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Spring 2012

### Forming Relationships to Benefit Schooling: How Students and Mentors Perceive Benefits of Afterschool Mentoring

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## **Introduction**

Educational research addresses a large variety of settings in which children learn. These range from formal schools to after-school programs and extracurricular activities. Each educational setting provides students with a different context in which they can learn important skills that they may not develop in the other settings. Helping Hands is an independent, non-profit organization that works on youth development in Hartford to help low-income students improve their academic achievement through a positive role model who will foster and encourage their students' goals and dreams. According to the mission of Helping Hands, these role models are tutors who use a holistic approach to link enrichment directly to the school curricula. The students learn skills that are not always taught and emphasized in the formal school system, so it is important to understand how they impact a student's experience in the classroom. While Helping Hands has different sites in which tutors work one-on-one with elementary and middle school students, Trinity College's site is unique. In this setting, students from low-income families are partnered with college students who are residing in the same neighborhood as the students, but often come from different economic and social backgrounds. (Helping Hands, 2010)

My research questions are: How do student mentees and their mentors perceive the mentoring program? How does participating in a mentoring program influence how students perceive relationships between what they accomplish during the mentoring program and their formal schooling?

### **Context:**

Helping Hands is an independent, non-profit community organization that works on youth development. The program was founded in 1978 by volunteers from various Hartford

churches and corporations. Since its founding, Helping Hands has grown and currently serves approximately 250 children throughout their programs. Helping Hands' goal is to connect children in Hartford to their full potential; they do this by providing students from several schools with role models in the Hartford area. According to the mission, these role models are tutors who help to use a holistic approach to link enrichment directly to the school curricula (Helping Hands, 2011).

This mission and the goals of the founders are successfully achieved by the extensive tutoring programs that Helping Hands has. Mentors are equipped with skills to encourage the students to practice their reading, writing and math through the both lesson plans and other educational tasks that are disguised as fun activities. Additionally, mentors are encouraged to engage their students in conversations about their day, week, school or family. (Helping Hands, 2011)

Mentors are provided with detailed lesson plans created by Helping Hands each week that engage the students in reviewing the material they are learning in school, but in a more interactive, exciting way. They are a compilation of activities and worksheets that correlate to the school curriculum. The lesson plans always have math and writing practice, and occasionally have spelling and reading comprehension. The lesson also outlines activities that the tutors could do with their mentees. These activities range from working on the mentee's homework to conversation topics to help the mentor and mentee form a strong relationship. Helping Hands wants their students to develop lifelong skills, so they ensure that the topics addressed in the lesson plans will be relevant beyond just what the students are learning in school.

In the tutoring program at Trinity, the students attend a 75-minute session once a week. The Trinity site serves second, fourth and fifth graders, and tutors are able to choose whether

they work with a second grader or a fourth or fifth grader. All of the students who attend the Trinity site are enrolled in the same school, Summit Elementary School. At Summit Elementary School, 94.9 percent of the students are minorities and over 95 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals (Connecticut Department of Education). At Trinity College, 18 percent of the students are minorities and 40 percent of the students receive some type of financial aid ([www.trincoll.edu](http://www.trincoll.edu)). This shows the difference in the population of students at both institutions that join together to participate in Helping Hands.

Helping Hands also has two other programs that work to fulfill the organization's mission. One is an Arts and Enrichment Program, which allows the students in the Tutoring Program to take classes during the year with local artists. The students can choose which classes to take. This empowers them to make their own decisions and form opinions about what is most interesting. The other program is a Summer Program which runs for five weeks. It uses a thematic approach that ties together academic and enrichment activities. It also provides an inspiring context to bring these academics and enrichment together to engage and motivate the students. Both of these programs fulfill Helping Hands' mission because they enrich the students lives and give them access to resources that they do not have in their everyday lives as well as provide positive role models to whom the students can look up. (Helping Hands, 2010)

### **Significance**

Mentoring programs have become a very popular way of helping underserved students reach their academic potential. Mentoring is commonly defined as a "relationship between an older individual and a young person that lasts over a period of time and focuses on the younger person's developmental needs" (Ryan, Wittaker and Pinckney 2002, 133). In working towards this goal of helping children, mentoring programs have employed tactics of forming strong,

positive relationships with community members in order to provide their students with a role model and encourage their personal development (Goldner and Maysseless, 2009).

