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A Study of High School Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Students with Disabilities

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A Study of High School Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Students with Disabilities

By
Ashley N. Davis

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Ashley N. Davis under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Dedication

To my curious and golden-hearted daughter, Sophie. When you were born, so was this Mommy. It has been my most cherished role and will continue to be in my lifetime. Keep your eyes on your goal, whatever that may be today. Wherever you go in your life, I know you will go far and make a positive impression on everyone you meet along the way. Keep the fire in your spirit, the spark in your mind, the stubbornness in your dedication, and passion in your soul. Sing your heart out and dance away your worries. You, my baby, will make a huge difference in this world. Embrace that. Thank you for reminding Mommy that, like Little Engine, if you think you can you will and for showing me that it is okay to fall as long as you get back up and try again. My oldest little, I love you times infinity.

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Abstract

A Study of High School Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Students with Disabilities. Davis, Ashley N., 2015: Dissertation, Gardner-Webb University, Contact Theory/ Mentoring/High School Students/Early College/Students with Disabilities/Service Learning

This dissertation was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study grounded in Contact Theory to investigate Early College high school students' perceptions of a multi-year mentoring program. The Early College students were paired with elementary students with varying special needs in a self-contained classroom throughout 3 years in various settings, including community-based therapeutic horseback riding and a school-based sensory program. The study attempted to garner how the mentoring experience affected the Early College high school students personally, as well as their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs in relationship to their tolerance toward people with disabilities as reported by the participants through individual interviews. An analysis of the data through coding and the use of the ATLAS.ti software program revealed commonalities between Early College high school students' perceptions of being involved in the program and its effects outside of the program, notably in the areas of tolerance, relationships, and personal effects, including future careers and skills. Following this study, the findings offer insight into how mentoring may affect high school and college students working with students with special needs and how this intentional pairing contributes to the literature of Contact Theory. This will provide opportunities for future research in specific areas within the identified themes. Following this research, it can be concluded that a similar mentoring program would continue to be valuable in this setting and may be considered beneficial in other settings, both in the school and community. There is a need for continued research in this area so data can be compared and findings further validated.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the last United States Census, almost one in every five Americans now report having at least one disability (Brault, 2010). As the number of people diagnosed with a disability continues to the rise, so does the number of people who depend on government assistance programs for basic daily needs. There has been a 40% increase in those using food assistance programs and a 14% increase in those using Medicaid assistance since 2008 (United States Census Bureau, 2013). The percentage of Americans using government assistance programs reached an all-time high within the past decade, making up one half (49.2%) of the current population (United States Census Bureau, 2013). However, what effects would there be for those individuals with a disability on government assistance, our society, and our nation if some of those individuals could work or volunteer and maximize their contributions back to society? Due to lack of knowledge in this area, those jobs and placements are few in number.

The biggest challenge facing people with disabilities in society today in the United States is attitude and tolerance, where there is a negative stigma attached to having a disability, especially in the workforce (Spencer-Rogers, Williams, & Peng, 2010). However, when given an opportunity and some support, these individuals tend to flourish in the community. Perceptions of reality and attitudes, whether positive or negative, vary between persons for several reasons, the greatest of which is personal experiences where what is familiar becomes personal values and beliefs (Allport, 1954). Tolerance in today's modern society is a topic of much debate. As media have expanded exponentially to global proportions, so has the digital world. This has given way to widespread information, some true and some rather misleading, about all topics. People are entitled to their own opinions, but these opinions tend to change once they have been

exposed to something long enough (Allport, 1954). This is the background for Contact Theory.

An extension of Social-Cognitive Theory, Contact Theory was first coined as a term in the 1950s and was used to describe the intentional pairing of two dissimilar groups of people through direct contact as a means of improving the relationships between the groups (Allport, 1954). Since its formation, Contact Theory has been used in varying scenarios with similar positive outcomes including race, gender, disabilities, and ethnicity as well as with adults and children (Cameron, Rutland, Hossain, & Petley, 2011; Mazziotta, Mummendey, & Wright, 2011; Novak, Feyes & Christensen, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013). Rodenborg and Boisen (2013) discussed the continued segregation in the United States and proposed how aversive racism and intergroup Contact Theory could play a role in cultural competence, even decades after Contact Theory first emerged. As students spend time together, they learn more about each other and realize their similarities while differences fade (Kaye, 2010). Within this context, the intentional pairing of a group of students with disabilities with a group of students without disabilities could be an impactful area of study.

This dissertation was designed as a phenomenological qualitative study to investigate Early College students' perceptions of a multi-year mentoring program in relation to Contact Theory. Specifically, the study attempted to garner how the mentoring experience affected the Early College high school students' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs in relation to their tolerance toward people with disabilities as reported by the participants through individual interviews. The Early College students from an Early College high school in western North Carolina were paired with elementary students with

varying special needs in a self-contained classroom throughout 3 years in various settings including community-based therapeutic horseback riding and a school-based sensory program. These data were analyzed for trends in order to identify common themes. Following this study, the findings offer insight into how mentoring may affect high school and college students working with students with special needs. These findings indicate opportunities for future research in specific areas within the identified themes.

Nationally and internationally, mentoring among peers or mixed groupings has been and continues to be used heavily in educational and work settings (McLaughlin, 2010). Mentoring is ever-present currently from the school to the workforce. Within this specific study, Early College high school students were paired with elementary students with disabilities in a unique mentoring program in a series of school and community-based sessions including sensory integration, horseback riding, and equine-assisted activities and therapies. This study then explored the Early College students' attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and beliefs of the program and tolerance toward individuals with disabilities following the completion of the mentoring program through individual interviews.

Nature of the Problem

As part of the Beginning Teacher Support Program, a piece in North Carolina's State Board of Education Educator's Effectiveness plan (McREL, 2009), mentoring programs are currently used in full force in the North Carolina public educational system. Beginning teachers in their first few years in the profession are assigned a veteran teacher as a mentor who is responsible for tasks such as co-teaching and observing. The mentor's task is to help the beginning teacher grow within the profession through the sharing of resources and knowledge. The mentor is also available to answer questions or

address concerns should these needs arise from the mentee. With mentoring in the educational setting prevalent for teachers, it is equally as present for the students.

Mentoring is often observable in the public and private school settings across grade levels (Karcher, 2008) where students are paired for various educational activities throughout the academic year. It can also be observed as a pairing between community members and students (Ryan, Wittaker, & Pinckney, 2002) within a specific subject area or across the curriculum. There are several models of mentoring used in various settings. Mentoring between peers or colleagues is the most well-known mentoring groupings. Also frequent are pairings of older students with younger students. However, the instances of older students specifically being paired with younger students with identified disabilities are few. The mentoring program within this study pairs older students, in this case Early College students, as mentors with younger students with disabilities as mentees through the vehicle of service learning.

The most common reason for offering a mentoring program is for its benefits to the mentees. However, there is limited data on the effects of the mentoring on the mentors (Olson, 2008; Weiler et al., 2013). Since mentoring positions are usually paid, offer a stipend, or offer a service in return (e.g., a record of required volunteer hours) for the mentor's service, there is a stigma attached that there are no real benefits otherwise associated with that role. Perhaps if the role had documented additional benefits, there would be more people participating in mentorships; however, this is not the case.

Mentoring can come in many variations and through several means. One of these means is service learning. Although mentoring and service learning both have documented short-term and long-range benefits for the mentors or service-learning participants (Maheu, 2009; McLaughlin, 2010; Olson, 2008; Weiler et al., 2013), the

model of mentoring through service learning is unique to this program. Service learning

is used in some Early College settings, although not required in all. It is also used readily

in preservice education programs and some other higher education areas (Maheu, 2009).

High schools around the country tend to use service-learning experiences minimally

(Levine, 2010). When service learning is used in these settings, it is usually in the form

of specific individual school or community-related service hours and not within a

structured program. Since service learning can be used as a teaching and learning

strategy that benefits all stakeholders involved (e.g., student, facilitator, and community),

it should be considered more often in these settings to create real-world experiences for

the learners to produce individuals more aware of societal expectations. Service learning

used in this context can intentionally pair these differing groups of students through

Contact Theory. One such societal expectation is acceptance and tolerance toward

groups and individuals who are different than the norm, which is more challenging for

Americans than their other country counterparts (Spencer-Rogers et al., 2010).

People with disabilities face many personal challenges, whether emotionally,

cognitively, developmentally, or physically. With more people being diagnosed each

year with a disability, up to one-fifth of all Americans reported more than a decade ago

(Bureau of the Census, 1997), those individuals are more present than ever in American

communities. These individuals are working and living in competitive environments and

face difficulties beyond the watchful eyes of others. As these individuals are struggling

for social approval, it is often difficult for Americans to embrace tolerance toward those

people with differences (Spencer-Rogers et al., 2010). This means social approval of

those with disabilities may be difficult for people without disabilities unless they have

had prior positive experiences with people with disabilities.

The theoretical framework of this study revolves around Contact Theory which systematically pairs different groups of individuals through direct contact as a method to improve the groups' relationships. First coined by Allport (1954), the term "contact hypothesis" began studying the impact of pairing individuals of mixed races to combat stereotypes. Although there has been some generalization of Contact Theory to date including ethnic groups (Cameron et al., 2011), people with disabilities (Novak et al., 2011), racism (Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013), and transgendered individuals (Cameron et al., 2011), the theory is still in its infancy. There is limited research behind how Contact Theory generalizes to include contact with people with disabilities, although there is a possibility that a relationship could exist based on generalizations to other areas besides race and ethnicity (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). With this theory behind the mentoring project of study, at the conclusion of the program, the mentors should show more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities, an important attribute for the Early College high school students to take into the community both during their time in the school setting and beyond.

The Research Problem, Justification, and Deficiencies in the Evidence

The Early College high school concept. In North Carolina's attempt to graduate prepared students, the Early College high school has emerged as a strategy for success. Early College students graduate with a 2-year college degree at the end of the program. The 5-year program lasts throughout their high school career. With the realization that this type of educational setting is both needed and beneficial, half of all states now have at least one Early College, with North Carolina in the lead for the most with 71 (Le & Frankfort, 2011).

In public and private prekindergarten through twelfth-grade programs, hands-on

learning is hailed as best practice with students within the regular classrooms as well as those with disabilities (Peterson, Johnson, & Showalter, 2012). It is also a strategy proven to be successful in high school (Levine, 2010), higher education (Wu & Sankar, 2013), with adult learners (Hindle, 2012), and in nontraditional settings such as online instruction (Lahoud & Krichen, 2010). These real-world experiences and the skills obtained through those learning experiences are one focus of producing literate students in the 21st century.

This type of learning environment helps to alleviate the bridge between coursework to career, making the transition as seamless as possible, which is additionally a goal for all Early College high schools (Early College Design Services, 2012). Faced with heightened accountability standards at the higher educational level and the high expectations of these Early College high school students, there is a significant amount of research involving these students related to their experiences and outcomes of the Early College program (Bernstein et al., 2010; Maheu, 2009; Nodine, 2011), specifically in North Carolina (Unlu, Yamaguchi, & Bernstein, 2010).

A portion of this experience for the Early College students within this study is an active service-learning component made up of a combination of school and community service as a requirement for graduation. Service learning, both in the school system and community, is an important component for the students involved in this study. The students within this program have chosen to complete some of their service-learning experience by mentoring elementary students with disabilities in a variety of community and school-based settings.

Service learning. Used in American preservice education programs is a quote from the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius: "I hear and I forget. I see and I

remember. I do and I understand" (Vaillancourt, 2009, p. 272). This quote is used to stress to these preteachers the importance to take with them into their field the concept of making learning relevant with real-world experiences. Hands-on learning has been widely used in education from infants (Gavin, 2011) to high school students (Grant & Littlejohn, 2009) and is a critical component in making a well-rounded classroom instructional environment (Glenn, 2009). Service learning is frequently used in the higher education setting especially in the field of education (e.g., preservice teachers and educational providers); however, it is used less frequently in other areas. In the high school setting, service learning is rarely used in combination with coursework, although there is some research to suggest it may be beneficial (Levine, 2010). The abundance of evidence on service learning, although showing benefits, does not consider service learning that is specific, such as mentoring programs.

Higher education institutions are currently using service learning frequently as a pedagogical strategy for their role in creating students who are responsible citizens while simultaneously fulfilling a need in the community, although the true impact on the community is rarely researched nor are the effects of specific service-learning experiences such as mentoring (Weiler et al., 2013). Mentoring programs are only one type of service learning, but one that may hold potential for all the participants involved. This is an area of promise that should be further explored due to its possible information on benefits and effectiveness.

Service learning within the high school setting is, at best, limited. Active participation with a community component is usually limited to secondary courses within the vocational field of study (e.g., cosmetology, welding, masonry). Those vocational courses often require hours of active hands-on participation as part of the course

requirements in order to begin coursework at a higher education institution for an associate's degree or training certificate. The Early College setting, which offers both secondary and higher education coursework, has adapted this idea of hands-on learning for all of its students. As a requirement, service learning within the Early College setting has been embraced by the students and faculty. Students usually choose service-learning opportunities based on single-event service whether in the community or the school. There are also reoccurring opportunities for hours through structured programs such as the mentoring program within this study. However, there is no research as to the benefits of any specific reoccurring programs that are currently offered for students to fulfill those service-learning hours, including the mentoring program.

Mentoring. Mentoring programs have a long-standing record of effectiveness, whether it is among peers in the educational setting, among colleagues in the workplace, or in politics, film, music, or sports (McLaughlin, 2010). Learning new environments from someone more experienced in the area is an important part of educational or career development. These programs offer benefits to the mentees in the form of knowledge, relationships, and support. However, there are also documented benefits for the mentors. These can include socialization, task development, and personal development (Olson, 2008).

As mentoring became more common, it was apparent that the mentees were not the only people benefiting from the programs. There is some research to indicate that the mentors also benefit. Specifically, there has been an abundance of research suggesting that students with disabilities are positively impacted through inclusion with nondisabled peers (Allen & Cowdery, 2011; Fredrickson & Cline, 2002; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2009), whether in a classroom setting at a school or in a structured school or community-based

mentoring program (Thurlow, Sinclair, & Johnson, 2002). In addition, peers of those

students with special needs benefit from the exposure and indicate more positive attitudes

toward people with disabilities afterward. Within structured adult/student mentoring

programs, there is limited research indicating that mentors within these programs also

report positive effects. In most cases, these studies were completed with same-age peers

or students within the same grade level. Some studies used high school students paired

with younger elementary students (Karcher, 2008), while others used college students

with younger peers (Weiler et al., 2013). However, there is little research into the area of

high school or Early College students paired with younger students with disabilities,

especially significant disabilities that hinder the education of these students to the point

that they are placed in a self-contained classroom within the elementary school. Through

casual conversations with parents, teachers, and therapists, it is reported that the

elementary students with special needs benefit greatly from this mentoring opportunity.

However, the purpose of this study specifically investigated the Early College students'

perceptions of the program and their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs as related to tolerance

toward individuals with disabilities.

Students with disabilities. Prior to the 1700s, individuals with disabilities were

largely ignored or ridiculed. They were often treated inhumanly, put to death, or

institutionalized (Salend & Duhaney, 2011). In the mid-1900s, there was a push toward

institutions that were supposed to focus on the care and vocalization of individuals with

disabilities. However, these institutions proved to be another way to separate individuals

who were perceived as different (Salend & Duhaney, 2011). With the decision to end

segregation in the Brown v. Topeka Board of Education (1954) Supreme Court ruling,

overturning the "separate but equal" doctrine in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), there was a

push away from separation and toward inclusion of everyone regardless of race or disability in the school setting. This continued in the 1960s and 1970s. The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed in 1975, which allowed families free appropriate education for their children with disabilities in the public school setting where it had previously been denied. This was later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and was revised on several occasions. A major revision was the addition that students must be educated in the least restrictive environment based on a continuum of services that includes hospitalization and homebound services at the lower end through complete mainstreaming in regular education classrooms with appropriate accommodations at the highest end. For each child, the decision must be made on whether this includes time in a regular education classroom, resource classroom, separate (e.g., self-contained) classroom or school, or a homebound/hospital setting. As this part of the law is being constantly debated on how to appropriately adhere to its implications, there is a push toward including all students in the general education setting to the highest degree possible. However, throughout history, this has remained a struggle for active practice (Rotatori, Obiakor, & Bakken, 2011; Salend & Duhaney, 2011). Still today, students with disabilities have twice the risk of dropping out of school compared to their nondisabled peers (Thurlow et al., 2002).

The elementary students with disabilities involved in this mentoring program are placed from the whole county in one of a few separate-continuum elementary classrooms because of their severe level of disabilities. All of these classrooms are housed within the same elementary school. Since service learning takes a community need and specifically strategizes and implements a plan of action to address that need (Marshall & Perry,

2010), it makes sense to offer a service targeting students with disabilities within the community that houses those students. In this case, it is a mentoring program between students with disabilities and older nondisabled students. This creates a unique mentoring program among the two groups of learners with a root in service learning.

Contact Theory. Allport (1954) recognized that from the time a child is about 5 years old, he or she can understand the process of belonging to groups. While the child is still young, those groupings are determined by the parents, including religion, groups within their race, social functions, and societal traditions. Also coming into play is where a child lives, from the national level to the neighborhood. Allport continued that by the time a child is 10 years old, he or she can realize what these groupings are and the differences in other groups. However, before this age, these in-group relationships have already been formed and whether or not the child is conscious of the fact, he or she has already bonded to the group with loyalty. There is a stated universal law among all people, "In every society on earth the child is regarded as a member of his parents' groups" (Allport, 1954, p. 31). Although this remains true for everyone in the world, in America, children are given more of an opportunity to accept these or deny these once they are older.

Contact Theory was first introduced as a method for reducing racial prejudice through the intentional pairing of groups that were having conflict. Since then, the theory has been researched more in depth to include various other groups of individuals. To date, Contact Theory has been proven effective in various scenarios with specific positive results in each, such as ethnic groups (Cameron et al., 2011), people with disabilities (Novak et al., 2011), racism (Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013), and transgendered individuals as well as adults and children (Cameron et al., 2011). Even though these new extensions

of the theory are still in their infancy, it promises to be an impactful area of study (Cameron et al., 2011; Mazziotta et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013).

This study used Contact Theory as a basis for intentional pairing of an in-group (students without disabilities) and a perceived out-group (students with disabilities). The Early College students used for this research were of an age that their values, beliefs, and perceptions of students with disabilities could have been affected through this intentional pairing. This research also included how these Early College students were affected personally by this experience.

Audience

Several people have been affected through this program of study, both in the school and community settings. Within the school setting, these include the elementary students with disabilities (the mentees), the Early College students (the mentors), the school physical therapist and assistant, the elementary exceptional children's staff and school administrators, the Early College staff and administration, and parents of all students involved. These people were also affected through the community-based aspect of the program in addition to the therapeutic horseback riding staff, additional volunteers, the riding stable's board members, and various community sponsors to the funding of the program.

Various stakeholders in this program have reported through casual conversations the perceived benefits to the mentees involved with regard to behavioral, emotional, academic, physical, and personal gains. However, there is no research into the benefits for those Early College students serving as mentors. One of the gains of this study was garnering the benefits of the mentoring program to the Early College high school

mentors. Program stakeholders could and should use the data to reevaluate and revise the program as necessary in order to be of the most benefit to the mentees and the mentors. In order for the program to be true service learning, evaluating the program and continuing to make adjustments are part of the process. Primary stakeholders involved in this specific mentoring service-learning opportunity include the school district physical therapist and assistant, the Early College principal, and the community-based representatives from the therapeutic horseback riding stables.

In addition to these, the gathered data may prove beneficial to others working within this program. These include the elementary exceptional children's teachers from the self-contained classrooms, the elementary school administrators, the school district exceptional children's director, and program specialists. In addition, if other Early College high schools are seeking to expand their programs to include a service-learning component or to specify programs within their current service-learning opportunities, this study may give valuable insight into the effectiveness of such a program in relationship to the Early College students.

Service learning, although not a new concept, is continually evolving and adapting. Curriculum and instructional specialists in both the high school and higher education setting may value information on how beneficial specific service-learning programs are for the participants, such as the mentoring program studied in this dissertation. Service-learning participants could gain valuable knowledge about how a mentoring program could be beneficial to them now as students or later on in their work careers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the mentoring program

experiences for the Early College student mentors who were paired with elementary students with disabilities. The purpose of the study was to gain in-depth knowledge about how participation in the mentoring program effects the Early College students' attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions in relationship to the program and toward people with disabilities. The study specifically focused on the impact on their attitude toward students with disabilities within the principles of Contact Theory. Early College high school student participants paired with elementary students who were in a self-contained exceptional children's program for a variety of physical activities including therapeutic horseback riding and sensory integration tasks for up to 3 consecutive years. These Early College high school student participants then participated in individual interviews about their experiences. Interview data were coded for themes using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data software. The knowledge gained offered insightful information about the use of service learning, specifically mentoring programs in both the high school and college setting as it relates to education and personal development. Central concepts within this study are service learning through mentoring and Contact Theory. This information also relates to the theory of service learning, offering important insight into its relevance in the high school and college settings.

Within the Early College high school setting researched in this study, there is a requirement that all students complete service-learning hours in order to graduate. There is a total of 150 required hours with components in both the school and community settings. However, these hours are not mandated into specific programs. There is no research among the Early College service learning to document its effectiveness within specific chosen programs, although specific programs are offered as a choice for service-learning hours.

This specific program takes place in a rural town in western North Carolina. The Early College students are housed on-campus at a local community college for coursework. Their mentees are educated in a local elementary school within a program designed specifically for all elementary students in the county who are placed in a self-contained exceptional children's program. School-based mentoring occurs at the elementary school. Community-based mentoring occurs at a local riding stable and agricultural center. This program has been in place for 3 consecutive years, with the participants based on the current enrollment in the elementary self-contained classes and the current enrollment in the Early College of students who wish to participate in this mentoring service-learning experience. The average number for both the Early College high school students and elementary students with disabilities during each year of the program was approximately 20. This study specifically examined the role of the program up to the 2013-2014 academic school year.

Research Questions

1. What are Early College students' perceptions of their mentoring experiences when serving as mentors to students with disabilities?

2. How does involvement in a mentoring program for students with disabilities affect Early College students' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about students with disabilities?

