcher to create an environment for mentors to share their wants and needs without fear of administrative pushback. Findings that provide support in real-time based on specific needs may improve mentors' ability to develop excellent mentoring relationships.

Future research could help educators gain new insight into methods. This study's research questions revealed the themes of enhancement and challenges. Conducting a repeat study intentionally focusing data collection questions on the methods mentors employed may create a more nuanced understanding of their transformation. A similar study should follow the same transcendental phenomenological framework with data collection focusing on the participants' perception of critical discourse. This type of study may improve mentoring methods as discourse reveals the intrapersonal process the mentors engaged in to understand mentoring (Kitchenham, 2008).

### **Inform Policy**

Additional research may help stakeholders weigh different perspectives on the issue of mentoring relationships. I recommend repeating this study outside of Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, to gain varying perspectives. Oakridge County is a suburban community with minimal racial, cultural, and religious diversity. Participants hailing from cities and rural areas could bring valuable perspectives to the shared phenomenon of mentoring at-risk youth. Further research conducted in additional geographic locations will help verify the accuracy of this study. Results from repeating this study across the commonwealth would be more representative of a larger population and used to inform policy decisions.

The findings of a variation of this study may help stakeholders make informed decisions regarding policy. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (2016) in *Chapter 12: Student Rights and Responsibilities* defined SAP as follows:

A systematic process designed to assist school personnel to identify issues, including alcohol, drugs and others, which pose a barrier to a student's learning and school success. Student assistance is a systematic process using effective and accountable professional techniques to mobilize school resources to remove the barriers to learning. (p. 16).

The nature of the qualitative results of this study are not generalizable or transferable. The 15 participants who participated in this study provided their unique perspectives. Numerous repetitions of this study may inform stakeholders at the level of the Pennsylvania government of more valid results. The perspectives of additional mentors who engage in critical self-reflection may reveal additional findings and enlighten policymakers.

### **Summary**

The problem of no known studies giving a voice to the school-based volunteer mentors of at-risk high school students created a personal and professional tension. The development of a thick, rich description of the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based volunteer mentors in Oakridge County, Pennsylvania, has released this burden. This transcendental phenomenological study gave voice to an underrepresented group of amazing individuals while producing the themes of depth, breadth, enhancement, challenges, and future growth.

At its core, mentoring is an individual committing time and energy to invest in the future success of others. The selfless volunteer work mentors do is notable and deserves recognition and celebration. This willingness to engage in close mentoring relationships has produced layers

of beneficial transformation for the mentors. Constructive outcomes may lead to a future within high schools that the mentoring of at-risk students' benefits the mentors, is led by well-informed and compassionate leaders, and demonstrates strategies that meet student needs.

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**APPENDIX A****IRB Approval Letter****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 28, 2018

Michael Choby

IRB Approval 3415.082818: The Voice of School-Based Volunteer Mentors: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear Michael Choby,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**The Graduate School**

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**APPENDIX B****Demographic Questionnaire**

Questions:

1. Date
2. Name
3. Email address
4. Employer
5. Current position
6. Years as a professional educator
7. Years as a SAP core team member
8. Has mentoring students had a profound impact on you?

## APPENDIX C

### INFORMED CONSENT

The Voice of School-Based Volunteer Mentors: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study  
Michael Choby  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based volunteer mentors in [REDACTED], Pennsylvania. You were selected as a possible participant because of your role as a current Student Assistant Program (SAP) core team member for at least three years in a high school in [REDACTED], Pennsylvania. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Michael Choby, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the experience of mentoring at-risk high school students for school-based volunteer mentors in [REDACTED], Pennsylvania. The study is designed to answer the following research questions: (a) How do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in [REDACTED], Pennsylvania describe their experiences? (b) To what extent, if at all, do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in [REDACTED], Pennsylvania experience transformation? (c) What do SAP core team members who volunteer to mentor at-risk students in a public high school in [REDACTED], Pennsylvania identify as contributing factors and/or obstacles to experiencing transformation?

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

1. Participate in a semi-structured individual interview. This task will take approximately one hour and audio will be recorded.
2. Participate in a focus group interview. This task will take approximately one hour and audio will be recorded.
3. Complete a reflective writing activity. This task will take approximately 30 minutes and will be typed electronically.
4. Have the opportunity to check transcriptions of the individual interview, focus group interview, and themes as they are revealed to provide feedback. This task will take approximately one hour.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. As a mandated reporter, if information triggers mandated reporting requirements the investigator has a responsibility to report child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include creating practical opportunities to influence the day-to-day

interactions of educators and at-risk students. Giving voice to the mentors may help determine which methods to replicate that work toward supporting at-risk students. Findings may also cause other mentoring methods, training programs, or strategies that do not work to be discontinued. Results of the study may also lead to the creation of formal or informal networks of support for the mentors if it is determined that they need a social outlet to share their experiences.

**Compensation:** Participants will be offered compensation for participating in this study. If desired by the participant, the investigator will pay for a meal and/or drink for the participant during the individual and focus group interview.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher and transcriptionist will have access to these recordings. I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Michael Choby. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [mchoby@liberty.edu](mailto:mchoby@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, James L. Zabloski, Ed.D., at [jzabloski@liberty.edu](mailto:jzabloski@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

Date

**APPENDIX D****Individual Participant Interview Protocol**

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

## Questions:

1. Describe yourself, your job, and what you do in your role as mentor.
2. How long have you been in your current position and in the field of education?
3. How long have you been a SAP core team member?
4. How do you define an at-risk high school student?
5. How do you define a mentoring relationship?
6. What is the role of the school-based mentor of at-risk high school students?
7. What impact do you believe that you may have on student academic/personal/social success?
8. Without mentioning their identity, describe one of your most memorable mentees and your relationship with that student.
9. In what ways has mentoring affected you?
10. Have you been transformed through mentoring at-risk high school students? If so, how?
11. Is there anything else significant about mentoring that you would like to share?

**APPENDIX E****Focus Group Discussion Protocol**

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Questions (Comment to interviewees: In your response, please do not share any information that would identify a particular individual, school, or district):

1. Describe briefly the nature of your mentoring relationships with at-risk high school students.
2. Select one episode, event, or situation in which your own sense of transformation stood out.
3. Describe the qualities of this at-risk high school student who awakened in you feelings of transformation. Develop a unified descriptive portrait of this symbiotic relationship. To develop this descriptive portrait, share the most frequently cited, or dominant, qualities of at-risk students that awakened in each of you feelings of transformation. The resulting composite portrait represents the core qualities or meanings that will enhance the understanding of the mentoring relationship (Moustakas, 1994).
4. Look over your descriptive portrait and determine whether you have included everything of significance. Elaborate on the description, if needed.

**APPENDIX F****Reflective Writing Activity**

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Prompt:

Share a deeper exploration of your experience as a Student Assistant Program (SAP) core team member responsible for mentoring at-risk high school students. Discuss your mentoring relationship with a specific student that helps to recall personal and professional transformation you have experienced. In your response, please do not share any information that would identify a particular individual, school, or district.

## APPENDIX G

## Coding Framework