My study is significant because it is important to acknowledge the education that takes place outside of the classroom. These learning environments can have as much impact on a student's learning as their formal schooling has; many mentoring programs encourage children to develop skills that they would not have the opportunity to develop within the classroom. Additionally, they often provide students with an adult with whom they can share their achievements, goals and problems which can be a very important relationship for children of any background to have and develop. While I will present previous research that has been done on this topic, my own research is unique in that it explores the relationships that are formed between low-income elementary school students and college students who reside in the same neighborhood. I look at how both students and mentors perceive that these relationships affect academic achievement, which is different than what the research I cite shows.

### **Literature Review**

Most scholars who write about mentoring programs discuss the importance of mentoring relationships for children and how they can help to improve academic success. Holland (1996) accurately points out that "most academic remediation efforts are introduced after students have already failed" (316). Many mentoring programs have been geared towards "at risk" youth by virtue of individual and/or environmental circumstances (DuBois et al. 2002, 189). Some programs are developed for students of a certain race or ethnic group while others are for students from a single-parent family (DuBois et al. 2002). This research shows the importance of studying mentoring programs geared towards students from low-income families. Because so many programs focus on what researchers consider "at-risk" youth, it is important to understand

how these youth feel relationships with college students who live in their neighborhood affect their academic achievement.

There are also a variety of mentor-mentee relationships that programs employ. Many programs focus on “consistent and sustained patterns of interaction” while other focus on the types of people who are mentors (Du Bois et al. 2002, 160). There are also programs in which the mentors have set requirements for each session and others where the mentor can “discover students’ interests, abilities and needs from a holistic perspective and to choose activities tailored just for that child” (Ryan et al 2002, 137).

In a meta-analysis completed by DuBois et al (2002) the researchers show that “youth mentoring programs do indeed have significant capacity to reproduce through more formal mechanisms the types of benefits that have been indicated to accrue from so-called natural mentoring relationships between youth and adults”. As DuBois et al (2002) found, there is much support in the success of mentoring programs for at-risk youth because this population benefits the most from the programs.

Numerous studies have been conducted to show how mentoring is positively associated with academic success for the underserved children who participate in mentoring programs. Goldner and Mayseless (2009) conducted a study on an Israeli mentoring program called *Pesach*. The program pairs disadvantaged youth with university students from all over Israel. The aim of the study was to “explore the associations between emotional qualities of mentoring relations, specifically closeness, unrealistic expectations and dependency and protégé adjustment” (Goldner and Mayseless, 2009, 1339). The researchers gathered participants from six low-income elementary schools where *Pesach* was implemented and had both the students and mentors complete a variety of surveys and questionnaires to examine their hypotheses of

mentoring affecting academic performance. They found that there was a “clear association between the quality of the mentoring relationship and improvement in protégés’ academic and social functioning after 8 months of mentoring intervention” (Goldner and Mayseless, 2009, 1345). Furthermore, they found that protégés reported good quality relationships based on their mentors contributing to learning skills, social support and wellbeing. Closeness in the mentoring relationship was associated with the protégé’s perceived contribution to the relationship; they also found that closeness was important in the protégé’s improvement. This research helps to explain why it is necessary to look at the relationship of low-income youth and their college student mentors. It is significant to consider how these relationships enhance a student’s education and to understand how education can extend beyond the formal classroom. In my own research, I will be focusing on how these close relationships contribute to academics, rather than just to the mentees’ social functioning. Additionally, I will be examining the relationships of elementary school students and college students who reside in the same neighborhood, while this student looks at relationships between people from all over the country.