3. How does involvement in a mentoring program for students with disabilities affect Early College students personally?

Definition of Terms

Early College. "Early College high schools are small schools designed so that students can earn both a high school diploma and an Associate's degree or up to two

years of credit toward a Bachelor's degree," and are designed to offer this education tuition-free to "low-income youth, first-generation college goers, English language learners, students of color, and other young people underrepresented in higher education" (Early College Designs, 2013, Design Features section, para. 1). The purpose of the Early College within this study is for the students to specifically obtain a high school diploma and Associate's Degree tuition-free within 5 years.

Mentoring. The groupings in this study combine traditional one-on-one and group mentoring, where one youth is paired with one older student or a few younger students are paired with a few older students. At a minimum, the mentor and mentee should meet regularly at least 4 hours per month for at least a year. However, there are exceptions to this recommendation, such as in school-based mentoring, which coincide with the school year (Daniel et al., 2006). For this mentoring service-learning project, students are placed at some points one-on-one with specific younger students and can be with the same student for one session in some instances or up to 3 consecutive years in other instances.

Service learning. "Service learning is a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities" (Marshall & Perry, 2010, p. 12).

Special needs and disabilities. In North Carolina, recognized disabilities include Autism Spectrum Disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment including blindness. The

disability must have an adverse effect on educational performance for a student to receive special education services in the public school setting (Exceptional Children, 2010).

Equine-assisted activities and therapies. "Equine-assisted activities are any specific center activity, e.g., therapeutic riding, mounted or ground activities, grooming and stable management, shows, parades, demonstrations, etc., in which the center's clients, participants, volunteers, instructors and equines are involved" (PATH International, 2014, EAAT section, para. 1). "Equine-assisted therapy is treatment that incorporates equine activities and/or the equine environment. Rehabilitative goals are related to the patient's needs and the medical professional's standards of practice" (PATH International, 2014, EAAT section, para. 2).

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is an important part of life for everyone but especially in the lives of adolescents. "This core belief is the foundation of human motivation, well-being, and accomplishments. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties" (Pajares & Urdan, 2006, p. 3).

Therapeutic horseback riding. Usually used in conjunction with other prescribed therapy, "therapeutic horseback riding is generally described as a riding program in which the primary goal is that of rehabilitation rather than the sole teaching of riding skills for recreational purposes" (Kern et al., 2011, p. 14). In addition, "therapeutic riding programs include exercises, games, and activities to be completed while riding" (Lehrman & Ross, 2000, p. 108). Therapy in this form is active treatment with the participant rather than passive treatment (DePauw, 1986).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to better understand the mentoring program experiences for the Early College student mentors who are paired with elementary students with disabilities. The study attempted to gain in-depth knowledge about how participation in the program affected the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions in relationship to the program and toward people with disabilities. The study specifically focused on the impact on Early College students' attitudes toward students with disabilities.

Overview

Mentoring is a long-standing strategy known for its benefits to mentees and is found across many different fields besides education including sports, business, politics, music, fantasy, and even film directing (McLaughlin, 2010). Documented benefits for the mentees can span several domains to include behavioral, social, emotional, and academic gains (Weiler et al., 2013). However, the potential effects, benefits or otherwise, to the mentors involved in these programs are limited at best; although there is promise of important implications from that data (Olson, 2008; Weiler et al., 2013). Fewer still are the studies specifically examining how mentoring programs may affect mentors when they are within the context of service learning, although there is much known about the general benefits to those participants in service learning (Weiler et al., 2013). This study attempted to garner Early College high school students' perceptions of their involvement in a specific mentoring program through service learning, which paired them with elementary students with disabilities. The study particularly examined how that involvement may affect the Early College students' attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and tolerance toward people with disabilities. The literature review begins with research

on service learning, then moves into the current literature on mentoring. Contact Theory is discussed at it relates to the present study. The conceptual framework of the study is shared, along with the literature behind Early College high schools. The literature review includes relevant information about students with disabilities and the attitudes towards them as well as therapeutic horseback riding and sensory programs. The literature review concludes with a synthesis of the findings and a discussion about the need for further research on the topics presented.

Theoretical Framework

  Service learning. A search for the term "service learning" can lead to several important and varying definitions based on the context of the service learning. There are several similar characteristics between all the definitions, however. All service learning requires a marriage between coursework and active engagement in learning in the community setting, in theory making all the learning that is occurring more meaningful for the student (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000; Yorio & Ye, 2012). It is more than isolated service or classroom-based learning.

  It is easy to confuse the term service learning with other community-based learning such as community service or volunteering. However, these activities are not considered within the context of service learning. In order to be true service learning, the activity must integrate the course content with academic skills while leading students to reflect on their activities in order to solve identified problems within the community (Marshall & Perry, 2010). The goal of service learning is to make an impact in the community based the identified needs of the community.

  Service learning may possibly be one of the most historical methods of teaching and learning. With roots in apprenticeships and mentorships, it was recognized for its

benefits early in time. Confucius, an ancient Chinese philosopher, is often quoted as saying, "I see and I forget. I hear and I remember. I do and I understand" (Vaillancourt, 2009, p. 272). American inventor and scientist, Benjamin Franklin, is often credited with, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn" (Benjamin Franklin, 2014, para. 10). Service learning was first coined as a term in the 1700s but its true roots are seen further back in history (The History of Service-Learning, 1998). Service and volunteerism have been greatly honored as communal ethics within the Native American culture from their early history to present and are hailed as great benefits to society (The History of Service-Learning, 1998). Dating back to England in the 16th century, the term service was originally used in the religious sense, while the meaning and definition continued to expand and evolve through time to include service through public works or the military (The History of Service-Learning, 1998).

Volunteer groups in the 1800s were rooted in religion and private organizations, and some of those organizations such as the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army are still active today (The History of Service-Learning, 1998). As volunteering became more popular, so did memberships in these organizations, which led to the creation of new groups in the early 1900s such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, the United Way, Kiwanis, Rotary Club, and the Girl and Boy Scouts of America. Organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and the Peace Corps came later in the 1970s after the War on Poverty and Civil Rights Movement. It was later in the 1990s when service was recognized on a national level that the Corporation for National and Community Service was established. This organization was created to pair Americans with opportunities to give back in their communities and nationally. However, no matter the origin or context of today's definition of service learning, these early ideas of service and volunteerism are

the framework for its foundation (The History of Service-Learning, 1998).

 While definitions of service learning widely vary, Permaul (2009) proposed that the characteristics among all sources remain similar. All service learning combines education with active engagement through staff, students, and community members or organizations. Within North Carolina, as pertinent to this study, there are several strong cases for definitions. Duke University lists its approach to service learning as both a tool for teaching and learning while still integrating community with academics to strengthen the community (Duke Program in Education, 2014). Working collaboratively, Communities in Schools, Learn and Serve School-Based, and the Public Schools of North Carolina State Board of Education Department of Public Instruction define service learning as "a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities" (Marshall & Perry, 2010, p. 12). Many activities are considered active learning or hands-on learning; but in order to be considered actual service learning, activities and programs must additionally meet these certain requirements.

 Service learning is presently categorized into 13 themes as identified through review of the current literature. These include AIDS education and awareness; animal protection and care; elders; emergency readiness; the environment; gardening, healthy lives, healthy choices; hunger, homelessness and poverty; immigrants; literacy; safe and strong communities; social change: issues and action; and special needs and disabilities (Kaye, 2010). Strategies for implementation or demonstration of one or more of these 13 identified themes can include activities such as tutoring, music, art, or technology (Marshall & Perry, 2010). The mentoring program in the current study fits into the

category of service learning within the context of the 13th identified theme, special needs and disabilities, due to the mentorship pairings between students both with and without identified disabilities in the school setting.

In order for service learning to be effective, there is a five-step circular process. This is a continual loop of investigation, preparation and planning, action or implementation, reflection, and demonstration/celebration (Kaye, 2010; Marshall & Perry, 2010). This allows for continuous improvement of the service learning opportunity. In addition to meeting the requirements to be considered true service learning, activities and programs of today can be further clarified into one of four types including direct service, indirect service, advocacy, and research (Kaye, 2010). Regardless of the type of service-learning opportunity, there is sufficient evidence as to its benefits for the participants (Astin et al., 2000).

There are several benefits generally associated with those involved in service learning, whether in the classroom in a school or on a larger level. Focusing on the areas of Early College service-learning hours, there are several benefits in both the school and community setting as well as for the individual student. Astin et al. (2000) reported significant positive effects for students involved in service learning in the areas of academic performance, values, self-efficacy, the choice of career, and the decision to continue service after the service-learning experience. Since students are actively engaged in the community, there is a wealth of community-based benefits, including generally more support from the community in the school system and the students having more of a connection in the community. Within the school setting, students involved in service learning also have more of a connection as well a more positive school environment, improvement in academics, higher order thinking skills, and a tendency to

explore more than one career path before settling on the one most appropriate for him or her. Students also have personal and social growth through service learning (Marshall & Perry, 2010). Proven as a powerful strategy for school reform at all grade levels, service learning connects community work and academic learning in a meaningful way that promotes growth both personally and socially (Kielsmeier, Neal, & Crossley, 2006). According to Kaye (2010), being involved in service learning allows students to apply the skills learned in a way that will improve the community, foster personal success, and develop leadership skills to make important decisions, all while helping others. In addition, service learning is hailed as an effective method to deter students from dropping out of school (Kielsmeier et al., 2006).

The National Drop-out Prevention Center compiled a list of the most effective strategies proven to prevent students from dropping out of high school. Within this list of 15 strategies, both service learning and mentoring appears, with both being praised for their benefits to the students involved personally and academically (Kielsmeier et al., 2006). The Early College students participating in the current study have been involved in this mentoring opportunity through service learning for a period of 1-3 years. This study is rooted in Contact Theory, the idea of intentional pairing of groups of individuals in order to diminish prejudices held by one or more of the groups. The study is also formed through the context of service learning. The information obtained from this study will directly link back to these theories.

Maheu (2009) conducted a qualitative research study where 12 college students were interviewed after the completion of a service-learning experience. Research questions centered on the examination of how these students transformed intellectually in response to their experience. From this study, five major themes emerged in the areas of

interpersonal capabilities and intellectual development and growth. These included

questioning of those in authority or experts, their communication skills and audience,

knowledge of their own perspectives and the contexts of those, how problems are

complex and unstructured in nature, and how service learning can be interpreted globally.

It was concluded that service learning, given the appropriate faculty involvement, does

benefit college students in the area of their own intellect and being more self-aware of

their skills. These conclusions encompassed how these transformations can be larger

than just personal to include global interpretation.

Astin et al. (2000) collected longitudinal data from more than 20,000 college

undergraduates from various national colleges and universities in order to compare the

effects of service learning and better understand how learning is enhanced by this service.

Using multiple standardized test scores, in-depth case studies on several campuses, group

interviews, classroom observations, and pre and posttest measures, this mixed-methods

study assessed 11 different dependent measures. These included academic outcomes,

values, self-efficacy, leadership, career plans and student plans to continue with service

after their higher education experience. In addition to showing greater positive outcomes

from service learning than only community service, all of the 11 measures showed

significant positive effects with the greatest benefits in the area of academics, most

notable in writing. Astin et al. also noted that these findings directly replicated several

other studies with varying samples and different methodologies. A note of interest in this

study was the finding that both qualitative and quantitative data revealed that allowing

students a chance to process or reflect on their experience together in group was a

powerful component to the experience. Overall qualitative outcomes of the service-

learning experiences reported an increase in personal self-efficacy, awareness of the

world, one's personal values, and engagement in the classroom.

Yorio and Ye (2012) conducted a meta-analysis on the effects of service learning in terms of the participants' social, personal, and cognitive outcomes. During input, the researchers chose only quantitative empirical research conducted between the years of 1993 and 2010 that contained enough statistical information to use in computing effects in one of their three variables. This yielded 40 research studies that fit the criteria. Within this research, almost 5,500 subjects were used. Each study was coded into one of three categories, pre-experimental, quasi-experimental, or true experimental. In conclusion, they reported that service learning did positively affect understanding of personal issues and personal insight as well as positively affected cognitive development. In addition, it was concluded that in order for service learning to be the most meaningful for participants, it should have aspects of reality, reciprocity, reflection, and responsibility.

Mentoring. One service-learning activity is the act of mentoring. Mentoring as a societal role can be traced to ancient Greek mythology with historical instances of mentoring throughout the arts and sciences. This study focuses on a mentoring program and its outcomes for the mentors as voiced by the mentor participants. Although the mentoring program is contextually created through the service-learning component, this study could easily be recreated without the service-learning component.

There are various types of identified mentoring groupings, several of which are used within this study's mentoring program. Most often used in this program is group mentoring where small groups of children are mentored by several adults with no more than four children per adult (Daniel et al., 2006). This is particularly used to pair Early College students with the elementary students with less serious disabilities. There is a

group of Early College students paired with a group of elementary students with disabilities for the specific planned activities. Peer mentoring may be the closest category of mentoring that is represented in this program model; however, it is used in this combination with the other models. Peer mentoring is often curriculum-based with the mentor serving as a role model for at least a semester and usually an entire school year (Daniel et al., 2006). In this study, the Early College students work with the elementary students on specific goals as they relate to their Individual Education Plan goals which are either academic, functional, or both. All of the scheduled activities revolve around these goals with a physical therapy component.

Benefits of mentoring to the mentees is a well-studied topic (Herrera, Sipe & McClanahan, 2000; McLaughlin, 2010; Olson, 2008; Weiler et al., 2013). Benefits include improvements in grades, attendance, and family relationships as well as the prevention of drug and alcohol use (Herrera et al., 2000). However, the benefit to the mentors is an area much less researched (Olson, 2008; Weiler et al., 2013). Even scarcer are those studies of mentoring in the context of service learning (Weiler et al., 2013).

A key part in an effective mentoring program is the relationship component between the individuals paired within the context of the program. Herrera et al. (2000) explored relationship developments through mentoring school-aged children in both community-based and school-based programs. Through a combination of telephone surveys of mentoring volunteers and interviews and focus groups with youth and staff from exceptional programs, the researchers compiled the voices of over 1,100 participants representing almost 100 separate mentoring programs. This study documented volunteer experiences and the development of relationships through the mentoring programs. Although both types of mentoring programs reported a bond

between mentors and mentees, Herrera et al. reported that community-based mentors reported a feeling of being closer to their mentees than school-based mentors. This research was conducted based on the presumption that the closer, more supportive mentoring relationships can be, the more likely they are to make a positive impact on the mentees.

Within the Herrera et al. (2000) study, a few key differences in school-based verses community-based mentoring programs were noted. The study found that community-based mentoring programs attracted mentors who were between the ages of younger 20s to older 40s, but school-based mentoring programs attracted mentors of all ages. In addition, school-based programs attracted more minority mentors, while community-based programs attracted more Caucasian mentors. School-based mentoring was less expensive to run but also limited the number of contact hours between the mentors and mentees, unlike community-based mentoring. School-based programs tended to serve more students who were identified at-risk academically, and thus targeted school success during the mentoring sessions. Community-based programs tended to pair same-gendered individuals with similar interests, possibly contributing to the greater degree of bond between mentors and mentees reported from this setting.

Olson (2008) explored mentoring as a source of growth for mentor teachers through a quantitative and qualitative analysis using explanatory research design, the follow-up explanations model. Within this context, quantitative data included written surveys as the main source of data with a focus group to add depth to the survey findings. This study particularly examined the impact this mentoring opportunity had on those participants' socialization, task development, and lifespan development. After a mentoring workshop, over 100 respondents completed the written survey. After the

surveys and interviews were analyzed, it was concluded that the mentors reported positive socialization with their mentees and students. In addition, there was a direct correlation to amount of teaching experience and the influence of the participants' mentoring experience on responsiveness to colleagues, community recognition of contributions, and comfort working with students of various backgrounds. There was only a slightly positive influence reported from the mentoring experience on task development.

Weiler et al. (2013) studied the benefits derived by college students from mentoring at-risk youth. This study is important to the current study because the mentoring program examined was constructed through the context of service learning. The researchers in this study praised the use of service learning for promoting civic-mindedness among college students, although stated that little is known about the benefits from specific service-learning opportunities such as mentoring. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of mentoring on student mentors in college while they were enrolled in a service-learning course. The study was specifically interested in the effects of the program on civic-mindedness. This study investigated the effects of mentoring within the Campus Corps program which provides therapeutic mentoring to at-risk youth. It is a 12-week structured mentoring design.

In this quasi-experimental research design, 648 participants contributed to data with approximately half being enrolled in the mentoring program, while the other half made up the control group. These participants were recruited via email at the beginning of each semester. These participants responded to a survey via surveymonkey.com before the mentoring program began and again at its conclusion. Information about the participants was obtained through a self-report. The Civic Attitudes Scale was used to

gain information about civic attitude while the Community Service Self-Efficacy Scale was used to gauge each individual in that area. Rosenburg's Self-Esteem Scale was used as well as the Civic Attitudes and Skills Questionnaire. These data were analyzed using *t* tests for each variable. Correlation coefficients were used to determine relationships between variables. Then, linear regression models determined significance between the intervention and control groups.

Results of this study indicated that students involved in this mentoring opportunity did have significantly higher scores than students who did not participate in this opportunity in the areas of civic mindedness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, political awareness, and problem-solving skills. The results indicated that the findings from this study were consistent with prior research conducted also evaluating specific service-learning models, whether or not those specific models of service learning were mentoring models. The researchers also generalized those findings to the pedagogical value of service learning in the domains of student academics, socioemotional, and identity.

Contact Theory. Allport (1954) first coined the term "Contact Theory." This same theory has been called Contact Theory Hypothesis, Intergroup Contact Theory, Extended Inter-group Contact Hypothesis, or a combination of those terms and is researched in a vast array of scenarios (Cameron et al., 2011; Mazziotta et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013). No matter the specific term used, the premises behind the theory remain the same. Contact Theory is an extension of Social-Cognitive Theory. Contact Theory pairs different groups of individuals through direct contact as a method to improve the groups' relationships. As individuals spend time together, they learn more about each other and realize their similarities while differences fade (Kaye, 2010). Rodenborg and

Boisen (2013) discussed the continued segregation in the United States and proposed how aversive racism and intergroup Contact Theory could play a role in cultural competence.

Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) compiled a meta-analytic test of Intergroup Contact Theory using 713 independent samples from 515 studies. At that time, it was hypothesized that Contact Theory could go beyond racial and ethnic encounters to include other minority groups. Criteria for inclusion in this research included the need for face-to-face personal contact between the participants. The random effects model was used for the analysis of data. The result of this analysis was a direct inverse correlation between intergroup contact and prejudice. The main idea taken from this study is that instead of focusing on behaviors or interventions that would further reduce prejudices, it may benefit future research to focus on negative behaviors that fail in reducing prejudices through intergroup contacts.

Since that meta-analysis, Contact Theory has been researched more in depth to include various other groups of individuals and even though these new extensions of the theory are still in their infancy, it promises to be an impactful area of study (Cameron et al., 2011; Mazziotta et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013). To date, Contact Theory has been proven effective in various scenarios with specific positive results in each, such as ethnic groups (Cameron et al., 2011), people with disabilities (Novak et al., 2011), racism (Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013), and transgendered individuals as well as adults and children (Cameron et al., 2011). In each of these studies, there were notable positive changes in attitudes toward those with differences. Part of the current study examined how structured exposure with students with disabilities through a mentoring program affects Early College high school students' tolerance towards individuals with disabilities. It is an area

that will no doubt continue to be researched while Contact Theory continues to develop over time.

Cameron et al. (2010) further added to the literature on Contact Theory through the first quasi-experimental method of research examining the role of high-quality direct contact as well as group norms when developing positive intergroup attitudes among children of different ethnicities. This study examined two different types of direct contact, both close friendships and acquaintances. One hundred and fifty-three Caucasian students, aged 6 to 11, from nine different elementary schools were involved in either a control group (no intervention) or assigned to one of two other groups who were read-aloud social stories. The other two groups were read stories with varying degrees of contact and characteristics between the characters of different ethnicities. These students were then assessed with a measurement tool to gauge how likely they would be to show friendship to a student in a different group on a future occasion. The assessment used simple questions and the use of emotion faces to rank student answers. Regression analysis revealed a main effect of high-quality group contact associated with significantly more positive intended behaviors from the students who were given the social story intervention. This research study added to the literature by being one of the first studies examining children and exploring both the when and why extended contact works among them.

Novak et al. (2011) reported that relationships with others are directly tied to one's sense of happiness and quality of life, which is the premise for social inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace. This study collected data on 22 employees with disabilities through interviews and jobsite observations to contribute to the literature on Contact Theory. Through these interviews, it was discovered that coworkers of these

individuals with disabilities had a more general acceptance of the individual after he or she had time to get to know the individual, when that individual worked as an equal, and when the employer fostered equality in the workplace.

Conceptual Framework

When planning this study, several factors about the model of the program as well as the unidentified effects as outcomes were taken into consideration. Under the umbrella of service learning, the mentoring program's structure, participants, and components left several areas that were unknown or vague such as the benefits to the mentors or specifics about the mentor/mentee relationship. The graphic organizer used during this planning process follows.

Service-Learning Instructional Model
↓
Mentoring Program
↙ ↓ ↘
Structure   Participants   Components

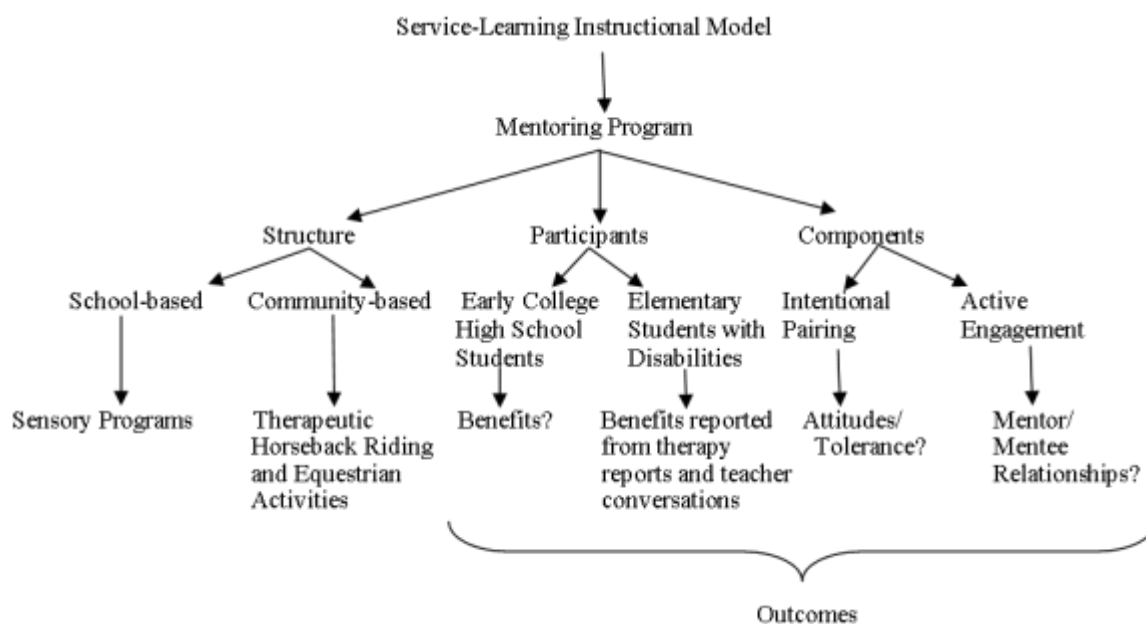| Structure		Participants		Components	
School-based	Community-based	Early College High School Students	Elementary Students with Disabilities	Intentional Pairing	Active Engagement
↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Sensory Programs	Therapeutic Horseback Riding and Equestrian Activities	Benefits?	Benefits reported from therapy reports and teacher conversations	Attitudes/ Tolerance?	Mentor/ Mentee Relationships?

Outcomes

Figure 1. Study Planning Graphic Organizer.

Although the benefits to the elementary students with disabilities were not a part of this current study, from casual conversations with the therapeutic horseback riding staff, elementary special education teachers, and therapists, there was a consensus as to

its advantages. These individuals generally reported that the elementary students with disabilities have benefited from the mentoring program and continue to benefit in the areas of relationships, communication, and behavior. Upon viewing physical therapy data and progress notes, there is also documented evidence that these elementary students benefit from the therapeutic horseback riding and sensory programs physically, gaining muscle strength, coordination, and proprioceptive skills more quickly than without these programs. Although it is presumed that after completion of the mentoring program the Early College students could potentially be affected, the specific themes as to the areas affected cannot be known until their voices are heard. This can be measured through interviews with specific questions related to their relationships and to their attitudes toward students with disabilities. With roots in service learning, mentoring, and in Contact Theory, this study may prove impactful in several ways.

Early College. Early College high school is a national innovative model of school reform initially funded from The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that offers an alternative to traditional high schools by pairing high school and college coursework. Early College high schools are a unique alternative to traditional high schools. Housed on campus at community colleges or technical higher education institutions at most locations, these schools are smaller in student population and are designed for the students to earn both their high school diploma and an Associate's degree (or equivalent college transfer hours) within the 5 years of coursework, tuition-free. The Bill and Melinda Gates foundation first launched the idea of the Early College high school in 2002 as a strategy for promoting higher education to underprivileged students. The next year, in 2003, the Cooperative Innovative High School programs statute of the Innovative Education Initiatives Act was first passed and encouraged high schools to be models of

reform in the American educational system. A part of this calling to reform was the purposeful pairing of high schools within postsecondary institutions to target those students who may be at risk of dropping out otherwise. One such specific program promising to achieve this goal was the Early College high school (Early College Design Services, 2012).

Students involved in the Early College high school program graduate with a high school diploma in addition to an Associate's degree or equivalent college hours at the end of a 5-year period. This education is offered free to the enrolled students and selection of students is based on several factors. Working through public and private partnerships, the goal in each of the national Early College high school programs is to target students who are at risk of dropping out (Early College Design Services, 2012).

In the Early College high school models today, enrollment is open to any student residing within the parameters of a specific Early College program location, usually the same school district, who are in the appropriate age and grade-level limits of the program. However, the focus of enrollment is students who are low-income, first-generation college students, have limited English proficiency, are of a minority race, or any other student who may be underrepresented in higher education (Early College Design Services, 2012). In order to be considered for admission into most Early College high school programs, students wishing to attend must fill out an application, submit an essay, and have at least two different letters of recommendation from current or previous teachers.

In North Carolina and in most sites nationally, Early College high school programs are housed on campus at local community colleges so that students can simultaneously enroll in both high school and college courses. Although goals of the

programs only slightly vary, the specific mission and vision of the Early College high school participants in this study are unique. From casual conversations with these Early College high school students and their instructors, it is reported that their particular mission and vision include student embracement of their individual learning styles in order for those students to play a lead role in preparing themselves for college, career, and life. There is a focus on technology and innovation throughout a nurturing environment.

A part of many Early College high schools is the specific requirement of a service-learning component, as is the case of the Early College high school involved in this study. These local Early College high school students, the participants in this study, must complete 150 service-learning hours within the course of their enrollment in the school. Of these, 50 hours are required in the school, 50 in the community, and 50 of the student's choice. The students involved in this specific study are completing service-learning hours through a school and community-based mentoring program for elementary students with disabilities in the self-contained classroom setting. Since the Early College is one strategy in North Carolina used to prevent students from dropping out of high school, it makes sense to incorporate other strategies that have also been proven to reduce the drop-out rate: service learning and mentoring.

Berger et al. (2013) studied the impact of Early College high schools on student outcomes for those completing the program. Research questions specifically targeted student outcomes as they would have differed from another high school and whether these outcomes differed based on student characteristics such as gender and family economics. To obtain participants for this study, the researchers used the lottery process that some Early College high schools use to offer student enrollment. By obtaining these

lists from 10 Early College high schools, the researchers were able to identify students who were offered enrollment in these schools and those also in the lottery process who were not offered enrollment. From these sample students, administrative records and data from the National Student Clearinghouse were obtained and these students were asked to complete a survey. Specific outcomes examined through records were high school graduation, enrollment in college, and college degree completion. Outcomes measured through the survey were high school and college experiences and course/credit completions between high school and college graduation. There were several areas of impact concluded from this study.

Berger et al. (2013) reported from their study that the high school graduation rate was high among both the high school students who entered the lottery process but were not offered enrollment in an Early College high school and those who were offered enrollment. However, with a 5% difference, those students in the Early College setting had a significantly higher rate of high school graduation than the students in the comparison group. The Early College high school students were also more likely than their comparison group to enter college after graduation and obtain a college degree. This study provides strong evidence of the positive impact of Early College programs on student outcomes.

Students with special needs and disabilities. In the United States, the federal law for educating individuals with disabilities is IDEA. Disabilities recognized under this law include Autism Spectrum Disorder, deaf-blindness, deafness, developmental delay, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment, including

blindness. Under IDEA, individual states are given the freedom to specifically define these disabilities further to determine who is eligible for special education and related services within that state. However, in addition to the positive determination of a student having a disability, in order to receive these educational services, there must also be a determination by the child's team that the child's educational performance is adversely affected because of the identified disability (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2013). Once a child has been given the determination for services, their educational team must determine the least restrictive educational placement for the child to receive services. According to the latest revision of IDEA in 2004, in each case of least restrictive environment options, the regular education classroom is considered first, with or without accommodations or modifications, with the continuum of services progressing from resource, self-contained and hospital or homebound placement. Special needs and disabilities is one of the currently recognized themes of active service learning. This is recognized as a need since students with special educational needs and/or disabilities are at an increased risk for bullying due to their vulnerability and negative attitudes displayed by others toward people with disabilities (McLaughlin, Byers & Vaughn, 2010).

Grames and Leverentz (2010) completed a study to compare attitudes toward people with specific disabilities. The purpose of this study was to compare the attitudes of American college students and Chinese international college students living in the United States towards people with disabilities. In addition to completing the Attitudes toward Persons with Disabilities Scale, 138 participants also completed a Q-sort. During this Q-sort, participants were asked to rank cards displaying varying disabilities and severities in order of the participants' preferences after being read about a hypothetical

mentoring program for people with disabilities. Grames and Leverentz reported that the American students had more contact with people with disabilities than the Chinese, so this was a variable accounted for during data analysis. As a result of this study, it was concluded that the Chinese students held more favorable attitudes towards people with disabilities and there were significant differences in the types of disabilities categorized through this study. Congenital physical disabilities were more accepted by the Chinese participants, while psychiatric disabilities were more accepted by the American participants. The Attitudes toward Persons with Disabilities Scale is one of the most used quantitative research tools to study this area of interest, while other scales are also gaining popularity.

Pruett, Lee, Chan, Wang, and Lane (2008) completed research to study the dimensionality of the Contact with Disabled Persons Scale and how this scale could possibly be used to measure attitudes. The researchers explained how intergroup contact is used as a primary strategy for reducing intergroup prejudice. The Contact with Disabled Persons Scale was designed to measure contact, although the researchers hypothesized that the scale may, in fact, measure more than one dimension of contact. For this research, 552 participants from other attitude research projects were pooled. This group was split into half, with one half used for exploratory factor analysis and the other for confirmatory factor analysis. Three separate factors for contact were configured including general interpersonal contacts, positive contact experiences, and negative contact experiences. These were presented as a revised three-factor Contact with Disabled Persons Scale in which these factors were analyzed along with attitudinal measures. In conclusion, Pruett et al. determined that the general and positive factors of the scale were not related to social desirability but rather to attitudes. The relationship

between those measures was closely related to attitudinal scales. However, the negative

factor of the revised three-factor Contact with Disabled Persons Scale proved to be an

effective measure of whether an individual responded in the socially desirable manner.

      The inclusion of students with special needs into general education classrooms

has long been studied as a way for those students to be accepted within the school and by

their peers, although it is still a highly debated topic as some believe when students need

intensive and direct services for medical, behavioral, or academic needs, an inclusion

setting is not always appropriate (Rotatori et al., 2011). However, even when the degree

of disability is so severe that students are placed into a self-contained program, there may

be benefits to exposure in the general student population as much as possible, specifically

in both academic and social areas (Katz & Mirenda, 2002). It is also argued that full

inclusion, regardless of ability, is a basic social justice and right of equality (Obiakor,

Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). One way to do this is to intentionally pair

students together for a mentoring program. Attitudes peers have toward students with

disabilities are often negative, and it makes the barrier of social inclusion much harder

when students are away from their general education peers (Brown, Ouellette-Kuntz,

Lysaght, & Burge, 2011). It has been reported that students with disabilities are at an

increased risk of bullying, especially those with mild disabilities; and a key factor in

reducing this risk is appropriate social skills, social opportunities, and communication

(McLaughlin et al., 2010). Sometimes students cannot determine the difference in

disabilities specifically but will report whether another student has a disability or is

"normal." One of the most effective ways to combat these negativities is for peers to be

exposed to students with disabilities on a regular basis while adults in the situation

proactively develop these relationships among peers (McLaughlin et al., 2010).

Intentional pairing of students between classrooms and often grade levels is one way to be proactive in this area.

Special needs and disabilities is one of the 13 current identified themes of active service learning. Kaye (2010) explained that service learning in this area can take several different forms including advocating, lobbying, direct service, or donations. Within the current study, the Early College high school students will experience active service learning through direct service to students with disabilities and special needs.

With federal and state mandates demanding high student success and frequent measures of this success including benchmark assessments, measures of student learning, and end of grade testing, there is a contingency of people who strongly disagree that all students with special needs can be fairly included in this high-stakes testing, even with accommodations (Morrison, 2000). Faced with the reality that students must be given all necessary tools for success in an academic and social world, parents, researchers, medical professionals, teachers, and therapists are led to constantly search for solutions to ease the symptoms for these children. In addition, due to a shift in societal norms in the recent years, students with disabilities today may receive less structure and support in the home setting than ever before and may be at an increased risk for abuse and neglect (Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003).

Continuing research in the United States population and students with disabilities indicates an increasing chance today that a child will be diagnosed as having a disability in his or her lifetime, specifically in the areas of developmental delays, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or Autism (Boyle et al., 2011). In 2010, the United States Census Bureau reported 18.7% of the United States civilian population as having a disability (Brault, 2012). In the area of Autism alone, it is suggested that it could now affect as

many as one in every 100 children, over 20 times higher than first predicted by researchers in the 1960s and increasing at a rate higher than almost every other diagnosis category (Allen, Robins, & Decker, 2008). As the prevalence of disabilities continues to grow, so does the attention it is receiving from the national population (Allen et al., 2008). Today's educational setting pushes all students for success in school and society, making adjustments to the school setting difficult. With such symptoms as resistance to change and lower academic functioning, students with disabilities are no exception. While the IDEA law requires that all students have access to education, this does not mean that these students are automatically accepted by their peers or other students, making tolerance and acceptance one more barrier to their learning progress.

Therapeutic horseback riding and sensory programs. Therapeutic horseback riding is an increasingly popular form of therapy that incorporates physical movements, communication, and personal connections (Drnach, O'Brien, & Kreger, 2010). Even though Chassigne of Paris first reported the study of therapeutic riding in 1875, with references to its use over a century before, only recently has therapeutic riding been considered newsworthy (DePauw, 1986). Several studies have been completed within the past decade to suggest that therapeutic horseback riding may have a positive effect on children with disabilities, specifically Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Cuypers, De Ridder, & Strandheim, 2011), Cerebral Palsy (Drnach et al., 2010) and Autism (Bass, Duchowny, & Llabre, 2009).

Bracher (2000) noted the benefits of using therapeutic horseback riding as occupational therapy for students with disabilities. Accessibility and physiological benefits were noted along with gains in the areas of perception, cognition, behavior, emotion, and socialization following horseback riding programs. Bracher (2000) further

suggested that therapeutic riding can be used for people with disabilities to expand their personal recreational hobbies and it may even have "an impact on aspects of the rider's general function, such as improvement in sensorimotor and cognitive skills, development of social skills, adaptation to others, improved self-esteem and trust" (p. 278). Since the umbrella of the term disability is so broad, students with disabilities encompasses a collective group of students as a whole with characteristics that are wide and varied. The current literature suggested continued research is needed to refine benefits in relationship to specific disabilities as well as specific targeted areas of difficulties within those disabilities. This continued research will make important contributions in the fields of education and medicine.

Sensory learning programs are a unique approach for students with various disabilities, most notably in the areas of Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. It is a combination of auditory, visual and vestibular activities used in order to improve the ability to learn. The focus of a sensory learning program is to offer activities that promote student engagement that can be used later in the classroom to facilitate learning in the form of self-awareness and self-regulation.

Need for Further Research

There are several documented benefits of mentoring to the mentees (Herrera et al., 2000; McLaughlin, 2010; Olson, 2008; Weiler et al., 2013); but the potential effects, including benefits, to the mentors involved in these programs are less known but hold the promise of important implications (Olson, 2008; Weiler et al., 2013). Even scarcer are those studies of mentoring in the context of service learning (Weiler et al., 2013). Contact Theory as it extends beyond race is still in its infancy but is now being

researched more in depth to include various groups of individuals because of it promises to be an impactful area of study (Cameron et al., 2011; Mazziotta et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013). Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) recommended focusing on behaviors that reduce prejudices while also focusing attention on the negative behaviors that fail in reducing those prejudices.

Based on the literature, service learning is an effective strategy for keeping students engaged in the curriculum and can add to the overall value of a program. There is limited data on specific service-learning programs such as mentoring, although this is an area of interest in education. Mentoring is a long-standing approach to target behavioral or academic concerns of students with benefits to the mentees in several domains. The benefits to the involved mentors are less well known.

Early College high schools are a recent innovation in public education and offer much promise in decreasing the drop-out rate among disadvantaged students and increasing their attainment of higher education credits or a higher education degree. There are specific benefits of this program on those enrolled. A part of some Early College high schools is the service-learning component. Based on the review of the literature, it can be concluded that service learning can be an effective instructional practice for all students, including those in the Early College high school setting. This study investigated this service-learning component.

People with disabilities continue to face negative attitudes and prejudices in American schools and society. Contact Theory, the intentional pairing of dislike groups for the purpose of decreasing prejudices, is still being researched as to its implications for dislike groupings beyond race but may be promising for its role in people with

disabilities. Researching a mentoring program pairing Early College high school students and elementary students with disabilities within the context of service learning may offer insight into its implications for tolerance, attitudes, and behaviors.

Furthermore, within the scope of service learning, there can be specific programs that may prove more beneficial than others. Of these, a mentoring program may show benefits beyond those to the mentees and actually include benefits to the mentors. Through casual conversations and therapy reports, there was evidence of the mentoring program being of benefit to the elementary students with disabilities as the mentees. Possible outcomes of this pairing on the Early College high school students were identified based on participant voices.

Self-efficacy has been a widely studied topic on all age groups of students. More studies have been completed on adolescents and teenagers than any other age group. It has been suggested that having service-learning opportunities may increase self-efficacy in students. It has also been reported that being involved as a mentor to a younger student may also positively impact self-efficacy. This was a theme additionally identified from the interviews.

Contact Theory, or the intentional pairing of two different groups of individuals, has contributed to literature promoting the benefits of such pairing on tolerance and attitudes, especially the decrease in prejudices. Since the Early College high school students had limited previous association with people with disabilities and they were paired for a significant amount of time with these individuals, an increase in tolerance toward or positive attitudes toward people with disabilities was an identified theme from the interviews. At its conclusion, this study led to additional knowledge about service learning, mentoring, and Contact Theory.

Research Questions

1. What are Early College students' perceptions of their mentoring experiences when serving as mentors to students with disabilities?

2. How does involvement in a mentoring program for students with disabilities affect Early College students' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about students with disabilities?

3. How does involvement in a mentoring program for students with disabilities affect Early College students personally?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively examine, through phenomenological research, Early College high school students' perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and beliefs in relationship to their involvement in a mentoring program with elementary-aged students with disabilities. This study sought to determine the Early College students' perceptions of their common mentoring experience; how involvement affected their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs; and how their tolerance toward people with disabilities may be affected. This information was gathered through individual interviews with the Early College students who served as mentors to elementary students with disabilities. After transcription by the researcher, this information was coded using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software and analyzed for common trends. From this study, information was added to the literature on mentoring programs and their role in affecting mentors.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative inquiry has become more common in research due to its possibility of world-wide impact, while a complete and concise definition is difficult to locate (Creswell, 2007). Although sources debate the exact components of qualitative research, there are several similarities among the identified key components.

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data analysis that is inductive and established patterns and themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of

participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and

interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for

action. (Creswell, 2007, p. 37)

"Qualitative research involves any research that uses data that do not indicate ordinal

values" (Nkwi, Nyamongo, & Ryan, 2001, p. 1). It also "involves collecting and/or

working with text, images, or sounds" and "allows for the inclusion of many different

kinds of data collection and analysis techniques, as well as the diversity of theoretical and

epistemological frameworks" (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 3). At its conclusion,

this study added to the literature of Contact Theory and service learning.

Creswell (2013), a leader in research design and a well-known resource

specifically in qualitative and mixed-method research, proposed that qualitative research

is appropriate when there is an issue that requires further exploration. "This exploration,

is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables

that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices" (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Since

there is limited data on mentoring effects in terms of the mentor and important

information can be deemed best from first-hand accounts, it was appropriate within this

study to use qualitative data in order to examine perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes within

this service-learning context. Since these personal values cannot be easily measured with

quantitative research, qualitative measurement must be used to extract the most

significant of information from the participants. Phenomenology is one of only a few

"prevailing traditions in qualitative inquiry" (Guest et al., 2013, p. 2) and also one of the

most commonly used.

Phenomenology

The phenomenological approach to qualitative research "describes the common

meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Phenomenology focuses specifically on "individual experiences, beliefs, and perceptions" (Guest et al., 2013, p. 8) through the use of observations and questions, including in-depth interviews. The aim of this is "drawing out individual experiences and perceptions" (Guest et al., 2013, p. 8). Further, the phenomenological approach within qualitative research is appropriate when everyone with a group of individuals shared a common experience and a common essence of the experience needs to be described (Creswell, 2013), which was the purpose of this research.

Moustakas's (1994) approach is one of the leading methods for conducting phenomenological research. The first major step in the process is to determine if the problem stated within the study is best studied through phenomenology. This component already has been addressed within this chapter; and it was determined that a phenomenological approach would be the only way to gather information about what was to be explored within this study, including how important the understanding of Early College students' perceptions was to an overall deeper understanding of the effects of the mentoring program. Personal accounts with mentoring and the information obtained through the participants about their shared phenomenon (e.g., the mentoring experience) are too multifaceted to study with quantitative data.

Within Moustakas's (1994) approach, it is also required that the researcher recognize the philosophical assumptions related to phenomenology (Creswell, 2013), including bracketing from the researcher. This step in the process is further clarified in the "role as a researcher" section of this chapter. The remainder of the sequence includes data collection from those individuals who have experienced the common phenomenon through the asking of two (or more depending on the research) open-ended questions,

coding their responses, and writing a description of their experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Role as a Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher is used as the main instrument in data collection. This is an important, while highly sensitive, role to balance. Within phenomenological qualitative research, Creswell (2007) required acknowledgement of past experiences and bracketing (thoughtful consideration of biases, assumptions, expectations, experiences, qualifications) of these experiences within the context of this study. Bracketing also entails the researcher to suspend his or her own understandings in order to more curiously explore a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). As a special education teacher who has worked within the field of education for the past 13 years, the researcher has seen first-hand the benefits of mentoring programs to the mentees. However, the researcher has no experience or personal context of mentoring as it affects the mentor.

Although never serving in a mentor role, the researcher has been a mentee within a beginning teacher program in the public educational system. Being one of the special education teachers of the elementary students within this study, the researcher has witnessed a unique relationship evolve between the mentors and mentees. The mentors appeared more fluid in their roles as the sessions progressed. However, until the Early College high school student mentors were encouraged to share their stories, the researcher had limited knowledge of the effect of this mentoring program on the mentor.

The researcher's role in this study was to encourage the Early College high school student participants to share their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and beliefs of the mentoring program in detail in order to further examine common themes of their experience. Being both the researcher and a teacher within this context, it was even more important to set aside all beliefs associated with this mentoring program; as researcher

bias can skew results of a study, especially in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). It was the researcher's objective to refrain from biases toward any aspects of the mentoring program and be objective in the researcher's role. The researcher was present during each mentoring session as an observer. In addition, the researcher's role in this study was a mixture of emic (outsider) and etic (insider). Although not directly involved in the mentoring, the researcher was a present individual within the program as a direct service provider to the elementary students with disabilities.