Another study conducted based on a specific mentoring program, PROJECT 2000, further emphasizes how important role models are thought to be for improving underserved childrens’ academic performance. PROJECT 2000 is a program in the United States created to prevent school failure among elementary schoolers, and to prevent their development of negative attitudes towards school; PROJECT 2000 was implemented for African American youth, but specifically boys (Holland 1996). Holland (1996) argues that “young Black boys...need and benefit from more extensive opportunities to see and work with adult males in the school setting” (317). He focuses mostly on the elementary school phase of the boys and argued that any literate adult would be able to help these youth be more successful in school, so he employed volunteers

from all job fields to work with the youth. One of Holland's students conducted a study on the effectiveness of PROJECT 2000. She used students in the program as her experimental group and 75 fifth graders from a comparable elementary school as her control group. She looked at the students' achievement data and found that those students in PROJECT 2000 had higher GPAs than those not in the program. In response to open-ended questions, the students in the experimental group expressed that their mentors helped them in both school subjects and demonstrating positive values. Therefore, Holland's project was effective in using strong social relationships to benefit urban youths' academic achievement. Although much of this program supports my study, the researcher fails to consider how this program may benefit young Black females. In my own research, I will be considering how both urban males and females benefit from mentoring and how their academic achievements may be related to social relationships they develop during mentoring.

Other researchers examine whether relationships that exist prior to a mentoring experience have positive or negative effects on a student's success in mentoring programs. Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, and Herrera (2011) took a sample of 1,139 youths, both male and female and all races, from a variety of Big Brother Big Sister programs. Both the youths and mentors completed baseline surveys. From those surveys, the participants were placed in either the treatment group, which received mentors, or the control group, which meant that they were placed on a waiting list to receive mentors. The mentoring relationships lasted for one school year. The surveys were conducted several times during the mentoring period and included questions about demographic characteristics, measures of parent, teacher and peer relationship, measures of mentor relationships and mentoring relationship duration. They also looked at outcomes the involved youths experienced such as academic behaviors, social behaviors and



problem behaviors. Schwartz et al (2011) found that there were significant differences between youth and their mentoring relationships depending on their previous relationships with family, teachers and peers. Students who had positive relationships outside of their mentoring relationships did not benefit significantly from their mentoring experience. Students who had very negative relationships outside of their mentoring relationship also did not benefit significantly from their mentoring relationships. However, those students who had average relationships outside of their mentoring relationships significantly benefited from having a mentor. They showed improvement in both academic and non-academic aspects of their lives. This study, and those mentioned previously, give insight into my own research because it shows how mentoring can have numerous effects on a student, both academically and non-academically. My research is unique because I do not focus on whether or not the students have strong relationships outside the program. I am interested in discovering if the mentoring relationships formed are beneficial no matter what the child's relationships are like outside the program.

Ryan, Whittaker and Pinckney (2002) examined an elementary school mentoring program to understand how teachers, parents, students and mentors felt that the program was promoting academic, social and personal achievement. They also investigated what these stakeholders believed to be the most successful elements of the program and what they believed needed improvement. This mentoring program took place in the elementary school and the mentors were people from surrounding communities. To carry out the study, the researchers conducted interviews of 12 students involved in the mentoring program, the teachers and mentors completed surveys, and the parents participated in semi-structured interviews. The researchers found that all of the study's participants felt that the program had many benefits and

was helping the students perform better in school. My own research will further these findings to understand the effects of having a college-age mentor who attends a local college.

Additionally, the program I am studying meets at the college so the students see a college campus and are welcomed into the community.

A study was conducted by Ayalon (2011) in which he examined student-teacher mentoring relationships. He conducted observations and interviews of students and teachers in two schools. One of the schools was a public school in Boston and one school was a public school in Israel. The programs that these schools established were intended to create stronger relationships between students and teachers to help close the achievement gap. Ayalon (2011) found that the students and teachers felt that the mentoring systems “created a space where both could relax and release anxieties” (118). Additionally, the mentoring programs ensured that students received all of the help they needed so that they could reach their full potential. The students felt that their relationships with their teachers allowed them to find the confidence to succeed academically and to feel good about the work they were accomplishing. The teachers participating in these mentoring programs had similar feelings. Again, Ayalon (2011) says that teachers felt they were positively encouraging their students and helping them to realize that college was an option for their futures. My research is unique because I focused on mentoring relationships between students and college students. These relationships are different because the students do not interact with their mentors in their schools, but instead have an afterschool relationship. My research will show how students perceive academic benefits from having a college student role model who lives in their neighborhood.