Biases. Due to the researcher's background with children and adults with disabilities, there is a strong bias toward those individuals achieving in school and society. The researcher is an advocate for the inclusion of people with disabilities into mainstream education and society and has been active in this passion for several years. Within this study, all of the students with disabilities are fully included, so it is not expected that this bias had any significance in the role as a researcher. Due to the researcher's personal background of poverty and being a first-generation high school graduate and college student, there was a feeling of commonality and personal identification with the Early College high school students, as the mission of this type of school is to recruit students with those similar backgrounds. The researcher reports a bias toward students coming from a background of poverty or other types of disadvantages to succeed. Since all of the Early College high school students are currently on track to graduate and are in good academic standing to be involved in the mentoring program, it is not expected that this bias had significance in this study or on the role as a researcher.

Assumptions. It is the researcher's assumption that the Early College students, prior to active participation in the mentoring program, lacked a sufficient background in students with disabilities. Some of the Early College students did have a background in

horseback riding but not in the therapy aspect as used in this mentoring model. The Early

College students, it is also assumed, were not knowledgeable about sensory tasks and

their role in teaching students with disabilities. It was assumed that beyond the

mentoring program, the Early College students and the elementary students had no other

relationship outside of this setting.

Expectations. The researcher had several expectations of the Early College

students involved in the mentoring program. It was expected that throughout the

mentoring sessions, the Early College students would be actively engaged with the tasks

and with the elementary students. The Early College students were expected to act

professionally while maintaining a positive attitude. There was an expectation that if

concerns or issues arose, the Early College students would make staff aware and allow

the staff to handle the issues professionally and effectively. There was also an

expectation of commitment to the program through attendance.

Personally, the researcher expected to gain knowledge of qualitative study,

specifically in the area of phenomenology, throughout this research process. There was

an expectation to gain a deeper understanding of the role mentoring plays to the mentors

involved. It was also an expectation to gain understanding of how a specific mentoring

program connecting people with disabilities with nondisabled individuals could

potentially affect their relationship, including an increase in tolerance toward people with

disabilities.

Experiences. Having no prior experience with the Early College setting or long-

term mentoring programs, the researcher had limited knowledge about either of these

contexts within the current study. However, the researcher did have a similar background

as most of the Early College students, such as a childhood within poverty and being a

first generation high school graduate and college attender. As a special education teacher, the researcher has a significant amount of experience working with students of all ages as well as adults with disabilities. The researcher has been active in the mentoring program throughout the past 3 years in the role of one of the special education teachers. The only contribution toward this mentoring program that the researcher made personally was in the scheduling of the sessions.

Qualifications. The researcher has been working with students with disabilities for 13 years in the form of a group home habilitation technician and medical technician, summer camp counselor, and teacher. During this time, the researcher completed a bachelor's degree of science at an accredited university in special education, general curriculum, with a minor in psychology. The researcher has a master's degree in special education with concentrations in emotional and behavioral disorders and learning disabilities. The researcher has an educational specialist degree in higher education with concentrations in adult education and developmental education. The researcher has completed coursework for an educational doctorate degree in curriculum and instruction with a focus in teaching. The researcher has completed several courses in action research, statistics, and analysis. In addition, the researcher took part in an online workshop for the use of the ATLAS.ti software program.

The Common Phenomenon

The mentoring program within this study was the shared phenomenon among all of the Early College high school mentoring program participants. This study took place in a rural town in western North Carolina. This yearly mentoring program has been active for the past 3 school years with the Early College students mentoring for 1, 2, or 3 consecutive years. Twenty Early College high school students were involved in the

mentoring program during the 2013-2014 academic school year. Interviews were conducted at the conclusion of the program to gain information about the attitudes, perceptions, feelings, and beliefs of those Early College high school students who had been involved in the program for 1, 2 or 3 consecutive years.

At the conclusion of the last spring therapy session, the Early College students voluntarily participated in individual interviews to report on their experiences during this mentoring opportunity. The interviews specifically related to the effect the program had on the Early College students, if any, whether negative, positive, or neutral. Questions examined the areas of Early College student attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about their experience and tolerance toward people with disabilities. The results were analyzed for trends to identify top specific themes which are reported in Chapter 4 and offer insight into future research.

There have been many claims as to various gains made by peer students in mentoring programs as well as high school students mentoring younger elementary students. However, there is little research extended to include how older students may be affected when working within a structured program with students with varying special needs. Garnering of perspectives of the Early College high school participants occurred through interviews and their voices as well as the ATLAS.ti data analysis to identify common themes throughout their responses. This research may be used to decide if a similar mentoring program would continue to be valuable in this setting and may be considered beneficial in other settings, both in the school and community. There is a need for continued research in this area so data can be compared and findings further validated.

Therapeutic horseback riding. The fall and some spring weekly therapy

sessions are conducted at the therapeutic horseback riding stables in the community for a 6-week program each fall and a 6-week program each spring. During these mentoring sessions, there is a devotion of 30 minutes to actual therapy riding in combination with 30 minutes each of barn chores, a grooming routine, and mentor-led academic session. This therapy is provided during the school day with accompanying teachers, physical therapists, and assistants. The riding stables provide certified therapeutic horseback riding instructors, assistants, and volunteers. The elementary students are transported to the therapy stables and provided the therapy free of charge to parents or their insurance carrier, following private and local donations to the therapy center for the program.

Responsibilities for the Early College students during these sessions include traveling with their assigned students to the various therapy stations, supervision and safety of the students, and active engagement with the elementary students while they are present at the therapy session. The Early College students are not responsible for behavioral, medical, or toileting issues. The researcher was present for these sessions over the past 3 years.

Sensory program. Therapy sessions in the spring again paired Early College students with their elementary mentee for an additional 6-week period. These sessions took place at the elementary school and utilized space within the self-contained classrooms and other spaces in the school within close proximity to the classrooms. Each space hosted a separate therapy activity designed by the physical therapist and assistant for a total of four separate stations. These included a 2-hour rotation schedule for the mentors and students between four separate classrooms for activities. Those activities were dance, yoga, a vestibular/proprioceptive station, and a tactile/deep pressure station with a 15-20 minute timeframe at each station. This therapy was also provided during the

school day with the support of teachers, a physical therapist, and assistants. The researcher was present for these sessions over the past 3 years.

These sessions were led by several Early College students with support from the therapists and teachers. The Early College students' role in the spring sensory program included running a therapy session on a rotation where the elementary students rotated with a group between the stations approximately every 30 minutes. The Early College students were responsible for the setup of their assigned therapy station and active engagement with the students while the sessions were in progress, including general supervision and safety. They were not responsible for behavioral, medical, or toileting issues that may have arisen during the sessions.

Therefore, throughout a single academic year in the program, the Early College students and the elementary students were structurally paired for the mentoring program for a minimum of 18 sessions. The Early College students were also invited to school functions that relate to the elementary students (e.g., Thanksgiving luncheon, PTO play), but these meetings were completely voluntary and not part of the structured mentoring program.

Participants

Creswell (2013) identified the first steps in data collection as locating individuals to serve as participants and gaining access to these individuals while making rapport. In addition, it is recommended that for the most in-depth data of a common phenomenon, researchers should interview five to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 1013; Polkinghorne, 1989). The participants selected to participate in the interview process were those Early College high school students currently involved in the mentoring program. All current Early College high school

student mentors were invited to be participants in the interview at the end of the 2013-2014 school year. There were 20 initial contacts for requests of interviews so that the required five to 25 participants could be interviewed. Twelve of those students agreed to be participants within the study and completed the interview process. For the purposes of reporting data, these participants were given random pseudonyms.

Creswell (2013) recommended purposefully sampling of the participants. Since this mentoring program was completely functional before the study, the participants were already involved in the context of the mentoring program before the study began. Since all participants were invited to participate in the study, there was no need to purposefully select a sample of those participants. Since all of the Early College high school students have experienced the same phenomenon to be studied, the mentoring program, and the number of these students is not large in number, it was acceptable for them all to be invited to participate in the research. The researcher had natural access to these individuals due to being involved in the mentoring program schedule. The researcher had already developed a positive professional rapport with those involved in the mentoring program. The researcher further clarified the participants according to age (under 18 or over) and gender as well as the length of time they served as a mentor.

Early College student mentors. The Early College students were enrolled through the local technical community college in a hybrid high school and community college program. The purpose of this program is for students to obtain both a high school diploma and an Associate's Degree at the conclusion of their 5-year study within the Early College program. These students were selected for the program based on several criteria including academics and personal characteristics. These students range in age from 14 to 19.

A major component of the Early College curriculum is active service learning. All of the required hours must be documented separately for each visit to an organization and include a description and supervisor signature. This documentation must be submitted and approved prior to graduation. The hours the Early College students participated in this mentoring program could be counted toward their service hours for graduation. The Early College students were not required to participate in this specific mentoring opportunity, but any student who was interested could attend. Their participation was completely voluntary. Additionally, participation in this study was also voluntary, and failure to participate in the study did not impact their acceptance into the mentoring opportunity. These students were not compensated for their additional time or participation in this study. Early College students had the option for discontinuing the mentoring project at any time but could remain in the program for up to 3 consecutive years or longer if they continued to participate after this study. All Early College students who have voluntarily been involved in this mentoring experience were invited to participate in this study.

Elementary student mentees. The students with disabilities were in a separate classroom setting within the elementary school but represented the entire elementary self-contained population of the school district. All students within the self-contained classrooms were invited to participate in the therapy, with no additional benefits being offered for participation. The therapy was offered free of charge to the students and their families. The therapy sessions were included in the normal classroom schedule and took place during regular school hours.

Only elementary students with disabilities in the self-contained setting within the county were paired with Early College students who chose to participate in this

mentoring service-learning opportunity. The students involved represented Grades

Kindergarten through 6 (ages 5 to 12) and had a wide range of disabilities including

Autism Spectrum Disorder, mild to moderate intellectual disabilities, severe intellectual

disabilities, physical impairments, visual impairments, other health impairments

(including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), and developmental delays. It was

not a requirement for these students to qualify for physical therapy in order to receive this

treatment, although many did have this related service. These students were passive

participants within the study and were only involved with the mentoring program as

mentees. These students were not involved with the research or identified within the

study.

Informed consent. Before conducting any interviews within the study, the

researcher obtained informed consent from all the participants including parental consent

for all Early College high school students under the age of 18. This informed consent

form (Appendix A) and informed assent form (Appendix B) stated that the participants

would be involved in a study, the purposes of the study, and that names and identifying

information would not be obtained, including student names. Other identifying

information such as the school district, school, county, or site was not recorded or

identified for the purposes of this research.

Data Collection

Creswell (2013) further listed activities for data collection to include the

recording of information, resolving field issues, and sorting data. For the purposes of this

study, this included one-on-one interviews with the Early College high school students

conducted either via phone or in person. Data collection also included sorting the data

through interview transcription, coding, and the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis

software.

Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher is used as the key instrument (Creswell, 2013). Within the phenomenological approach, it is also important to use an instrument to collect data about personal experiences in order to hear the voices that have not yet been heard (Creswell, 2013). This can be in any narrative form including focus groups and interviews. In this study, interviews were used for this purpose.

Interviews. In qualitative research, interviews serve to make sense of central themes based on subjects' factual information and meanings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Specifically in phenomenological research, interviews or a similar form of data collection through communication are always used to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of the phenomenon being examined. Although there are several types of interviews, standard open-ended interviews in individual settings were used during this study due to their ease of use and promise of insightful information.

Creswell (2013) recommended the determination of "what type of interview is practical and will net the most useful information to answer research questions" (p. 164). In this case, the Early College high school students were already familiar with each other and were similar in nature in relationship to the phenomenon. It is postulated that due to the close nature of the mentoring group, the Early College high school students may be more hesitant to provide information during a group interview session and the most insightful information would be shared via individual interviews of their experiences. Further, Creswell (2013) warned that with a group interview setting, it would be important to encourage all participants to communicate and not let a few individuals dominate the conversation. With the personalities of these specific Early College high

school students in mind, the researcher decided that a group interview would yield results that were only the opinions of a few students; therefore, only individual interviews were conducted. The Early College high school participants participated in the interview process in the natural setting. The Early College students were interviewed either via telephone or at the local agricultural center where the therapeutic horseback riding and equine-assisted activities took place. In addition, the researcher gathered contact information from the Early College high school students in order to conduct follow-up interviews as appropriate in order to further clarify information obtained during the initial interviews.

In phenomenological research, Moustakas (1994) recommended using two specific questions in every interview in addition to any other open-ended questions that may be beneficial to the study: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). These questions were used to guide the process in creating the interview protocol for the Early College high school student interviews. In addition, Creswell (2013) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) recommended the use of an interview protocol of four to five pages with five to seven open-ended questions and space to record answers. The interview protocol used in this study is located in Appendix C. In addition, aspects of good interview procedures were followed during the interviews including staying within an appropriate time limit, following the questions, and being a good listener (Creswell, 2013). All interviews were recorded on an audio recording device in order to transcribe completely at a later date.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological data analysis has specific steps that are common in all research

of this type. "Building on the data from the first and second research questions, data

analysts go through the data (e.g., interview transcriptions) and highlight 'significant

statements,' sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants

experiences the phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). All interviews conducted as part

of this study were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher following the

interviews. This allowed the researcher to be more personally involved in the process

and gain additional information from the context of the participants' responses. All

transcriptions were uploaded to the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software and

coded for specific themes. Following the coding, reoccurring themes were discovered

and further clarified. When using the ATLAS.ti software to organize data, the researcher

coded the transcripts into the program and created code families that were later reduced

into several key themes.

   ATLAS.ti software. The ATLAS.ti software program was selected for use

within this study because a phenomenological study suggests the use of coding the data.

Friese (2012) noted the use of this software within self-reflective approaches, such as

phenomenology, allows the researcher to approach the interpretation of this data within

the epistemological framework. When working with the ATLAS.ti software, it is

proposed to use a specific method for data analysis with the computer-assisted analysis.

Called the NCT method of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, it is a method that

necessitates noticing, collecting, and thinking about "things" presented within the data

(Friese, 2012). In addition to Friese, these three elements are also found in Creswell

(2007) in each of the traditions of research he describes. It is noted that within this type

of data analysis, the important point is marking interesting "things" and putting names to

them, whether these "things" include themes, emotions, values, or a combination of these

at the same time (Friese, 2012). Within this study, the recursive process of data analysis

was used as outlined in Friese. This is a method of movement within the NCT approach

in order to recode after relationships have been discovered and created within the

networks of the ATLAS.ti software. A holistic approach was also used which includes

reading and rereading the data and reflecting on the interviews and contexts.

Time allotment. The time allotment for this mentoring project was the past three

academic school years with data collection and analysis the year following. The

dissertation proposal was defended to the committee in May 2014, with adjustments

made before sending to the GWU Institutional Review Board, where it was determined

that data collection could begin. Interviews and data collection began in the summer of

2014, with transcriptions of the interviews immediately following. Coding and data

analysis were conducted throughout the fall of 2014 and winter of 2014-2015, with

completed results and discussion prepared for defense by the fall of 2015.

Limitations

This mentoring program occurred between August 2011 and May 2014, with

ongoing Early College student and elementary student contact within this timeframe.

Due to the extended timeframe of the program itself, there was limited time for data

collection before the majority of the Early College students left their school setting to

attend college. This could have resulted in some limitation on the data received via the

interviews. Of the 20 Early College high school students invited to participate in this

study, only 12 accepted the invitation and completed the interview process. This could

have been a factor in a 60% participation rate among the Early College high school

students who were initially contacted about completing interviews for the study.

In addition, all phenomenological qualitative research is subject to limitation due

to the difficulty with the researcher as the main instrument. Although the researcher identifies many biases as they relate personally, the researcher cannot always identify all of them, even when following the process for bracketing. Bracketing may also prove to be difficult for researchers to implement as the data incorporates those assumptions even if they are identified (van Manen, 1990). The researcher in this study spent some time bracketing and identifying these assumptions before conducting the interviews.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to garner the prospective of Early College high school students involved in a common phenomenon, a multi-year mentoring program with elementary students with disabilities. Specifically, the study attempted to identify common themes about how the mentoring experience affected the Early College high school students' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs in relationship to their tolerance toward people with disabilities as reported by the participants through individual interviews. All 20 Early College students involved in the mentoring program at the conclusion of the 2013-2014 academic school year were invited to participate in the interviews, with 12 of those students accepting the offer of participation, for a participation rate of 60%. Of those participants, there was a wide range of length of involvement within in the mentoring program as well as a wide range of prior experience with people with disabilities. These 12 Early College high school student participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their experiences and involvement in the program aligned to the research questions. In order to easily display the data for the reader, random pseudonyms (Chloe, Lisa, Tommy, Annie, Montana, Bethany, Fisher, Carson, Ellie, Mary, Allison, and John) are used for the participants when discussing quotes.

Interview questions 1, 2, 6, and 7 were designed to garner the perceptions of the Early College high school students about their experiences in the mentoring program. Interview questions 3, 4, and 5 were designed to determine whether the program had an effect on participant attitudes, feelings, and beliefs toward people with disabilities and, if so, how. Interview question 8 attempted to discover if and how participants were affected personally through their role as a mentor within the program, although there was some information that could be gathered from the other interview questions that were

aligned to this research question. In addition, there were responses recorded during other times of the interview process that pertained to several of the research questions. These were coded as such and used in this manner for analysis. For the purposes of this study, any theme or subtheme coded with three or more responses is considered a prominent finding, while those with two or fewer are discussed as "other" findings.

Executive Summary

The most dominant theme emerging from the data was stronger relationships with the elementary students as time progressed throughout the program. Almost all participants had this account of the phenomenon, with it being more prominent among those participants involved in the program for an extended amount of time (1 year or longer). In addition, the participants noted a better understanding of people with disabilities after this experience, with previous fear or nervousness being eliminated. In general, the mentoring program was a positive experience for all Early College students involved who participated in the research. Although participant backgrounds and prior knowledge of people with disabilities varied greatly, prior background and knowledge appeared to have little effect on their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs at the end of the mentoring experience.

Other themes from these data suggested that not only did the relationship among the mentors and mentees grow throughout the time spent in the program but the relationship among the Early College high school students also grew as they worked together throughout the program. Several participants mentioned the idea of comradery or a deeper connection with classmates involved in the program at the end of the mentoring experience. Many spoke fondly of their experiences not only with the elementary students in the program but with each other. All of the Early College high

school student participants indicated an overall positive experience of the mentoring program.

A central theme emerging from the data was how the program affected the Early College high school students personally, although this took many different forms in the data. Both interpersonal and intrapersonal characteristics were noted as benefits from being involved in the program. Some participants suggested the experience altered or reaffirmed their career choice in the future, while others indicated a deeper level of personal gain from the program, from work management skills, social skills, and confidence, to include self-efficacy.

In addition, a suggestion for improvement that was reoccurring was the need for training or information about the elementary students with special needs prior to the beginning of the program. Many participants described having insecurities about their role in mentoring students because of their limited knowledge of the students' disabilities, abilities, behaviors, and tendencies. They also indicated a desire to know more about specific students, from tendencies to behaviors, before being assigned as that student's mentor.

Findings

As part of the interview process, Early College high school students were asked to indicate the amount of time they were involved in the mentoring program. Since the answers ranged from 1 month as the least amount of involvement to participation since the program's beginning (approximately 4 years), these answers were assigned codes within the ATLAS.ti software. These codes were involvement of time less than 1 year, more than 1 year but less than 2 years, more than 2 years but less than 3 years, and 3 years or more. These codes were used to check for themes that may be based on the

length of time the Early College high school student participated in the program.

However, it was concluded that the answers from all participants were similar and their

reported experience within the program was not determined by the amount of time within

the program, except for one specific occasion to be discussed later. The distribution of

those is included within Table 1.

Table 1

Time in the Mentoring Program

Time in Program	Number of Participants
Less Than 1 Year	2
More Than 1 Year/Less Than 2 Years	4
More Than 2 Years/Less Than 3 Years	2
More Than 3 Years	4

Although not a part of the interview questions, the Early College high school

student participants as a whole indicated their prior experience with people with

disabilities during the interview section about attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about people

with disabilities. This information was broken down into four categories of prior

experience, meaning experience with that population before beginning the mentoring

program. These included no experience (none), limited (basic knowledge), some (a small

amount of involvement) and familiar (a significant amount of involvement). This

information was also coded and organized within the ATLAS.ti software to check for

themes that may differ based on the Early College high school students' prior experience

with people with disabilities. However, as with the time spent involved in the program,

the information obtained from all the participants was similar and it was determined that

this piece did not lead to differing experiences of the participants. This information is available in Table 2.

Table 2

Prior Experience with People with Disabilities

Prior Experience	Number of Participants
None	4
Limited	3
Some	2
Familiar	2

The research findings proved to offer a holistic account of how the 12 Early College high school students perceived their experiences with their time involved in the mentoring program with students with disabilities. Although only 60% of the students involved in the program within the 2013-2014 academic school year wished to participate in the interview process, they were a significant sample with various time dedications to the program and a varying degree of prior experiences with people with disabilities; to indicate similar experiences of the common phenomenon would have been reported by additional students if they would have participated in the interview process. Although each Early College High School student participant accounts of his or her experience was unique, several common themes surfaced through the 82 unique codes garnered from the responses. These were broken down into sections. These sections are further discussed and organized below. Each section begins with an introduction and is followed by a display and interpretation of data from that section. Each section is concluded with direct quotes from the student participants related to that section. Main subheadings are

experiences and perspectives; attitudes, feelings and beliefs; and personal, which were also the inquiries of the research questions.

The experiences and perspectives category attempted to answer Research Question 1 through interview questions 1, 2, 6, and 7. The major themes were experience, challenges, relationships, and previous information. The attitudes, feelings, and beliefs category attempted to answer Research Question 2 through interview questions 3, 4, and 5. The major themes were knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. The personal category attempted to answer Research Question 3 through interview question 8. The major themes were personal as well as extension (effects of the mentoring experience beyond the program). However, as the Early College high school students participated in the interview process, information about these topics was coded throughout the resulting transcripts outside the intended specific interview question. These findings are organized, displayed, and discussed in detail within their appropriate section.

Experiences and Perspectives

Early College high school student participants were willing and eager to share their experiences with the researcher. This section of data resulted in 60 coded responses from the participants. While transcribing and coding the interviews, four major theme clusters emerged about the shared phenomenon of the mentoring program as experienced by the Early College high school students. The frequency of data and number of participants quoted for each theme and subcluster is displayed in Table 3. Additionally, these emerging themes are displayed visually in Figure 2. These include favorite experiences, types of experiences to include specific memories or general/technical experience, the overall experience, and challenges or suggestions for improvement.

Table 3

Themes and Subclusters for Experiences and Perspectives

Themes	Subcluster	Number of Coded Responses	Number of Participants in the Responses
Overall			
	Overall Positive	14	12
	Fun/Silly	5	5
	Consistency	3	2
	Making a Difference	1	1
	Community	1	1
	Involvement = Satisfaction	1	1
Types			
	Specific Memory	7	5
	General Technical	1	1
Favorite			
	Sensory	4	3
	Student Environment	3	3
	Horseback Riding	2	2
	Personal Improvement	1	1
Challenges			
	Training	8	5
	Consistency	3	2
	Authority	2	2
	Enough Volunteers	2	2
	Location	1	1
	Transition	1	1
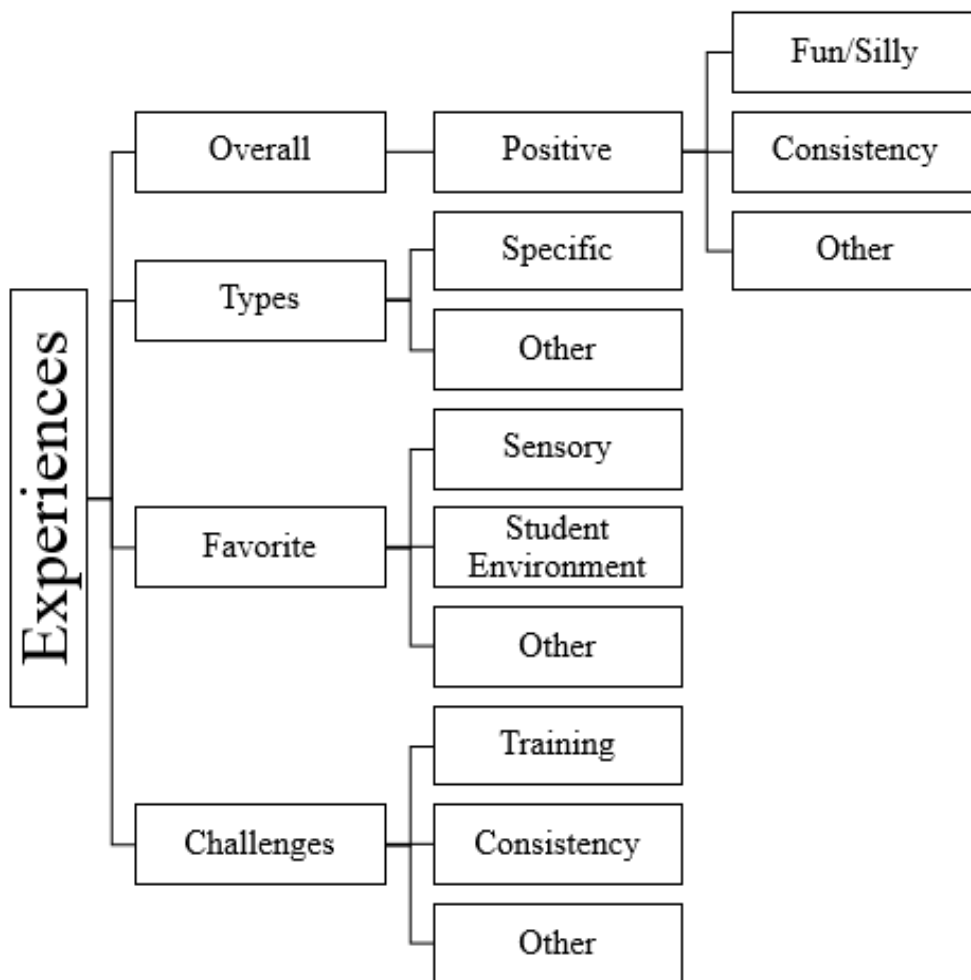
Figure 2. Experiences and Perspectives Hierarchy Chart.

The most significant finding from these data on experiences is that all Early

College high school student participants recounted an overall positive experience of

being involved in the mentoring program for elementary students with disabilities.

Overall Experience

All 12 participants indicated during the interview process an overall positive

experience in participating in the mentoring program as a mentor for a student or student

with disabilities in the context of therapeutic horseback and/or sensory activities. In

addition, there were 14 total codes for "overall positive experience" within the interview

transcripts. Respondents also indicated five other categories to describe their "overall" experiences of the phenomenon of the mentoring program. These included the experience being fun or silly (five respondents/42%), the idea of making a difference (one respondent), a sense of community (one respondent), the importance of consistency (three respondents/25%), and the idea that the level of involvement within the program equals the satisfaction gained from the experience (one respondent).

Overall positive. All 12 student participants shared responses that their experience within the mentoring program was an overall positive experience. Although the wordings used to describe this overall experience varied (e.g., "love," "awesome"), the underlying theme of an overall positive experience of the program for 100% of the Early College high school student participants remained a shocking statistic from the data. It should be noted that students who may not have wanted to participate (the other eight students invited to participate but declined) may have offered a differing view of the overall experience with the program; but since all of those students had been involved in the program for at least an entire semester, it would be speculated that those mentors would have similar experiences to those who did participate in the interview process. These overall positive experiences as quoted by the participants are included.

Chloe indicated, "I really just loved the whole thing." Lisa stated, "It was just really neat." "Overall, it's just a good place to be," said Tommy, as well as, "It's just a great program to be in." Quoting Annie, "I think that it's just a really good experience and I think a lot of people should have that experience." Montana had high regard for the program, stating, "That was gold." "I really liked the general attitude of the thing," stated Bethany; while Fisher said, "I guess it's been really really good to interact with people and interact with the horses and everything. It's just it really has done a lot for me."

Carson described the experience as "humbling" and "You are benefiting as much as the students." Ellie said, "I don't know. It just makes me feel better about life in general"; while Mary indicated, "It's really rewarding." Allison generalized the overall experience to include the aspects of loving, learning, and improvement. John had a sincere affection for the program and the experience, stating,

> Just that we started with the program and we fell in love with it, my buddies and I did and it was unlike anything we had ever done before. That's why we kept coming back. We loved being with horses. We loved working with handicapped kids. It was a blessing to us. It meant a lot. We kept coming back for more. We didn't just want to do it, we fell in love with the program.

John followed up the general overall positive experience by stating,

> basically what I'm saying is through my experiences I've come to love working with them and it is one of the most favorite things I have done in high school. I would never have imagined I would have been doing this, but once I started I didn't want to quit it.

Although much of the overall experience of the mentoring program shared by these participants included hints toward personal benefits, those personal effects were separately coded and will be discussed in greater detail later within this chapter.

Fun/silly. Five participants (42%) shared their experiences of the mentoring program being fun or silly. Lisa indicated, "That was just a lot of fun"; while Tommy noted it "was a lot of fun." Fisher offered a little more feedback with, "While you interact with the kids you have an excuse to be silly and it's just good to be silly every once in a while." Allison shared, "Having fun with {the elementary students} as they do it. That's definitely my favorite, just interacting with them." John indicated that the

elementary students with disabilities sometimes relied on their Early College high school mentor for enjoyment by stating, "I always tried to make it as fun as I could with the kids I was working with and I feel like they enjoyed working with everybody and they enjoyed working with me just as much."

Importance of consistency. Two participants dictated responses about mentor consistency and its importance to the mentoring program and the mentees. Chloe spoke of how the elementary students with disabilities "liked consistency" and how it was believed that this consistency led to the elementary students' recognition and remembering and thus a stronger relationship in the end. Chloe also indicated that some weeks there was a smaller group of Early College high school student mentors because everyone was not consistent. At the end of the interview process, Mary added, "I think Early College students just need to know it takes a lot of dedication. It's really rewarding, but you also have to have that mindset that you want to go there and you want to have fun." One of the challenges specifically mentioned in detail by the participants was consistency, so this theme will be discussed again in greater detail later in this chapter.

Other. In addition to an overall positive experience, with many Early College high school student participants specifically addressing the fun or silly nature of the experience and the importance of consistency, a few other minor themes emerged through their experiences. These included a sense of community, making a difference, and how involvement in the program could determine the satisfaction gained from the program. One Early College high school student participant indicated throughout the interview process the importance of giving back to the community through volunteer and service work. It was interesting that this theme did not come up more often since

volunteer hours were at the root of this community service mentoring project. However, only Chloe shared this idea during the interview, stating,

> I really just loved the whole thing. Since I didn't have school on Friday I really
> didn't want to just sit around not doing anything. It was great being able to be out
> in the community and feel like I was making a difference and doing stuff like that.
> And I really loved it. I needed community service, but it wasn't like work for me.
> I really loved doing it.

Along the same lines as consistency, one Early College high school student participant made a claim that the amount the Early College high school students were involved was linked to the amount of satisfaction they would get from the program. Tommy stated,

> It really was all a matter of how much the {Early College high school} kids want
> to get involved. I saw those who would just do what they were told and I saw
> those would actually get in there and try to learn new things. One thing I learned
> was how to saddle up the horses. I rode them before but I never knew how to
> saddle them up too much and I learned how to do that. I don't really have
> anything to add to the program. It's just how much they want to get involved.

Types

Specific memory. When asked about their experiences within the mentoring program, most Early College student participants gave detailed generalized experiences. However, many also gave details that pertained to specific memories or contexts within the program. These detailed memories included student names, specific difficult or joyful moments, or specific instances while participating in the mentoring process. Five participants shared their experiences that fit into this theme.

Chloe discussed her time specifically spent with the sensory program at the elementary school, stating,

> I really liked the car wash thing that we had there because all the kids would rotate to the mittens at the end and they would be drying each other off and it was just the cutest thing. And we also got to help those kids through the course to get them to the end and that was just a lot of fun.

Chloe also shared a specific memory that seemed less than desirable:

> I know one time (a student) ran out of the barn and we had to chase her. I ended up going out one way and another person went around out the other way so that we could get her. I remember one time she didn't want to go in the barn so she started pulling my hair and I just picked her up and got her to the door. She finally would go, but she didn't want to.

Montanta shared her experience of a sentimental moment shared with her student mentee:

> I was with (student) because he needs a more experienced person. It was me and (staff) and I was on one side and she was on the other and we had (student) and we were about to get off but I started scratching (student)'s side. You know how (student) is. How he can act up a lot. He's kind of on his own planet. He completely focused in on me, looked at me, starred at me, was kind of trying to talk to me, but not really. It was like his language he was trying to talk to me. I would scratch his sides. He would giggle and stuff. He focused on me for about five minutes and then he went back off into his own little world. But that was really cool. (Staff) was blown away by that.

Ellie similarly shared specific experiences with two mentees:

Okay, so like (student) specifically. I remember when she first started, they were really having to take it slow with her and barely getting her on the horse. And now, she is able to do half of what all the others are doing and I think that's great. Because I remember when (student) was born. Her family went to my church. So, it's kind of nice seeing how she has grown. And another one that sticks out in my mind is (student). He gets on a horse and he's terrified but leading he . . . like (trainer) last year had him focusing on you know, just, it was okay. And he would ask me to go slow. And he's willing to keep talking to me and expressing what he wanted to do. And even when he was getting scared, I would be able to tell him, "(Student), it will be okay. We will go slow. Don't worry about it." And he would calm down.

Mary also shared a specific memory of how relationships grew over time, how students began remembering and recognizing the mentors, and how the elementary student mentees began opening up throughout the process. These are themes that are discussed later in this chapter. Specifically, Mary shared, "(student) for example always ran up to me and my sister, even when we were outside of school and it was the craziest thing I ever saw because he came to a restaurant that I worked at a lot."

Allison also shared a specific memory with an underlying theme of relationships, stating,

Especially watching (student) . . . she really, it amazed me as to how . . . to every evening she was riding. We were sitting off with (student) and she was sitting there telling me the horse was hurting and the horse wasn't acting right, so I sit there and listened to her and I fixed what I thought was going on with the horse, and the horse was fine. It just amazed me because they both have eyesight

problems so the connection that they have is just amazing.

Other. Although most participants had specific memories of their experiences, a minor theme was that of a general or technical account of the experience. One participant, when asked about the experience, gave a general and technical response. Bethany spoke of the process of grooming the horses, getting the elementary students fitted for helmets before riding, having the elementary students "dress up" the mini-pony, and this being a physical therapy session for them. Referring to the interview question about experience, Bethany shared,

> We got some physical therapy in whenever they would groom the horse because we would let them stroke it one time with the one brush and then sometimes with the one and we would go circular and forwards and backwards. So, they got a bunch of therapy in with that.

An interesting point to note is that Bethany spent the least amount of time involved in mentoring the program (approximately a month) than any of the other research study participants. This could have been a contributing factor in the participant sharing such a different account of the experience than other Early College high school student participants.

Favorite Experiences

Ten Early College high school student participants indicated a favorite aspect of the mentoring program that was not related to relationships or personal effects, which is discussed in great detail later. The other favorite aspects of the program included sensory activities (four respondents/33%), being with the elementary students with disabilities within their own learning environment (three respondents/25%), horseback riding (two respondents/17%) and personal improvement (one respondent/8%).

Sensory. Of the 10 participants who indicated a favorite aspect of the program, three indicated the sensory activities as being their favorite. This included either those sensory activities set up as a station during the horseback riding rotations or the sensory activities at the elementary school. This meant that one-fourth of the Early College high school participants indicated that the sensory part of the mentoring program was their favorite aspect. Annie explained further why this was the case:

> But, it was good to see the kids when they would be in the activities place or if they got over on to ride Magic. You could see more of their personality once you got down there with them. You could see them just play and have some fun, but you also got to experience what they were feeling whether it was getting on the horses or how they were going to do that day.

In addition, Montana shared her experience about the sensory aspects within the school: "With them having more things to do hands-on, being able to touch things and learn things. When we did the sensory thing I was over the dance part. That was gold." Montana also commented on the sensory aspect at horseback riding: "I think that was really cool that they had that. We had the corn and the kids loved to run their fingers through that."

Student environment. Of the 10 participants who gave information about their favorite aspects of the program, another three indicated that seeing or working with the elementary students in their own environment was their favorite. This makes up another fourth of the overall Early College high school student participants who spoke of this theme within their interviews. Montana explained why this may have been the case by stating,

> We have been with the kids inside the classroom and I think they are more open

when they are there and doing that even with the sensory stuff and the horseback

riding, both ways it's better that way.

In addition, Chloe explained her favorite aspect of the mentoring program as getting "to

see the kids in their environment."

Other. In addition to the major themes, a few minor themes also emerged in the

data. These included reports of favorite experiences of the horseback riding component

of the mentoring program and that of personal improvement. Although therapeutic

horseback riding was a main context for the learning and interaction environment for the

mentoring program, only two participants indicated that this was a favorite aspect of the

program. Montana stated, "My favorite thing would definitely be horseback riding. That

was the best I think in general. That's the thing I think the kids look forward to the

most." Although Montana stated that horseback riding was her favorite aspect, there was

an underlying tone of it being her favorite only because it was the favorite among the

elementary student mentees. Carson had the same reasons for listing horseback riding as

his favorite aspect of the program. Carson shared his experiences of being involved in

the mentoring program as "Just working with the kids on the horses . . . watching them

learn better balance over time . . . how to reason . . . better reasoning."

Although the theme of personal improvement in varying degrees and contexts was

well-documented throughout this research process, only one student participant indicated

this was a favorite aspect of the program. Fisher shared his experiences of being

involved in the mentoring program as "It's just . . . it really has done a lot for me." This

was a reoccurring theme throughout the interview processes within the context of

personal effects, which is discussed later in Chapter 4.

Challenges

The Early College high school student participants within the interviews indicated a total of seven specific challenges related to the mentoring experience. These included having enough volunteers (two participants/17%) as well as consistency with volunteers (three participants/25%); exercising authority (two participants/17%); the location of the horseback riding (one participant/8%), which was later solved; and transition periods (one participant/8%). In addition, the training aspects of the program were discussed in great detail including the need to continue training for the therapeutic horseback riding component of the program (three respondents/25%) and the need for better training for the Early College high school students regarding students with disabilities (five respondents/42%).

Training. Five Early College high school student participants indicated the need for continued or better training as a challenge. Three of these addressed training that was offered about the horses and the therapeutic horseback riding. These comments were all positive in nature and referenced their appreciation for this knowledge before beginning the program and as a reminder in subsequent years. Chloe mentioned having some training at the beginning for "how you are supposed to hold them when they were riding the horses and stuff." Fisher also indicated this, stating,

> The first year . . . I don't know how good the training was this year, but . . . the first year I came in we had really good training . . . I mean it was (program director) there and it was top to bottom. We learned how to groom and we all had to groom. We watched a video.

In addition, Mary stated, "We are trained on the horseback riding part and getting the students on and off the horse."

However, the Early College high school participants went on to indicate a need

for more training beyond the horse therapy to include information about the students, common disabilities, behaviors, and how to work with those students. Fisher indicated that this was a part of the training the first year but it had not been in the years after. Fisher additionally stated,

> I tell you what . . . the first year we all went to (school) the first day and (physical therapist) and (assistant PT) sat us down in the therapy room and we were assigned to two kids . . . one in the morning and one in the evening and I know they can't do that because they are so short-handed now but that makes the world of difference because you get to focus in on them. It's easier to figure out.

However, the other participants making the suggestion had not been a part of the program for as long as Fisher. Chloe stated, "Additional training would help"; while Bethany gave more details about what this training should entail: "Behavior and I guess one thing was just knowing which kids had what. Which had Down's Syndrome and which were Autistic and just knowing what they had to deal with them in different ways." Mary, although acknowledging being trained on the horses, added,

> I think it would be very beneficial to maybe have a day where the Early College students can come in and somewhat meet the students. So, maybe then we would almost be paired with somebody then before the actual horseback riding begins. That way we kind of know who we will be working with and kind of how they behave and it won't be so much of the kids show up and it's, "Oh, here."

With so many spoken voices for this need, it appears that someone within the program is listening to the suggestions. When asked about challenges or suggestions for improvement within the program, John stated,

> Honestly, I cannot think of anything that can be improved. Now, (program

director) and I got together this fall go-round and we put together a few packets

for each and every volunteer who would be working. One of the things we

included in the packet was some of the more common handicaps that you would

be dealing with and some of those tendencies of some of those specific types. I

think that that's definitely something that should be kept up because that keeps

you from going into things blindly and you know a little bit of what to expect. I

wouldn't say anything needs to be changed, but that for sure is something that

should be kept up.

Consistency. The theme of consistency has already been discussed in this

chapter; however, several times it came up during conversations throughout the interview

process that consistency among the volunteers was a challenge, so it was also appropriate

to include it here. Two interview participants reported about consistency and its

importance in the program. Due to the nature of the mentoring program, the elementary

students with disabilities preferred consistency in order to form relationships. In

addition, consistency among the volunteers would mean less trainings and informational

gatherings and more time serving those elementary students. Specific quotes related to

consistency can be found in the section on experiences.

Other. In addition to the major themes, several minor themes also emerged.

These included difficulty with authority, having enough volunteers, the location of the

horseback riding, and transition components. Two separate Early College high school

student participants indicated that the students felt using authority was a challenge within

the program although this may be an additional component of needing more information

about the elementary students before knowing how to work with them. Lisa indicated, "I

had a hard time in situations where I had the authority. Like, carrying out that authority

was hard for me." Fisher went into further detail about the specific mentee, stating at the beginning of their relationship, "I was just a little too . . . like hover-y . . . I tried to do too much for her and not let her do enough on her own. And if she acted out, I had zero discipline skills."

Two participants indicated a challenge as related to their experience in the program as not having enough volunteers to work with the elementary students with disabilities. Although it was not clear at the time of the interview, this could have meant Early College high school student mentees but could also have meant therapeutic horseback riding staff and volunteers. Fisher spoke highly of the prementoring experience through training and only being assigned two elementary students to mentor for the entire year, but stated, "I know they can't so that because they are so short-handed now but that makes the world of difference because you get to focus on them." Carson indicated this as a challenge as well, stating, "One is getting volunteers to stay with the program for a long time and not constantly training some people."

One participant indicated a challenge of the program as being the physical location of the therapeutic horseback riding program prior to this school year. In previous years of the program, the actual riding therapy was conducted at a private riding facility that was completely outdoors except for a small holding barn for the horses. In addition, it was far from the Early College campus, making transportation difficult for some. The location itself was isolated, so there was some difficulty with directions as well. Carson wrapped up this information by stating, "One of them was the location before. I mean (owner)'s barn was all we had, but now we have this center to use and it's more centralized and no one gets lost trying to find it." This was one challenge that was reported by the participants that had already been addressed and corrected.

Although it is widely known that people with specific disabilities have difficulty with transition, only one Early College high school student participant indicated this was a challenge within the program. Montana stated,

I think the transition periods were probably the most challenging part. Going from one activity to another, because they are either really ready to go or they're really not ready to go. Yeah, that's kind of the main focus I guess just making a smoother transition. We had that down for the most part, but sometimes it was just a little bit more difficult.

Relationships

With 17 separate code names among 68 specific codes, relationships was the most noted area of discussion during the interviews. With 51 coded responses, the mentor/mentee relationship was most significant. The frequency of this data and the number of participants quoted for each theme and subcluster are displayed in Table 4. Themes and subclusters are displayed visually in Figure 3.