In my own project, I will build on research that has been previously done to better understand urban children in Hartford, Connecticut. Although research on mentoring programs

has been conducted in other urban areas around the United States, the relationship between Hartford and Trinity is unique. The majority of students who attend Trinity are from a vastly different background than those students who participate in Hartford mentoring programs which provides unique findings.

**Thesis:**

I found that through the strong relationships that are formed, students feel comfortable talking about both academic and personal issues with their mentors which they feel impacts their formal schooling

**Methodology:**

This study used both interviews and observations to collect primary data. I interviewed ten students: three second grade students and seven fourth and fifth grade students who were involved in Helping Hands. Before I conducted the interviews, I handed out parental consent forms, so the number of interviews I conducted relied on who returned the forms. I also interviewed two mentors involved in the program. My sample size of students was 40 and my sample size of mentors was 35. In the student interviews, I asked questions to understand their opinions about Helping Hands and their mentors. I also wanted to see if they viewed the program as relating to their formal schooling. I asked questions relating to how the students feel about the mentoring program, how they relate to their mentors, and if and when applicable, how they use what they learn or accomplish during mentoring in the classroom. I also interviewed two mentors who participated in the program. In the mentor interviews, I asked questions to find out how mentors feel that they are helping their mentees and how they think that their mentees perceive the mentors. I wanted to understand how the mentors saw their roles as

relating to the students. All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed and pseudonyms were used.

In addition to the interviews, I was a participant-observer of the tutoring sessions. I conducted these observations last year (Winter/Spring 2011) from the end of January to the beginning of May for three hours a week. They are mainly based on two students, one second grade boy and one fourth grade girl, but there are also observations about the entire tutoring group. I took field notes of all of my observations. I use my observations as a support for my interviews in order to show that what the students share in their interviews are common feelings amongst the students in the program.

### **Limitations**

My group of participants was small because I needed parental consent forms. Furthermore, since Helping Hands only meets once a week, it was difficult to ensure that the students would remember to bring back the forms. I also recognize that I had very limited participation from the mentors. Additionally, because I was only able to observe one mentoring program, I understand that my findings may not be able to be generalized, but I do believe that they are still significant for understanding how the relationships I studied affect low-income students.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

#### *Smart and Very Kind and Loving*

I have concluded that the students involved in Helping Hands found positive elements of their experiences that translated into success in their formal schooling, mainly based on the relationships formed. When the participants were asked about their relationships with their mentors, they all responded that their mentors helped them with their schoolwork and made them

feel good about what they were learning in school. All of the students responded to a question asking them to describe their mentors by using words such as “fun, sweet, and helpful”, “pretty, fun and talented” and “nice, kind and compassionate” (Mark, personal interview, November 15, 2011) (Student 1, personal interview, November 7, 2011) (Student 2, personal interview, November 8, 2011). Students continued on to talk about how their mentors are supportive of them. One fifth grade girl, Sofia, who has been involved in the program for 4 years said that all of her mentors have been “both smart and very kind and loving to me” (Sofia, personal interview, November 15, 2011). She explained how her mentors have always started the sessions by asking her about her week, school and her family, and then have made sure that she fully grasps all of the concepts from her homework. She also shared that she confides in her tutor about more personal issues. “Like if my friend is doing something or I didn’t like my teacher that day, sometimes my tutor can help me think what to do” (Sofia, personal interview, November 15, 2011). A fifth grade girl who has only been participating in Helping Hands for one year said, “You can talk to your tutor about what you did on the weekends and what happens in school” (Student 3, personal interview, November 8, 2011). When asked how she would describe her mentor, this student replied that her mentor is “awesome and really fun”. Based on the ways in which the mentees described their mentor, I was able to conclude that the students all feel positive connections with their mentors, and therefore confide in their mentors about issues they may be having in school or in their home lives. This also shows that the mentees perceive the program as a positive element of their lives because they are able to build relationships with their mentors.