Table 4

Themes and Subclusters for Relationships

Themes	Subcluster	Number of Coded Responses	Number of Participants in the Responses
Mentor/Mentee			
	Mentee Growth = Mentor Satisfaction	8	6
	Specific	8	7
	Recognizing/Remembering	7	7
	Interaction	5	5
	Stronger	5	5
	Opening Up	5	5
	Mentee Satisfaction = Mentor Satisfaction	5	3
	Overall Positive	4	4
	Friends	3	3
	Recognition of Likes/Dislikes	2	2
	Communication	1	1
Mentor/Mentor		5	4
	Teamwork	1	1
Mentor/Staff		3	3
Mentee/Horse		3	2
Mentee/Mentee		2	2
Mentor/Horse		1	1
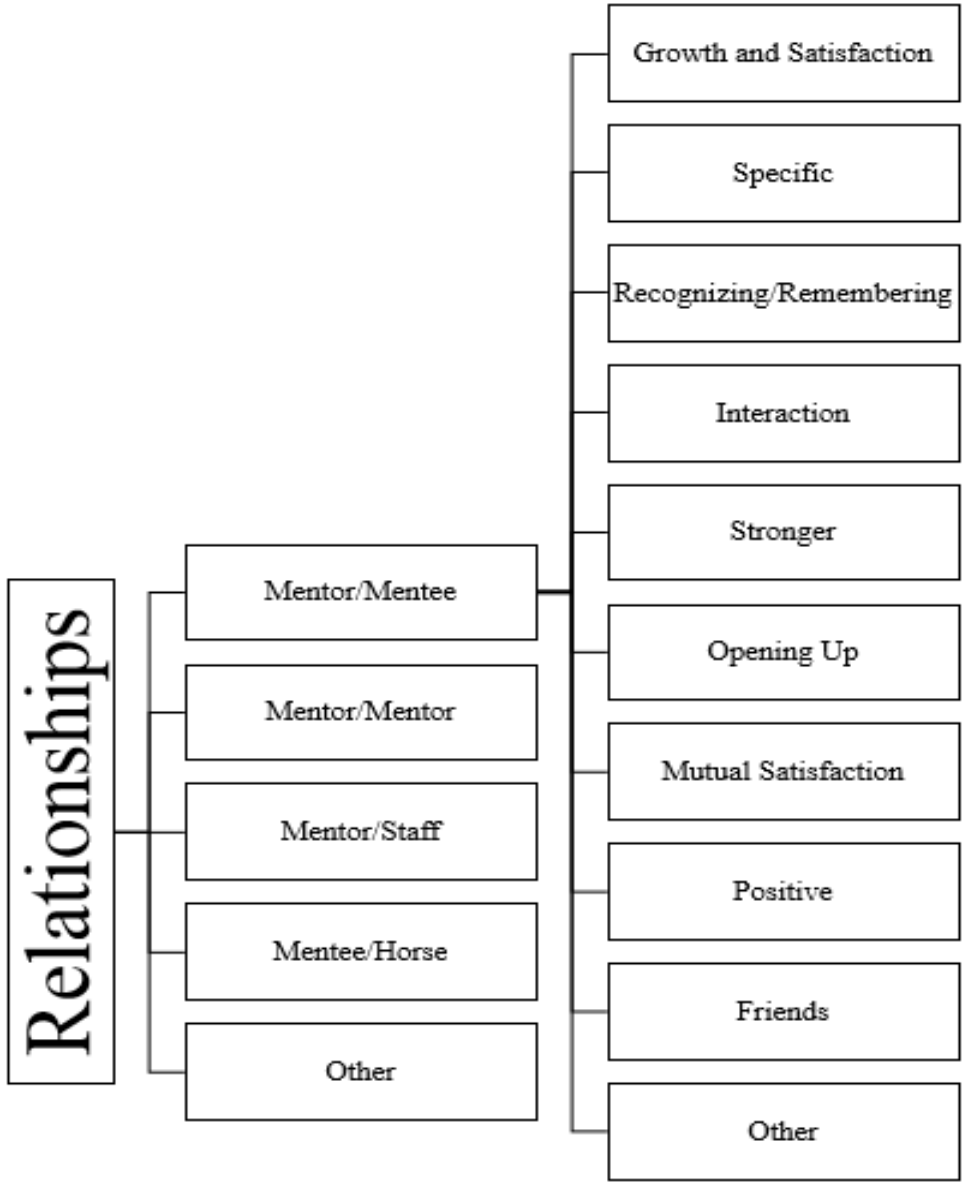
Figure 3. Relationships Hierarchy Chart.

Mentor/mentee. The most significant area of discussion was that of the

mentor/mentee relationship, since this was a specific question addressed during the

interview process. Major themes emerging included mentee growth leading to mentor

satisfaction, specific stories about the mentees, a recognition or remembering component

from the mentees, interaction, strengthening relationships, opening up, mutual

satisfaction, overall positive, and friendships.

Growth influencing satisfaction. The main theme emerging from these data was how growth of the mentee was reported as leading to satisfaction for the mentor, with responses from six participants. Tommy stated, "It was great to see their progress as time went on and how much they changed and how much the program did for them." Annie indicated that this was the favorite aspect of the program, saying, "I think just seeing the kids grow and improve was probably my favorite. I don't think I had a favorite activity." Fisher described the experience with "Just watching the improvements they make. It's just so so good to see them from the first day until today. It's just something else." Carson sounded like a proud friend in stating,

> One of the things for me is watching the kids develop over the weeks and get better with the activities so we make it more challenging for them. And just watching them grow up over the years. Like, over 4 years some of them have grown over a foot.

Carson additionally made the statement that this was a favorite aspect of the mentoring program: "Just working with the kids on the horses. Watching them learn better balance over time. How to reason. Better reasoning." "Eventually they get to where they can trot and they're just squealing and giggling. It's great," was the experience shared by Ellie, as well as, "Just seeing their growth from each time I am here is amazing." Mary indicated that this was also a favorite aspect of the program:

> Definitely my favorite part would just be seeing each of them grow, not only academically but just like their personalities and I just felt like at the end everybody was doing something new whether it be a new skill or just talking more. So, it was definitely my favorite part just seeing each and every one of

them grow.

In speaking of the elementary student mentees, Allison indicated joy from "How much they learn. How much they improve over time, even the short time I have been there, you see improvement."

Specific. Seven participants (58%) reported a specific elementary student mentee that he or she had created a relationship with through the mentoring program. Although the names of the elementary students with disabilities as well as the Early College high school students were not included in the final transcripts, these instances of specific relationship memories were recorded during the interview process. For the purposes of this research study, these accounts of the relationships gave the most insightful information. Lisa shared,

> There was one girl, and at first I was nervous about the whole thing, but she was really sweet. And she was singing and made us sing with her, so that was cool because we kind of became friends through it.

Tommy shared about specific students remembering certain mentors which is discussed later in more detail. Tommy stated,

> Our relationship with them, like, they would all come and be ready and I'd get down there and just be talking to them and they would be over there doing activities and especially (student) and (student) they would always come over to me and be like "Hey, I remember you" and they were always like, "I want to try to get on your horse."

Tommy also indicated the need for consistency after making those specific mentor/ mentee connections: "They are asking when they are gone. They want to be with you for that day. They want to hang out." Along the same lines, Annie stated, "I definitely think

that some of the kids kind of picked us out specifically. I mean, I tried not to pick certain . . . but the kids definitely do pick. If you pull them, they like certain ones more than others." Fisher noted a specific relationship with one student several times throughout the interview, once by stating,

> (Student) started out with . . . I was just a little too . . . sorry about the name . . . I was just a little too . . . like hover-y . . . I tried to do too much for her and not let her do enough on her own. And if she acted out, I had zero discipline skills.

Mary had this to add on the topic of a specific relationship,

> By my senior year, when I was done (students) for example always ran up to me and my sister and even when we were outside of school it was the craziest thing I ever saw (same student) cause he came to a restaurant that I worked at a lot. He always came up to me and hugged me.

Allison made a specific relationship with one of the male students, and during the interview Allison stated, "Like (student). He remembers my name more and he asks me all the questions. They open up to me more now than they did at the very first." John indicated how this specific relationship could build over time: "They come back and ask to work with you and say (specific early college student) or (specific early college student) or (specific early college student)."

Stronger. Five participants (42%) indicated that the relationship between themselves and their elementary student mentee grew "stronger" throughout their time in the mentoring program. When asked to describe if and how their relationship with the elementary students changed over time, Chloe stated, "It definitely got stronger"; while Tommy indicated, "You can build relationships with these kids." Montana went a little deeper with, "They were coming up and wanting to give you hugs and just be close with

you because you were kind of like an older sibling I guess in a way. I guess it grew stronger would be a better word or example." Fisher generalized with, "Just working with the kids and getting to know them has just made me feel very thankful for what I have"; and Mary added to the coded responses with, "I felt like through the whole time I was there you really do gain that relationship between all the students."

Recognizing/remembering. Seven participants (58%) indicated joy in their mentee recognizing or remembering them specifically by name and/or outside of the mentoring program, such as out in the community. This was a surprising theme that over half of the participants expressed joy that the elementary students with disabilities remembered them, many speaking specifically of the mentees remembering their names. Chloe shared, "The first couple times I was there of course they didn't know me because I was new. But, they remembered our names." Tommy shared the excitement felt over the mentees remembering names as well. Tommy stated,

> Our relationship with them, like, they would all come and be ready and I'd get down there and just be talking to them and they would be over there doing activities and especially (student) and (student) they would always come over to me and be like "Hey, I remember you."

Montana added, "At first they are shy. They don't know you, but by at least the second or third time they were remembering your name and they were coming up and wanting to give you hugs and just be close with you." Ellie added to the coded responses with, "And some of them I recognize on a weekly basis, and sometimes they recognize me." Mary expressed extreme joy when the mentees started remembering faces. Mary stated, "I think by my senior year, when I was done (students) for example always ran up to me and my sister and even when we were outside of school." When speaking of a

specific mentee, Allison shared this account: "He remembers my name more and he asks me all the questions." There was a similar account from John, stating, "They start to know you and they learn your name and them come back and ask to work with you and say (specific early college student) or (specific early college student) or (specific early college student)."

Opening up. Along the same lines of the Early College high school mentors building a stronger relationship with the elementary students with disabilities was the theme of the mentees "opening up" to the mentor which yielded responses from five participants (42%). When discussing the elementary students with disabilities, Chloe stated, "They were a lot more open because I was there all the time." In the same context, Annie added, "A few of the kids at first, they're . . . a few of the kids are just open. They will run up to you and hug you and whatever. But, some of the other kids are a little bit more shy and it took them awhile to open up." Montana spoke highly of the sensory program that took place within the mentoring program at the students with disabilities' elementary school and indicated, "We have been with the kids inside the classroom and I think they are more open when they are there." When asked about if and how the relationship between the Early College mentors and the elementary student mentees changed over time, Mary stated,

> I definitely feel like it totally changed. I feel like at first they were a little more shy and didn't necessarily open up to us, but then I think by my senior year, when I was done (students) for example always ran up to me and my sister and even when we were outside of school it was the craziest thing I ever saw.

Allison also recognized this occurrence by stating, "A lot of kids open up more now that they are more used to me," and "They open up to me more now than they did at the very

first."

Mutual satisfaction. A surprising theme was how mentee satisfaction led to satisfaction of the mentor, with three participants contributing responses within that theme. Tommy stated, "Those kids, when you put them up on those horses and saw their faces. You know, they were just there to have some fun and it just made your day," and additionally he spoke of the joy it brought to see "how much the program did for them." When asked about the experiences in the mentoring program, Ellie shared, "And, just seeing the smiles on the kids' faces every week, and even the ones when they are scared. When they finally get on the horse and realize they love it." Ellie also indicated that this was a personal favorite aspect of the program, stating,

> I just think it's great to watch these kids get to come and have fun. They're not just doing horse stuff, they are doing other things and it's . . . . A couple of the kids I know their families and they talk about how much they look forward to Fridays and getting to go ride, and I just love knowing that the kids have that much fun.

Allison indicated joy when, "I saw the excitement within them and I saw how much they enjoyed it."

Overall positive. Four Early College high school participants (33%) generally indicated their relationship with their elementary student mentee was positive in nature. Although Tommy generalized this theme with the statement, "It was just good overall," relating to the relationship experience with the elementary students, other Early College high school participants also indicated this theme. Montana indicated a strong connection and positive overall relationship by stating, "I just love them to death and think they are the sweetest kids on the planet." Bethany expanded this positive

relationship to include a general positive relationship among all the Early College high

school mentors and their mentees with, "I liked how everyone was near the kids and

cared about the kids. Nobody was complaining. They were all just happy to be there and

ready to help. The kids loved it." John shared, "We loved working with handicapped

kids. It was a blessing to us. It meant a lot. We kept coming back for more."

Friends. In addition to a strong relationship, specific relationships, the mentees

opening up, or the other themes about the relationships between the mentors and the

mentees, three participants (25%) indicated that by the end of the program their

elementary student mentee was a "friend." Sharing a specific relationship, Lisa stated,

> There was one girl, and at first I was nervous about the whole thing, but she was
>
> really sweet. And she was singing and made us sing with her, so that was cool
>
> because we kind of became friends through it.

In addition, Fisher said, "I've definitely made some new friends from the program";

while Carson shared, "It does build friendships."

Other. In addition to the major relationship themes emerging from these data,

there were two minor themes that also emerged. These were a recognition of likes and

dislikes as the time progressed through the mentoring program and an increase in

communication between the mentors and mentees. As part of a stronger relationship and

identifying the elementary students opening up to their older mentors, there was also a

theme of the Early College high school student mentors' recognition of the mentees' likes

and dislikes. This was indicated by two participants (17%). Montana spoke of the

enjoyment from the sensory program at the elementary school because of how the

elementary students responded in that environment. Montana said, "Getting their

attention without them having to hold up or hold on and other than just listening to you or

being told what to do. They don't really like that much. Also, it's kind of a learning

experience." Bethany commented on the likes of her elementary mentee as well:

> I know (student), she loved dress-up and we would just let her just dress them up.
>
> So she had fun with that. When they got to put on their helmets they got so
>
> excited because it was about time to ride the horses.

One participant spoke at length about the communication component between the

mentors and the mentees, while five participants (42%) specifically discussed the

interaction component. Carson spent some time discussing how the elementary students

with disabilities communicate, although not always through words. Specifically, Carson

stated, "So you learn to read expressions pretty well. Like if they are in pain or

something." It was interesting that this participant developed a relationship with these

elementary students to the degree that they had learned to communicate with each other

without using words. Fisher generalized, "I guess it's been really really good to interact

with people and interact with the horses and everything." Ellie, speaking of the difficulty

with understanding the elementary students in the beginning, later stated, "But over time,

I've become more outgoing with it and I realized even as a leader and a person who only

sees them every now and then, I can still interact with them." Also when speaking of the

elementary students with disabilities and that relationship, Mary indicated, "I feel like I

can interact with them and be comfortable with them." Allison felt so strongly about this

interaction that she, in response to which aspects were the favorite, indicated, "I guess

interacting with the kids and being right there beside them as they are going around. Just

having fun with them as they do it. That's definitely my favorite, just interacting with

them." Additionally, this theme was also described as John's favorite aspect of the

program. John stated, "I think my favorite parts of it were of course working with the

kids each week."

Mentor/mentor. Four participants discussed the relationship between the mentors, specifically three participants including the idea of "teamwork" and one participant addressing "comradery." Again, Tommy generalized, saying, "I liked working with everybody." John stated, "I feel like I enjoyed working with everybody and they enjoyed working with me just as much." However, the other coded responses within this theme gave more insight into the actual nature of these relationships. Carson stated, "I've become better friends with the people I have worked with here. And I've met a bunch of new people." Ellie indicated, "I've made great friends with the other volunteers, too, just relationships have built over time." John added,

> It was awesome to see my classmates and I come together. The ones that stuck
>
> with it for more than three years . . . we all kind of developed a passion for it. I
>
> just loved seeing that comradery grow between us all for one specific thing,
>
> especially something as tender as something like this. As tender as something
>
> like this could be, it was great to see a bunch of teenagers get together and do
>
> something like this. It's awesome I think. I think that's one of my favorite parts.
>
> It was neat to see something like that come together.

The tone of the Early College student participants while talking about the other mentors was that of mutual respect while more on a personal friendship level.

Mentor/staff. Mentor/staff relationships were discussed by three participants (25%). Within this context, staff included the teachers for the elementary students with disabilities, the therapeutic horseback riding staff, and/or the physical therapist and assistant. Tommy generalized to, "I liked working with everybody"; while Annie gave a more in-depth insight into the relationship with a staff member,

I think things went pretty smoothly and it's just a learn as you go. I mean, we met

with (specific adult) after each time and told her suggestions and stuff. I think

that really helped because we would tell her what happened and what we thought

could improve it and it seemed to work pretty well.

Additionally, John added to the responses with, "I feel like I enjoyed working with

everybody and they enjoyed working with me just as much."

Other. In addition to the major themes emerging in the area of relationships, two

minor themes also emerged. These were the relationship among the mentees and the

relationships with the horses. A surprising theme discovered from the data was how the

Early College student participants recognized the relationship between the elementary

students with disabilities. Two separate participants (17%) indicated this theme. Chloe

discussed a specific memory from the sensory activities at the elementary school, saying,

"I really liked the car wash thing that we had there we had there because all the kids

would rotate to the mittens at the end and they would be drying each other off and it was

just the cutest thing." Additionally, John added to the coded responses of the theme with,

"It really amazes me how the kids interact."

The Early College high school participants also commented on the relationships

developed with the horses, specifically the mentor/horse relationship and the

mentee/horse relationship. Only one participant spoke of the relationship that developed

between the mentors and the horses, while two participants contributed about the

relationship that formed between the mentees and the horses. John stated, "We loved

being with horses"; while Tommy commented that "those kids got up there and interacted

with them." Allison added to the coded responses: "with the horses that surprised me

also. Just the relationship between the kids and the horses. I knew it was there, but I

never realized how strong it was."

Attitudes, Feelings, and Beliefs

   The Early College high school student participants had an extreme variety in their

prior experience with students with disabilities. Although prior experience was not a

specific question on the protocol, this theme emerged several times during the interview

process. A total of 46 coded responses within the themes emerged. The frequency of

data and the number of participants quoted for each theme and subcluster are presented in

Table 5. These themes on attitude, feelings, and beliefs before beginning the mentoring

program are displayed in Figure 4, while those postprogram are displayed in Figure 5.

Table 5

Themes and Subclusters for Effects on Attitudes, Feelings and Beliefs

| Themes	Subcluster	Number of Coded Responses	Number of Participants in the Responses
(Pre) Experience			
	None	5	4
	Limited	3	3
	Some	2	2
	Familiar	2	2
(Pre) Expectations			
	Unknown	8	6
Knowledge			
	(Pre) Limited	2	2
	(Post) Enlightenment	5	4
	(Post) Gained	2	2
Attitudes			
	(Pre) Indifferent	2	2
	(Post) Positive Change	2	2
Feelings			
	(Pre) Nervous	4	3
	(Pre) Scared	3	3
	(Pre) Excited	2	2
	(Pre) Happy	1	1
	(Post) Different	2	2
	(Post) Surprised	1	1
Beliefs			
	(Pre) Less Capable	1	1
	(Post) Normalcy	5	4
	(Post) More Capable	4	4
	(Post) Student Uniqueness	2	2
	(Post) Not for Everyone	2	2
	(Post) Simplicity	2	1
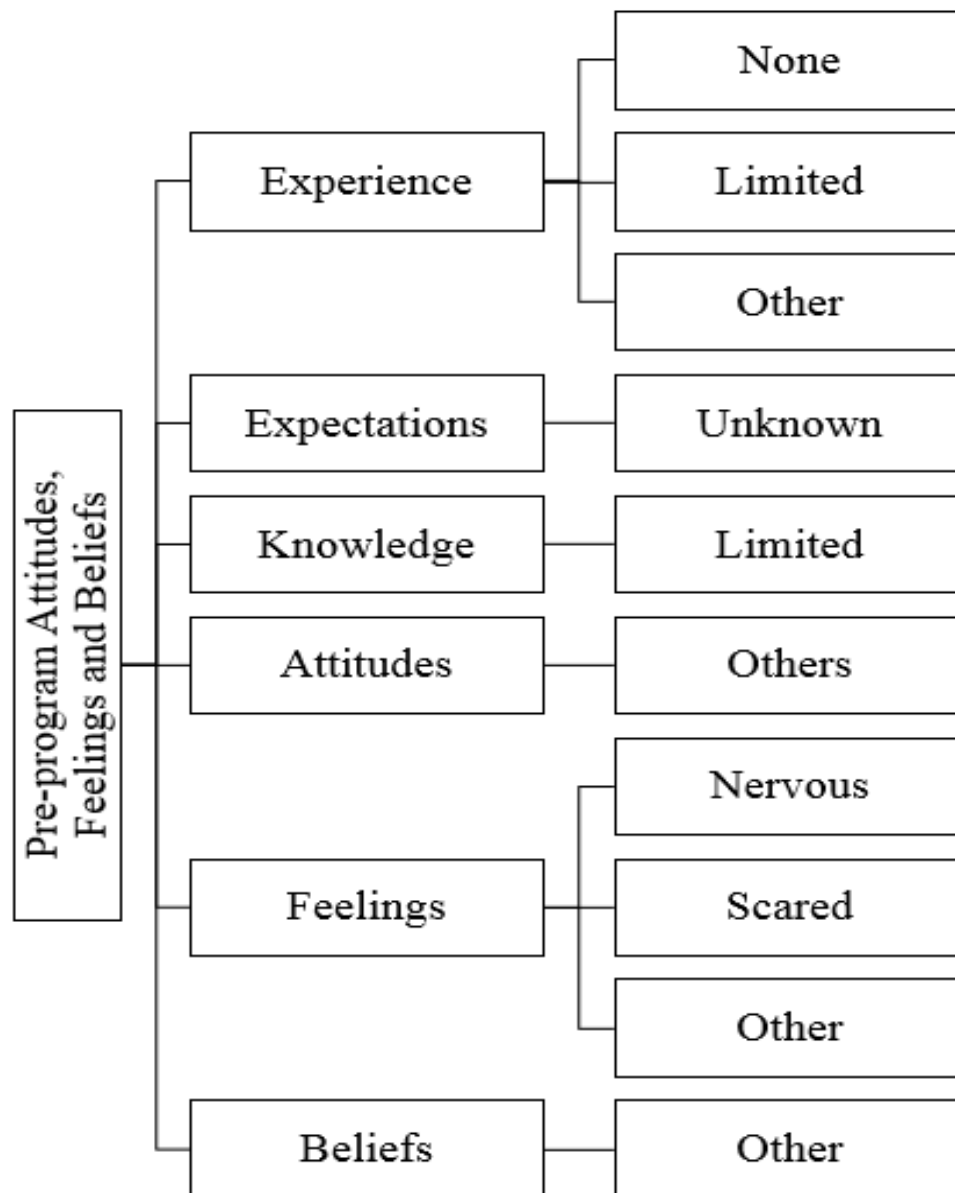
Figure 4. Attitudes, Feelings, and Beliefs Preprogram Hierarchy Chart.
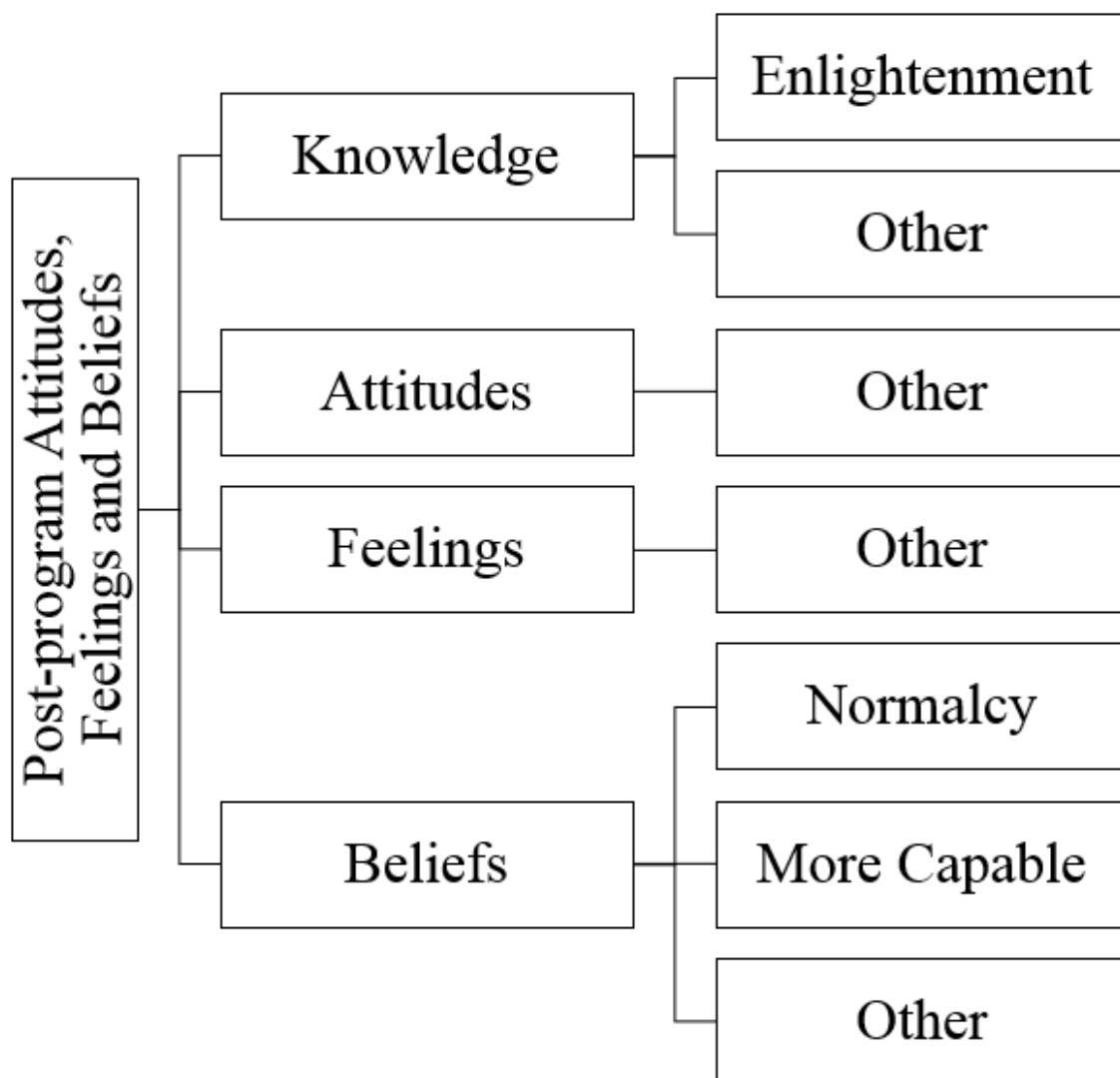
Figure 5. Attitudes, Feelings, and Beliefs Postprogram Hierarchy Chart.