Since the mentees are elementary school students, they do not see the differences between themselves and their mentors despite being from different backgrounds, but instead, see

their mentors as people “who have time to be with [them], which [they] really like” (Student 5, personal interview, November 8, 2011). The mentees appreciate that these college students want to take time out of their days to spend with their students. The mentees also value the relationships that are formed and can see the positives of the relationship. Whether they do not see the differences, or look beyond them, the students do not let these differences affect the relationships. My observations also support the theme shown that the mentees see their mentors through a positive light. Each week when the students arrived to Trinity, they were full of energy and immediately ran over to their mentors. Many of the girls greeted their mentors with a hug and the boys greeted their mentors with a high five. The mentees always had smiles on their faces and stories to share from school that day or the bus ride to Trinity. They settled in quickly to not miss out on any time that they had with their mentor. Then as the sessions came to end, mentors hugged their mentees, reminded them to try their hardest in school, and mentees excitedly said that they could not wait until next week to see their mentors again. This further shows the strong relationships and that the students felt strongly about their relationships with the Trinity students, as well as the Trinity students feeling close to their mentees.

Based on mentors reactions to their relationships with their mentees, I was able to further my conclusions that because of the strong relationships formed, the students feel comfortable talking to their mentors about issues in their lives and value the relationships that they have. They see their mentors as a trustworthy person to whom they can look up and know that they will get the information that they need to be confident in themselves and make mature decisions. The mentors held similar opinions about the relationships formed with their mentees. One mentor, Jen, who was participating in Helping Hands for her fourth year said:

“I think they think we’re adults who have all the answers to everything. I’ve definitely never had a kid who just wants to do homework. They always want to have more of a relationship than that and talk about their lives.” (Jen, personal interview, November 16, 2011)

The other mentor, Anna, who was also in her fourth year as a mentor for Helping Hands, had similar feelings. She said that at the beginning of each session she always talks to her mentee about their day or their week and they always like to share “something they’re excited about. Like if it’s their birthday or they’re going to the movies or something like that” (Anna, personal interview, November 17, 2011). She continued on to explain that when her mentees talk about school, they usually talk about:

“Teachers a lot. Complaining about teachers sometimes. Not necessarily what they’re learning or anything like that unless I specifically ask about it. I don’t know, usually I just ask about the day and they’ll say some highlight like ‘I had an ice cream party because we finished the CMTs’” (Anna, personal interview, November 17, 2011)

Both of these quotes show how the mentors also perceive that the relationships they build with their mentees help the mentees feel more excited about school and what they are accomplishing. Based on my observations, I have also seen that the mentees are usually excited to share with their mentors when they do well on a test or a homework assignment. The mentees excitedly explain their achievements to their mentor with details about how they knew the material and therefore did well in school.

Jen described how during her first year participating in the program, her mentee shared with her a very personal anecdote about her life: “sophomore year I had a mentee who had been sexually abused as a child, so I heard a lot about that and she talked to me about her family now”

(Jen, personal interview, November 16, 2011). She explained that after that first year, the conversations she had with her mentees were less intense, but that her mentees still believed that she had answers to their questions and that she was someone they could come to with concerns. Jen described how one year she had two fifth grade boys as her mentees.

“They were both kind of interested in big topics they were just starting to hear about. So they would ask me about drugs and violence and one time they asked about sex. So I think both of them had heard it for the first time in school and didn’t know what to make of it.” (Jen, personal interview, November 16, 2011)

The fact that these various students were comfortable talking to their mentor about these issues shows that they respected her and valued her opinions on important issues that they were confronting in their lives. Jen explained that she felt as though by having these conversations with her mentees, she was helping them to form their own opinions and to understand situations that they were experiencing. Then, the students showed more confidence in their academic work and in themselves that they had knowledge they felt they needed. Again, this portrays how the mentors and mentees perceive the program as beneficial. If these children did not have a strong role model to whom they could talk, they would be less secure and confident in themselves.