Preexperience. Eleven of the 12 Early College high school participants reported on their prior experience with students with disabilities. Of these, four participants reported that they had no prior experience with people with disabilities before beginning the mentoring program. "I have never worked with disability kids at all," was reported by Lisa, as well as, "I was kind of nervous about how to interact with the kids, since that's not something I have ever experienced." Bethany reported, "I didn't really have any

experience with kids with disabilities." Carson offered a little more information with, "I really didn't know what to expect. I mean, I had seen from like elementary schools I went in, you would see the EC classes, but I had never really thought too much about it." Mary indicated, "I never really had any big interaction with any kids with disabilities."

In addition, three Early College high school students reported having limited prior experience. Annie stated, "I had never really been . . . like I had been around special needs children but I had never really interacted with them and done all that stuff." Ellie, while expressing the feelings associated with beginning the mentoring program, indicated a lack of prior experience with people with disabilities while having an in-depth experience with the horseback riding program itself. Ellie stated, "Well, I watched (therapeutic horseback riding program) as a whole get started because I have been riding with (owner) for forever, really. So, I had a little bit of experience with it." John indicated this same themed response with, "Before I actually started working with some of these kids I didn't know a lot about them."

For the subcategories of prior experience, two Early College high school student participants indicated "some" level of prior experience. Chloe and Tommy provided information that they had some prior experience with people with disabilities. Chloe indicated some experience with,

> I didn't really know that much. My mom has always taught alternative school. Sometimes she got kids with Autism, but not really as severe as a lot of these kids were. Before, I just didn't really know a lot about it.

Additionally, Tommy shared, "I volunteered up at the rest home a lot for a couple of summers. And a couple of my friends have something."

The last subcategory of prior experience, familiar, also had responses from two

Early College high school student participants. Montana and Allison shared their prior

experiences. Montana stated,

> I go to church and we have a class that is specific for people with disabilities and
>
> stuff, so I've been around kids like that and people like that. My aunt she worked
>
> so I heard all kinds of stories and stuff. So I kind of knew what to expect going in
>
> and I wasn't too worried with it.

Additionally, Allison shared, "Well, since my mom works with the EC kids in

elementary school, I've been around them more."

Preexpectations. A prominent theme emerging from the data suggested that half

of the Early College high school student participants had unknown expectations going

into the mentoring program. These students reported being unsure of several factors

including the students with disabilities' behavior and how to best interact and work with

them. Tommy spoke of personal unknown expectations: "Honestly, I didn't know what

to expect when I got up there so I was just enjoying it as I went on"; as well as unknown

expectations of others: "I saw people come in and they wouldn't know what to expect,

how they would act." Montana indicated being unsure, "if it was okay for me to touch

them and all that," and a general, "I just didn't know what to expect," when asked about

feelings, attitudes, or beliefs about people with disabilities. Bethany specified,

> The first time we were just figuring everything out. Just learning the kids' names
>
> and just I guess how to act best around them. Because some wouldn't talk and
>
> some would and some didn't mind if you touched them and some that just set
>
> them off and they didn't like that.

Additionally, when asked to describe attitudes, feelings, or beliefs about people with

disabilities, Fisher stated, "Mostly I just didn't know. Honestly, that is about it. I came

in not knowing"; while Carson generally stated, "I really didn't know what to expect." When asked the same question, Mary stated, "I just wasn't really sure how to act in the beginning."

Preknowledge. Two participants (17%) commented about having limited knowledge of people with disabilities before beginning of the program, while one other participant indicated, "gaining knowledge" about people with disabilities through the time spent in the program. When asked about attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about people with disabilities, Chloe stated, "I just didn't really know a lot about it," while indicating the "it" was referring to disabilities or people with disabilities. Quoting John,

> I just didn't realize the nature of some of their disabilities. But it seems to me that
> before I actually started working with some of these kids I didn't know a lot about
> them . . . I just didn't know anything about handicaps or disabilities so I wasn't in
> a place to say.

While Chloe and John shared their experiences of having limited knowledge of disabilities and people with them before beginning the program, Bethany and John additionally shared how they gained knowledge about these individuals though their time spent in the mentoring program. When speaking of the elementary student mentees, Bethany stated, "By my last time there, we had pretty much figured out how to work best with the kids." John stated, "I just didn't realize the nature of some of their disabilities," and "I didn't know a lot about them."

Postknowledge. Four Early College high school student participants indicated a sense of enlightenment through their time involved in the mentoring program. Many of the participants indicated toward the beginning of the program a feeling of uncertainty, unsureness in expectations, or even a lack of knowledge about the students with

disabilities, in particular in the area of behaviors or tendencies. Through their time in the

mentoring program, these four participants stated their enlightenment on beliefs about

people with disabilities. Lisa specifically stated, "It just opened my eyes more to how the

kids are"; and later, when responding to another interview question, stated, "It just kind

of opened my eyes to what is out there." When asked specifically about beliefs, Montana

shared no prior beliefs, some limited knowledge about people with disabilities, as well as

a statement on how having first-hand experience with people with disabilities may shape

personal and others' beliefs: "But being with them kind of gives you more of an insight

into it." Mary shared, "It was just really eye opening working with a diverse group of

students." John shared,

> Well, honestly my viewpoint changed on kids with mental and physical handicaps
>
> a lot. It's not that I ever had any kind of disrespect for them; I just didn't realize
>
> the nature of some of their disabilities . . . but I come to realize that through my
>
> experiences, that these kids . . . they may lack something here and there but it
>
> seems like they make up for it in some other way and they will always try to find
>
> a way to make you smile. Through the occasional little kick and scream or
>
> whatever.

Pre-attitudes. Only three separate Early College high school students had

responses indicating attitudes toward people with disabilities. Two (17%) indicated

having an "indifferent" attitude toward people with disabilities prior to their participation

in the mentoring program.   In addition, two participants (17%) indicated that after the

program there was a "positive change" in their attitude toward people with disabilities.

The theme of indifference before starting the mentoring program emerged from

two Early College high school student participants. When asked about feelings, attitudes,

and beliefs before starting the mentoring program, Chloe indicated, "I was kind of indifferent. I didn't really have an attitude toward them I guess because I just didn't know much." Additionally, when asked the same question, John stated,

> It seems to me that before I actually started working with some of these kids I didn't know a lot about them and of course I didn't have a bad opinion but I didn't know enough to have a good opinion. I was neutral. I just didn't know anything about handicaps or disabilities so I wasn't in a place to say.

Postattitudes. The theme of positive change was indicated by two participants. When asked if and how attitudes about people with disabilities had changed as a result of the mentoring experience, Chloe stated, "Oh yeah, definitely. Those kids are awesome." Additionally, Mary added to the coded responses with, "Oh, it's a total 360. I definitely think it's totally changed since I started." Mary added some additional details within that response that were coded differently but continued to speak highly of the change in attitude associated with the time spent in the mentoring program.

Prefeelings. Nine Early College students (83%) responded to prior feelings before beginning the mentoring program. These feelings included being nervous (three participants, 25%), scared (three participants, 25%), excited (two participants, 17%) and happy (one participant, 8%).

Three participants indicated their nervous feelings prior to beginning the mentoring program. When asked about the relationship with the elementary students with disabilities, Lisa shared, "At first I was nervous about the whole thing," and specifically, "I was kind of nervous about how to interact with the kids." "I was always apprehensive because I didn't know how to handle kids with these types of disabilities," was Ellie's account; while Mary's account was, "I feel like going into it, it's not that I

was scared, but I was almost nervous I guess because I hadn't been around it. I just wasn't really sure how to act in the beginning."

Additionally, another three participants shared their prior feelings of being scared before beginning the mentoring program. Annie shared, "I will admit, I was a little scared at first." When asked about feelings about people with disabilities before beginning the mentoring program, Montana laughed while stating, "I was a little scared," while indicating that the fear was unwarranted. Ellie additionally shared, "I think I came in afraid to be around them." However, by the end of the program each of these participants indicated they no longer had this feeling of fear or that the feeling was replaced with a positive feeling.

Two Early College high school students shared their excitement before starting volunteering with the mentoring program. After expressing some initial concern about beginning the mentoring program, Lisa also shared, "I was excited to be there." Allison stated, "I really was excited," in response to being asked about feelings prior to beginning the program. In addition to these positive feelings going into the program, one participant shared through the interview process the feeling of happiness going into the mentoring program. When asked about prior feelings toward people with disabilities, Tommy shared that prior work at the group home may have led to his feeling of happiness going into the mentoring program. Tommy stated, "I never had any bad feelings towards it. That's one thing that I was happy to be working with."

Postfeelings. The Early College high school student participants also shared their feelings coming out of the mentoring program after spending some time within the program. Postfeelings were discussed by three participants and included that of difference (two participants, 17%) and surprise (one participant, 8%). These participants

also shared how those feelings had changed or were unexpected. When, if, and how

feelings toward people with disabilities changed as a result of the mentoring program.

Lisa stated, "Yeah, just feelings that it wasn't . . . like, it was a lot different than I thought

it would be." Although it was in response to the question about prior attitudes, feelings,

and beliefs, John shared this experience about how his feelings toward people with

disabilities changed as a result of the mentoring experience:

> Well, honestly my viewpoint changed on kids with mental and physical handicaps
>
> a lot. It's not that I ever had any kind of disrespect for them; I just didn't realize
>
> the nature of some of their disabilities. But it seems to me that before I actually
>
> started working with some of these kids I didn't know a lot about them and of
>
> course I didn't have a bad opinion but I didn't know enough to have a good
>
> opinion. I was neutral. I just didn't know anything about handicaps or disabilities
>
> so I wasn't in a place to say . . . but I come to realize that through my experiences,
>
> that these kids . . . they may lack something here and there but it seems like they
>
> make up for it in some other way and they will always try to find a way to make
>
> you smile. Through the occasional little kick and scream or whatever it's a . . .
>
> basically what I'm saying is through my experiences I've come to love working
>
> with them and it is one of the most favorite things I have done in high school. I
>
> would never have imagined I would have been doing this, but once I started I
>
> didn't want to quit it.

In addition, when asked about post feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about people with

disabilities, Allison spoke of the excitement of entering the program but then shared the

feeling of surprise by stating, "I was expecting certain things and I was surprised at sort

of how some things were different than how I thought they would be."

Prebeliefs. One participant (8%) indicated a prior belief that people with disabilities were less capable than those without disabilities. This Early College high school participant shared with the researcher the belief that before working within the mentoring program, students with disabilities, or at least a particular student with a disability, was less capable. Fisher worked intensively for the entirety of the existence of the therapeutic horseback riding mentoring program with one specific student. Fisher spent a majority of the interview describing the experience with this student. At the beginning of the program, Fisher described how "(Student) started out with . . . I was just a little too . . . sorry about the name . . . I was just a little too . . . like hover-y . . . I tried to do too much."

Postbeliefs. When asked, only one Early College high school participant indicated a prior belief toward people with disabilities before the mentoring program, although there were a great number of participants who did indicate several ways in which their beliefs were affected by the end of the mentoring program. Four participants (25%) indicated a sense of enlightenment toward people with disabilities. Additionally, four participants (25%) indicated a belief of normalcy toward people with disabilities by the end of the mentoring program. An additional four participants (25%) reported a change in belief toward people with disabilities being more capable as a result of their time in the mentoring program. Two participants (17%) indicated a postbelief that people with disabilities are all unique (a sense of uniqueness among all people with disabilities). One participant reported a belief that people with disabilities have a simpler life, while two participants stated that working with people with disabilities is not for everyone. Another four participants indicated a belief of normalcy among people with disabilities as compared to those without by the end of their time in the mentoring program. When

asked about whether beliefs had changed as a result of the mentoring experience, Chloe shared, "They are just like any normal kid, really. They want the same things." When asked the same question, Tommy stated, "You never notice anything about them once you start getting out in life. They just get out and just try to live normal lives. As long as you don't treat them different, they are normal,' and later indicated, "I have no doubts about them," when speaking of the students with disabilities. Annie shared, "Well, I think what I learned was that special needs kids really aren't that different from other children, they just might need different attention than other children." Ellie showed some more depth with,

> So, I had a little bit of experience with it, but I was always apprehensive because I didn't know how to handle kids with these types of disabilities, but I have learned over time that you can treat them just as normal as other kids and I like the growth in myself that it's caused.

An additional three participants in addition to Fisher indicated their beliefs that the elementary students with disabilities were more capable than what they believed after they had spent some time in the mentoring program. Lisa stated, "it also showed me that they are really . . . like, I wouldn't have thought them to be as smart as they are I guess. And, yeah, it was just really neat." "At the end of the program though, I learned that they were more capable of things than I thought they were. I learned that they could pretty much fend for themselves with a little help," was Bethany's account. Following up on the previous statement about the specific elementary student mentee, Fisher additionally shared about the entire mentee group: "They are just capable of so much. Just watching the improvements they make. It's just so so good to see them from the first day until today. It's just something else." Carson shared, "I think they all have potential. Some of

them may be hindered more than others, but they all try to communicate, even they communicate different than how we would."

Other. Two Early College high school student participants shared their belief that students with disabilities are all unique. Lisa shared a favorite of the program as being, "seeing how they were all disabled, but they were all disabled in different ways." Carson gave a series of quotes including, "I think they all have potential. Some of them may be hindered more than others, but they all try to communicate, even they communicate different than how we would." The researcher asked for clarity with, "So you are saying they are all individuals, they are all different," to which Carson indicated, "Yeah."

One participant shared with the researcher the belief of simplicity. Montana indicated the belief that the elementary students with disabilities had a more simple life or enjoyed simplicity within life. When asked to share experiences of the mentoring program, Montana shared, "Also, it's kind of a learning experience because the simplest things make them the happiest." When asked about how beliefs changed as a result of the mentoring experience, Montana additionally shared,

> I think they are the sweetest kids on the face of the planet because they don't really have much to complain about. As long as they are having fun and have a smile on their face, they are happy. They are good. They are humble. They are easy to please.

Two participants shared the belief that working with people with disabilities is not for everyone. When asked to share some challenges of the program, Chloe shared, "Sometimes we had a really small group because a lot of the people weren't consistent. I don't know if that's just that they ended up not liking it, because it's not for everybody.

It's just not." Mary shared with the researcher,

> I think Early College students just need to know it takes a lot of dedication. It's
>
> really rewarding, but you also have to have that mindset that you want to go there
>
> and you want to have fun. I don't necessarily think it's cut out for all kids.

Personal

The Early College high school participants were extremely willing to discuss how the mentoring program affected them personally, including how those effects extended beyond the program. It was an area that yielded a significant amount of coding (26 total codes) as well as a significant array of codes (14 unique codes). The frequency of data and the number of participants quoted for these themes and subclusters are displayed in Table 6. Themes are displayed visually in Figure 5.

Table 6

Themes and Subclusters for Personal Effects

| Themes	Subcluster	Number of Coded Responses	Number of Participants in the Responses
Personal			
	Satisfaction/Benefit	10	6
	Social Skills	2	2
	View of Others	2	2
	Humility	2	2
	Accomplishment	1	1
	Patience	1	1
	Leadership Skills	1	1
	Thankful	1	1
	Confidence	1	1
	Treatment of Others	1	1
	Responsibility	1	1
	Comfort in Ability	1	1
	Perception	1	1
Extension			
	Future Opportunity	5	5
	Career Choice	5	4
	Other Kids	3	3
	Career Reinforcement	2	2
	Community	2	1
	Diversity	1	1
	Career Skills	1	1
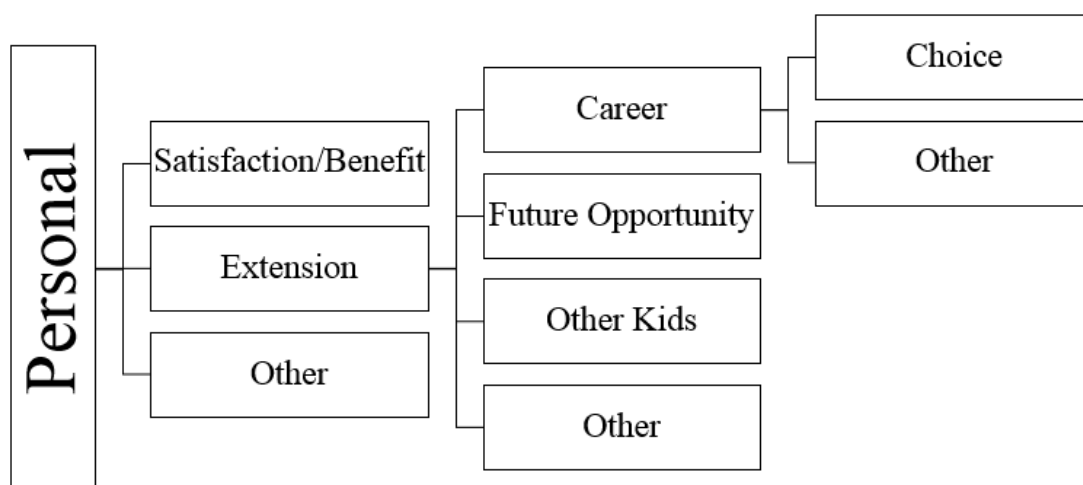
Figure 6. Personal Effects Hierarchy Chart.

Participants were willing to discuss this area openly, not only during those

specific questions in the interview process but throughout the interview. Personal effects of the program were indicated throughout most of the interviews. Six participants indicated the personal satisfaction and/or benefit brought to them specifically by the mentoring program and working with the elementary students with disabilities. Two participants (17%) each indicated a specific benefit of personal humility, increase in social skills, and how they view others. In addition, there was one participant each (8%) who indicated personal effect in the following areas: perception of others, sense of personal accomplishment, comfort in one's own ability, confidence, an increase in leadership skills, an increase in patience, personal responsibility, thankfulness, and treatment of others. A surprising theme emerging from the interviews was how the involvement within the mentoring program affected the Early College high school students beyond their time within the program.

Several "extensions" of the mentoring program and the effects of the program on the Early College high school students beyond their time within the program emerged. Eighteen separate codes with seven code names were recorded. Three of these code names (seven total codes) were in the area of future careers. Five participants (42%) indicated that if a future opportunity arose to work within the context of horseback riding or a mentoring program with students with disabilities, they would accept the opportunity or seek out this type of opportunity in the future based on their experiences within the current mentoring program. Three participants (25%) indicated that their time spent within the mentoring program prepared them to work with other students or children in the future, independent of the mentoring program, either within the community or with personal children of friends or family. The importance of being involved in the community was reported by one Early College high school student, while the awareness

of diversity in general was also reported by one participant (8%).

The extension of the program in the area of future career was intensely spoken of within the interviews. Four participants reported that their time spent in the mentoring program had an effect on their career choice for their future. Some specifically indicated a future field of teaching, physical therapy, or special education. One respondent (8%) each indicated that the time spent in the program had an effect on skills that would be used in a future career and the reinforcement of career choice.