These strong relationships were still shown to be beneficial whether or not the students reported having other role models whom they viewed as similar to their mentors. Mark (personal interview, November 15, 2011), a fourth grade boy who has had the same mentor for 2 year, described how he has relationships with people similar to his mentor, but most specifically, with his “cousin. He’s like 15 years old and he helps me with my homework when I don’t come here.” Mark went on to describe how even though his cousin was a good role model for him, he still liked to come to Helping Hands to spend time with his mentor because this was someone



other than a family member who wanted to spend time with him. Other students mentioned their mothers, fathers and siblings as role models, but only Mark said that his role model helped him with his homework. There were also students who said that they did not feel there was anyone in their lives who was a role model in the same way as their Helping Hands mentor. Despite the differences in responses to having other role models, all students still reported that they felt they benefited from the relationships with their mentors.

Both students and mentors discussed how having the program at Trinity College is beneficial. Many students expressed excitement about being able to come to Trinity making comments such as, “my friend did Helping Hands before me and he got to come to Trinity so I wanted to do it also” and “coming to Trinity is so cool because I get to see where my tutor lives” (Mark, personal interview, November 15, 2011) (Student 5, personal interview, November 8, 2011). Both Anna and Jen agreed that having the students come to Trinity is a very positive element of Helping Hands.

“I think they like to see the campus and they’re really curious about it. They often ask like where do I live on campus or what’s the food like on campus. I think it’s a good way to get them to see the whole college scene and maybe want to go here themselves.”

(Anna, personal interview, November 17, 2011)

Jen seconded what Anna explained when she said that coming to Trinity allowed them to see a college campus and also explained why this element of the program was her favorite.

“I think one of my favorite things about Helping Hands as opposed to the other programs that go to the schools is that I’ve heard all my mentees talk about how cool it is to come to Trinity and how it makes them excited for college. And I think just for any kid, seeing a college campus makes it real for them.” (Jen, personal interview, November 16, 2011)

I have also seen this theme through my observations. Numerous mentor-mentee pairings each week have conversations about Trinity and college. The mentees always ask questions about Trinity and the campus, which allows mentors to discuss the topic of college with their students. Because of the positive relationships and respect that the mentees have for their mentors, mentors are able to encourage their students to think about college, even though they are only in elementary school. Furthermore, because the mentees see that their mentors want them to succeed in school and encourage them to progress and have high standards for themselves, they feel that they can discuss the prospect of college in the weekly sessions.

The combination of tutoring and mentoring helps students feel accomplished and self-confident about their work so that they can excel in school. Building this self-confidence is one of Helping Hands largest goals and the mentees show that this is taking place. While there are several types of relationships that mentors and mentees form, they all have the same result. Students in Helping Hands perceive that they are achieving academically because of the weekly support and encouragement they receive from college students.

*Help me with math, reading and vocabulary homework*

The strong relationships that students form with their mentors are very beneficial to the students' academic success. As one of the main parts of Helping Hands is to get assistance on homework, the students feel that they can bring any homework or material with which they may be struggling to their mentor. As Mark (personal interview, November 15, 2011) said,

“my mentor may be able to help me with math, reading, vocabulary word homework and so far I just got my first hard math problems so she's helping me with that”.

One fifth grade student who is involved in Helping Hands for the first time also said that her mentor “told [her] how to do mental math” (Student 2, personal interview, November 8, 2011).

The student continued on to explain that her mentor realized she was using a calculator or her fingers to solve all of her homework, so she created tricks for her to use. She also said that her mentor was able to give her strategies to do mental math. Other students talked about how their favorite part of Helping Hands was “getting help with homework” (Student 4, personal interview, November 15, 2011). Most students explained how their mentors worked mostly on math homework, and the mentors agreed that this subject seemed to be where they assisted students most and also where they saw the most improvement and excitement from their students.

These instances of a tutor helping to teach his/her mentee an important academic skill was common in Helping Hands. Even second graders participating in Helping Hands felt that their mentors were helping them with their academics which was allowing them to improve in school. One girl commented “my mentor sometimes teaches me how to do stuff and then we do it at school which helps me.” Through my observations, I have noticed that tutors work to make sure that their mentees are fully understanding all of the concepts they have learned in school. Mentors will often create tricks for their mentees to help them solve a particular type of math problem or help them learn spelling words. I observed one tutor teaching her student multiplication tables by using manipulatives and then slowly transitioning to having her mentee do the problems in her head. The mentee’s facial expression changed as she slowly understood the concept of multiplication and she continuously thanked her tutor for helping her feel more confident with her math skills. Mentors were able to provide this type of academic assistance because they knew their mentees’ learning styles and had the opportunity to assist specifically to their mentees’ needs. In a classroom, teachers often do not have this ability, so the students greatly benefit from having a mentor with whom they are comfortable and know well.

The participants also discussed the lesson packets that Helping Hands distributes at the start of each tutoring session. One fourth grade boy said that “doing math in the packet is easier to understand and more fun” (Student 8, personal interview, November 15, 2011). Other students also commented that they like doing the packet when they finish their homework because it is extra practice for what they are learning in school. The second graders did not have as much of a positive experience with the packets, saying that they were happier doing their homework with the tutors and then playing games if time allowed. However, the mentors had different opinions of the lesson plans than the students. As Anna stated when asked whether the lesson plans helped the students succeed academically,

“I feel like when I have 5<sup>th</sup> graders [the packets] more on the same page as what they are doing. But this year, they’re too hard for the fourth graders. They’re doing...like the lessons plans will have them add and subtract fractions when they’ve barely worked with fractions, so I don’t think they’re exactly right. We never really do a whole lesson plan, we just work on parts of it.” (Anna, personal interview, November 17, 2011)

This mismatch between the mentors and mentees’ views is interesting. Perhaps the students perceive any type of work as beneficial, whereas the mentors can better understand whether it is correlating to the school-assigned homework. This discrepancy could also be caused by the students not seeing the connections between the packets and their schoolwork until they are actually in the classroom, which the mentors would never experience. Additionally, because the packets are created as fun ways of learning material, the students may feel that when they complete work with their mentors that seems less academic and more fun, they may feel more excited about the work and gain confidence because they are able to understand material beyond their homework.

Based on my observations, I have seen both sides of the lesson packets. There are some students who are excited to work on parts of the packet while there are other students who would rather engage in conversation with their mentors or play games. In multiple instances, I observed students asking with enthusiasm to work on the lesson plans, specifically the math sections, because they wanted more practice. In these scenarios, it appeared that the students wanted to be more successful and confident in their work and viewed the packet as a means to reaching a higher comfort level with their math skills. However, I have also witnessed situations in which mentees request not to work on the packets but instead to just talk or play a game with their mentors. While there is a difference in how the students react to the lesson plans, the underlying theme of these interactions is the same. All of the students want to have a strong relationship with their mentors and for their mentors to be proud of the work they accomplish.

Through examining both students' perceptions of working on homework with their mentors and working on the lesson plans, I conclude that while all Helping Hands participants do perceive academic benefits from the program, there are different elements of the program that help each student.

**Conclusion:**

This study was conducted to understand mentor and mentee perceptions of how relationships can have positive academic benefits for elementary school students. The research shows that through strong, positive relationships that are formed over the course of the tutoring sessions, students feel they perform better academically and have more self-confidence in their work. Based on interviews and my role as a participant-observer, I was able to see how these relationships between elementary schoolers and college students residing in the same neighborhood can raise the students' self-esteems and their perceived academic achievements.

My findings showed that both the mentors and mentees agreed that strong relationships allowed mentees to respect and trust their mentors, which in turn allowed them to feel comfortable getting homework assistance and more confident in themselves. These relationships also caused the mentees to share exciting news about their academic achievements with their mentors because they felt that the mentors were people with whom they could talk about accomplishments.

In future research, it would be interesting to have access to students' grades and their teachers to know if there was actually an academic benefit to having this type of strong mentoring relationship. With access to grades, future researchers could conduct a comparative study looking at perceptions and grades to understand why students have these positive perceptions. Additionally, if it was found that the grades were not supporting academic benefits, mentoring programs like Helping Hands could be adapted.