Personal. This was an area of great interest within this study as the participants were passionate about their responses in this area and most spent a great deal of time within this area during the interview process.

Satisfaction/benefit. Six Early College high school students indicated during the interview process their personal satisfaction and/or benefit from being involved in the mentoring program. Chloe shared, "Every Friday, I would leave and my heart was so full." Speaking of the days spent at the mentoring program, Tommy shared, "it just made your day," and later, "If you are having a bad week and getting up there, those kids just make you forget those bad things for just a little while." Carson stated, "You are benefiting as much as the students," and "I think the volunteers get almost as much benefit as the kids do, learning social skills." Ellie's experience during the mentoring program was described as "It just makes me feel better, about life in general"; while she additionally shared, "I like the growth in myself that it's caused." Mary stated, "For me, it was just really rewarding working with all different types of students with their disabilities and just their personalities. I just found it really rewarding." John shared, "It was a blessing to us. It meant a lot. We kept coming back for more. We didn't just want to do it, we fell in love with the program," as well as, "They enjoyed working with us and

we fell in love working with them, so it was a mutual thing."

  Other. In addition to personal satisfaction and benefit from the program, several minor themes in the area of personal effects were also garnered from these data. Two participants specifically addressed the area of humility in response to personal implications of the program. When asked about goals or plans for the future, Montana stated that being involved in the mentoring program, "Well, I think it's kind of made me a more humble person." When asked about favorite aspects of the program, Carson was quick to include working with the elementary students and their growth over time as well as, "It's humbling is a better word."

  An additional two participants addressed a personal gain of social skills through the mentoring program. Fisher shared, "It's actually improved my social skills by interacting and coming up with on the fly stuff to keep kids entertained and stuff." It was noted that Fisher began the program painfully shy, would not make eye contact, and when spoken to would respond very limitedly. By the end of the program, however, he was answering questions fluidly, was making eye contact, and acted very interested in the discussion. Fisher also has a noticeable stutter which the researcher noted seemed to be more present at the beginning of the program. However, during this conversation, it was noted that the participant seemed to be at ease and speaking fluently without issues. Additionally, Carson shared, "I think the volunteers get almost as much benefit as the kids do, learning social skills."

  Two Early College high school participants also addressed their view of others as being effected by their participation in the mentoring program. When asked how involvement in the mentoring program affected, shaped, changed, or reinforced their goals or plans for the future, these two participants responded about their views of others,

specifically those with disabilities, as being changed. Annie specifically stated, "I feel like a lot of people are misinformed about special needs children and what they act like. I feel like the program would just help people to have a better view." Carson additionally responded with, "I know it's changed my view about people with disabilities."

The Early College high school student participants spoke of personal effects in the areas of perception of life, personal achievement, comfort in ability, confidence, leadership skills, patience, responsibility, thankfulness, and treatment of others. Montana spoke of personal perception of life as being affected by the time spent in the mentoring program. Montana stated,

> You look at them and you see kind of how their world is shaped and look at us
> how we can perceive things maybe a little bit better than they can. To me, that's
> changed how I look at things.

Fisher spoke of the effects as being a confidence builder: "It's been a confidence builder, helping me interact," as well as the effect on personal achievement, stating, "It makes me feel accomplished. It's done a lot." Mary addressed comfort in new abilities after involvement in the mentoring program. Mary stated, "I think that I've personally become more comfortable with people with special needs." When asked about how involvement in the mentoring program affected, shaped, changed, or reinforced goals or plans for the future, Carson spoke of leadership abilities, sharing, "When I come in, I really get to interact and that got better over time. Like, now, showing others what to do and how to do it." The researcher followed up with, "So, you're now more of a leader or teacher yourself," which Carson confirmed. In response to the same question, Bethany shared, "It taught me to be more patient." Ellie shared the sense of responsibility that has been instilled through the mentoring program, stating,

It has taught me responsibility that, even in college, I've kept with me. I work at the education unit at NC State. And the responsibilities I've learned here, making sure things are done, I've carried with me over there. People compliment me because I am willing to stay after the hours I am supposed to work to get things done and they love me for it. It's nice to know people appreciate that. And I think it all started working around horses and especially this program.

Fisher indicated that the mentoring program had a personal effect of being thankful. Fisher stated, "just working with the kids and getting to know them has just made me feel very thankful for what I have." One participant shared how the program later had an effect on personal treatment of others. Chloe shared,

I didn't have to do anything, but they just loved me anyways. It's not like I had some great gift for them. They just loved me anyways. It showed me how I should be toward other people as I am going through life.

Extension. A major theme emerging from the data on personal effects from the mentoring program was that of extension into the future, which included future opportunities, response to other kids, extension into the community, and awareness of diversity. In addition, many of the Early College high school students spoke of their time within the mentoring program having effects on their future careers. This included career choice, career skills, and career reinforcement.

Future opportunities. Five participants indicated that through the mentoring program, they would be more likely to engage in a similar opportunity in the future. Fisher stated, "I guess if an opportunity like this came up in the future I would definitely be a lot more . . . I would definitely want to take it." Carson shared, "I do want to stay doing something like this. Even though I am now in Raleigh, I still come back to be

involved in this." Ellie added with,

> And working with this program has made me want to, later on in life, continue
> with this program, or start more of them, maybe expand it to where it's not just
> (specific elementary school). It can be some of the other schools in the county or
> surrounding areas once I am out of college and able to help out more.

Allison additionally shared,

> It made me want to be more involved. When I first started, I thought hey it would
> just be for the semester and I didn't think I would enjoy it so much. Whenever I
> have time, I plan to go back when I can. It's really something that I enjoy. It's
> something that will probably be in my future when I think about it later on being
> involved in it because I just love being around them and everything.

John was excited with the response,

> If I see some kind of opportunity coming up, shoot yea I'm going to take it and do
> it because I have this background. So it's something I'm going to try to keep up
> because I like working with these people.

> **Other kids.** Three Early College high school students shared responses that

made up the theme of their time in the mentoring program transferring to other children.

Bethany shared her experience of the mentoring program,

> It really just helped me with kids in general because I'm not typically good
> around kids and it was easier I guess. I don't know why it was easier with them
> than not, but it was just more . . . I had to be good with them, so that just helped
> me.

Fisher shared, "I guess overall it's just taught me some skills and stuff about first and

foremost caring for young'uns." Carson additionally stated, "And I kind of learned

working with the kids. It helped when I had all the fourth graders in the county. I had to teach them for AG Awareness Day."

Career. A major theme emerging from the data suggests the mentoring experience had an effect on the future of the Early College high school student participants in the area of careers including career choice, career skills, and career reinforcement. This was most notable in the area of career choice. Four participants indicated that the mentoring experience had an effect on their career choice. Only one participant indicated it had an effect on the skills needed in a future career, while an additional participant indicated that the program attributed to career reinforcement.

These four participants indicated career choice was among the effects from participation in the mentoring program of elementary students with disabilities. Chloe shared,

> Actually, before the program I wanted to go into nursing school. And, a couple of other things happened that's kind of a long story, but I decided that I didn't really want to go to nursing school anymore, so I had to decide what I wanted to do. And through the program I think that I realized that I wanted to go into special education.

Chloe additionally shared, "I thought about going into actual occupational therapy, but I think I might just do the special education part of it." Annie had the following to say about future effects of the program: "Actually, it helped me decide what I want to do as far as college. I decided that I wanted to be a physical therapist because of the program." Ellie stated,

> I want to be a vet, and watching one of the (therapeutic horseback riding program) horses. He got injured a couple years back and they didn't think he would live, let

alone be rode again. And to watch him affect kid's lives like this kind of drove

me to want to be a vet and be able to help horses, and kids, and people like this.

When asked about how has involvement in the mentoring program affected, shaped,

changed, or reinforced personal goals or plans for the future, Mary shared,

Honestly . . . and it's crazy . . . it was the deciding factor of my career. I had

never thought about education or anything and I think just working with all the

kids really opened my eyes to it. I just want to be a teacher. I want to be able to

help with all those . . . I just want to be there to help them grow, and I think

(horseback riding program) is what pushed me do that.

Only one participant indicated that the skills learned from the mentoring program

would carry over into a future career. When asked to describe the mentoring experience,

Mary commented,

Well, personally, for me, it was just really eye opening working with a diverse

group of students and it really helped me because I am wanting to be a future

educator, so I think it really helped me learn about all different types of students

and different types of people that are truly out there.

In addition, only one participant indicated that the program reinforced a career choice.

Lisa noted,

I think it showed me some more options of things I could do, but I am not sure I

would want to work with disabled kids in the future because I don't know if I am

the best person for that. But, it just kind of opened my eyes to what is out there.

Other. Only one Early College high school student indicated a sense of

community as an extension of the time spent involved in the mentoring program.

Montana shared how time in the program helped when out in the community by stating,

When I go off places and there are certain children that do need special attention, because I work at a campground, I would know how to handle them and interact with them and be able to get on their level.

Montana additionally shared details of this experience, stating,

I worked at the campground. My last day was like a week ago. So, with the kids there it was better. Some people would come in or call to make a reservation and would be like, 'Well, I have a special needs kid' and since me (Early College participant), and (Early College participant) all worked there it would be like, "Well, we have staff here that know how to get on a interpersonal level with them and treat them fairly and not seem like it's bad or stuff like that." It kind of makes it easier whenever you come into contact with anything like that or anything people's got.

One Early College high school student participant also contributed that the mentoring experience led to a better understanding and acceptance of diversity. Mary shared, "I think it really helped me learn about all different types of students and different types of people that are truly out there."

Summary

The 12 Early College high school student participants were willing and eager to share their experiences of the mentoring opportunity with elementary students with disabilities with the researcher. Several themes were discovered through this interview process. There was a sense of the unknown going into the program, while the most notable theme was the overall positive report of the experience by all of the participants. The participants noted a stronger relationship with their elementary student mentees as they spent more time within the program. In addition, a stronger relationship was formed

among themselves and with other adults involved in the program. The participants also reported a better understanding of people with disabilities after their involvement in the program. A major suggestion was continued for better training on expectations of the mentors and the disabilities prior to entering the program. The responses from the Early College high school student participants along with coding and analysis revealed answers for the research questions. In addition, emerging themes from data aligned with previous research in the areas of service learning, mentoring, and Contact Theory, which are discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to garner the perspectives of Early College high school students who were involved in a common phenomenon, a mentoring program with elementary students with disabilities. The participants were involved in the program for a period of 1 month to 5 years. Of particular importance in this study were the conclusions of if and how this experience affected the Early College High School students' attitudes, feelings, or beliefs about people with disabilities. This study attempted to add to the literature surrounding service learning and mentoring programs and their possible benefit to the mentors involved within the program, since the information at this time is extremely limited. This study also attempted to add to the literature on Contact Theory, since its use is widely known throughout many intentional pairings of two dissimilar groups but is limited in the scope of people with disabilities.

As the number of people with reported disabilities is on the rise, so are those relying on government assistance programs for life's necessities. One of the most significant barriers to obtaining a job by those with disabilities is the stigma and prejudices still evident today in American society (McLaughlin et al., 2010). However, when given the opportunity and some support, these individuals tend to flourish in the community (Novak et al., 2011). It is suggested that personal experiences play a vital role in attitude and tolerance, while negative stigma can be altered based on exposure, reducing or eliminating prejudices (Cameron et al., 2011; Mazziotta et al., 2011; Novak et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013; Rodenborg & Boisen, 2013). As an extension of Social-Cognitive Theory, Contact Theory describes intentional pairing of two dissimilar groups of people through direct contact as a means of improving the relationships between the groups (Allport, 1954). Contact Theory has been used in an

abundance of varying scenarios with similar positive outcomes, but the area of people with disabilities with nondisabled individuals continues to be an understudied area still in its infancy.

This study attempted to define the collective experiences of 12 Early College high school students serving as student mentors to elementary students with disabilities. The study additionally attempted to gain in-depth knowledge about how participation in the program affected their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions in relationship to the program and toward people with disabilities. These Early College high school students participated in individual interviews where the questions were designed to garner their collective experience of the program related to specific areas of interest to the study. Although interview questions were thoughtfully designed to each address a specific research question, the Early College high school student participants referenced indicators of all the research questions throughout the interview process which required careful data organization. Data from the participants included general examples and deep emotions when discussing the experience. After transcription of the interviews by the researcher, these data were coded using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software and analyzed for common trends for use in answering the research questions.

Within this chapter, the discussion of the findings center on the three research questions presented in Chapter 1. In each section, the most significant findings are discussed first, followed by those with less significance. Throughout each section, the discussion links the findings of this study back to the literature discussed in Chapter 2 and includes the researcher's interpretation of those findings. In addition, these findings are linked back to Contact Theory. After this discussion of findings, Chapter 5 discusses limitations of the study and concludes with the implications of the research findings for

future mentor/mentee pairings with students with disabilities both in practice and in future research, including methodological implications. The chapter then concludes with a summary.

Research Questions and Answers

Question 1: Perceptions of mentoring experiences. The Early College high school student participants were eager and willing to share their personal accounts of the mentoring experience. Although specific details were shared by most of the participants, all of them indicated their overall positive experience within the program.

Overall positive. The Early College high school students spent a varying amount of time within the mentoring program. Some spent less than a year, while others spent more than 3 years, with many of the students having ranges in between. The most prominent theme emerging from the data was an overall positive experience with the mentoring program. All 12 participants included quotes and references about the program being a positive experience during their interviews. This supports the findings of Astin et al. (2000) who also reported significant positive effects for students who were involved in a service-learning opportunity. The participants' account of their positive experiences had an impact on them returning to the mentoring program each semester. Since program retention is an important factor in a program's success, this finding offers important insight into program values that may keep these mentors coming back or referring the program to new mentors.

Fun/silly. Within the noted overall positive experiences, almost half of the Early College high school student participants included a reference to having fun or being silly within the program, either as a mentoring program favorite or in generally speaking about their experience. This indicates the nature of the mentoring service-learning program

which contributed to the overall positive perception of the program: The freedom of playful expression, in addition to contributing to the sense of enjoyment of the program, laid the framework for a more personable connection between the mentors and the mentees. This led to positive relationships noted between the mentors and the staff members. This finding has important implications for the nature of such a program in order to foster these in-program relationships as well as retention and recruitment of mentors.

Consistency. The Early College high school student participants stressed the importance of consistency while being a mentor, not only to maximize benefits as a mentor but also to benefit the mentees. The Early College high school student participants also reported on the level of involvement within the mentoring program leading to the satisfaction obtained from the program. It is interesting that the mentors were able to evaluate how their presence made a difference not only to themselves but to the mentees as well. This speaks to the nature of the growing relationship the participants reported between themselves and their mentees and how time spent in the program could be correlated to stronger relationships and personal effects as suggested by Novak et al. (2011).

Community. The Early College high school student participants also included making a difference and a desire for community involvement or having effects on the community as reasons for initial or continued involvement. This finding is consistent with Astin et al. (2000) who also found students being involved in service learning having more of a connection within the community. Along this same theme, Marshall and Perry (2010) reported that in order for an activity to be truly service learning, it must teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities. This further solidifies that the

mentoring program explored within this study truly qualifies as a service-learning experience. The Early College high school student participants expressing the theme of community involvement and further service extend the findings of Weiler et al. (2013) who indicated students involved in a mentoring opportunity had significantly higher civic mindedness scores than students who did not participate in the opportunity.

Favorites. Significant favorite experiences of the program as indicated by the participants included sensory activities and seeing the elementary students with disabilities within their own environment. An insignificant number of participants indicated favorites of the program additionally being personal improvement and horseback riding. Almost half of the participants included specific memories or stories from the mentoring experience. Only one participant shared an account of the program that was a general account of her mentoring responsibilities. It was noted that this participant had spent the least amount of time in the mentoring program, approximately three months. This links back to participant accounts of their consistency within the program which reportedly led to both their personal gain from the program and gains from the mentees. It is important to note both the intrapersonal as well as the interpersonal feelings or beliefs that accompany these accounts of favorite aspects. Although some of the accounts were personal in nature, most of the participants discussed the improvement within themselves rather than simply favorite activities or components of the program. In addition, many of the participants spoke of favorites that were outside of themselves, those that required thinking of their mentees. This indicated the personal nature of the mentor/mentee relationship, as the mentors explained favorite aspects of the program being about their mentees.

Challenges. The most significant challenge presented from the data was having

either more vigorous informative training or the continuation of the training presented before the program year to include information about the elementary students with disabilities. This is an area that should be shared with the stakeholders of the mentoring program so those individuals can take steps toward making this information available to the mentors. It is interesting that the mentors had a wish for this information in order to better benefit the mentees and lead to their own deeper understanding of the disabilities and how to react to the actions caused by them.

Consistency of mentor attendance and having enough volunteers each session were discussed as challenges. This is where it is extremely important for the findings and implications of this study to be shared with the program stakeholders. The information about the mentor experiences along with their perceived challenges could alleviate or at least positively impact the number of mentors returning each session or the recruitment of new mentors into the program.

Several Early College high school student participants reported that asserting authority at the beginning of the mentoring program was a challenge. This finding was consistent with Maheu (2009) who noted service learning transforming participants in response to their experience. Maheu specifically noted the participants within that study gained confidence to include questioning those in authority or those considered experts. It is of great benefit to the mentors and the mentees alike that the mentors learned this balance of authority and friendship within the mentoring program through support. This coincides with the work of Herrera et al. (2000) who reported that the closer and more supportive mentoring relationships can be, the more likely they are to make a positive impact on the mentees.

Other challenges noted by the Early College high school student participants

included the location of the horseback riding and transition times between activities for

the elementary students with disabilities. Since the location of the therapeutic horseback

riding sessions changed in the past year, it appears that this was a major issue in the past,

and those concerns were noted and dealt with appropriately. It could be speculated that

the issues and challenges that arose within this study will be handled in a similar manner

by those who are in leadership roles within the mentoring program. Since the

participants are calling for more intensive information about the students with disabilities,

it would be wise to include within that information strategies for transitions. This would

alleviate the challenge of transitions in the future through training the Early College high

school student participants in transition strategies and the appropriate use of their

authority during those times.

Relationships. The interviews produced a significant amount of data about

relationships within the mentoring program that were not only between the mentors and

the mentees but between others in the program as well. However, positive mentor

relationships with the mentees was the most significant area of produced data. This

further supports the findings of Herrera et al. (2000). Within their study, Herrera et al.

compiled the voices of over 1,100 participants representing almost 100 separate programs

and reported a bond between mentors and mentees in both community-based and school-

based mentoring. They also reported that community-based mentors reported a feeling of

being closer to their mentees than school-based mentors; however, in contrast, the

participants within this study reported feeling more of a connection and additional

benefits when seeing the mentees within their own environment, e.g., the school setting

rather than in the community-based component.

Within the current study, several themes occurred related specifically to the

mentor and mentee relationship. Half of the participants indicated that seeing their mentees grow produced personal satisfaction. This finding further expands on the strong bond reported between the mentors and mentees of this program. Specific mentor/mentee stories were shared by over half of the respondents. This leads to the conclusion that the mentors made specific bonds with certain individuals over the span of the program rather than with the mentees as a collective group. The interaction with their mentees was mentioned several times by the mentors. The participants reported the mentor/mentee relationship grew stronger over time, where the mentees "opened up" to their mentors as their time within the program progressed. This was similarly reported by Olsen (2008), where it was concluded the teacher mentors studied within the project reported positive socialization both with their mentees and students. Within the current study, the Early College high school student mentors reported satisfaction when the mentees began to recognize and remember them and in turn the mentors began recognizing the likes and dislikes of the mentees. The participants reported becoming "friends" with their mentees through the mentoring process. The mentors reported an overall positive relationship with their mentees through the program. Communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, was key to this positive relationship. This relationship experience contributed to the positive outcomes on attitudes toward people with disabilities, further clarifying the research on Contact Theory as specifically targeting people with disabilities. This is discussed in depth in the next section.

Other significant relationships made through this program included those between the mentors and the horseback riding and school staff, the mentors with the horses, the mentees with the horses, and the mentees with each other. Another significant finding was the mentor relationship among each other. The feelings of "teamwork" and

"comradery" were interesting findings. This could be an area of further exploration during additional research.

Question 2: Effect on attitudes about people with disabilities. While the Early College high school student participants were flowing with information and this research question was at the heart of this study, it is also the area which yielded the least responses from the participants. Although disappointing, the researcher speculated that perhaps this area was deeper and more personal than the others and therefore the participants spent the least amount of time discussing this area. However, the information gained was still of significant importance in the field of Contact Theory.

Prior experience and expectations. The Early College high school participants had varying prior experiences with people with disabilities. A quarter of the participants had no prior experience with people with disabilities before beginning the mentoring program, while the others had varying degrees of prior experience. Those with previous experience with people with disabilities did not indicate whether that experience influenced their decision about entering the mentoring program. The only shared expectation going into the mentoring program was that of the unknown. Half of the participants shared this during their interviews. It can be concluded that even with prior experience with people with disabilities, the participants were unsure of how to perceive this specific mentoring program and their mentees before actually becoming involved. This further supports Maheu (2009) who similarly concluded those involved in service learning gain knowledge of their own perspectives based on their involvement, which was the case for the participants in this study. The Early College high school student participants were simply unaware of what to expect with regard to the program, the elementary students with disabilities, or the experience coming into the program. This

appeared to surface regardless of prior experience.

Knowledge. Knowledge of people with disabilities before the mentoring experience was limited. Afterwards, the mentors reported a sense of enlightenment toward those with disabilities while also gaining knowledge about those individuals. According to Contact Theory, this outcome should have been expected since Kaye (2010) reported that as groups spend more time together, they learn more about each other. It could be speculated that the time spent with the students with disabilities had a direct correlation to the Early College high school students' sense of knowledge. The participants shared little about specific knowledge gained, only that knowledge was gained.

Attitude. Early College high school student participants reported an attitude of indifference toward people with disabilities going into the mentoring program, while they came out with positive changes in attitudes. This again should be an expected outcome within the realm of Contact Theory, as the premises behind the theory itself are improvement of relationships and attitudes (Allport, 1954). However, since attitude was a factor on which reporting was done postintervention, there is a possibility the participants did not adequately address their prior attitudes, especially if they contradicted current attitudes. Reporting on self-attitude may be difficult when it pertains to a specific group of people. It may have been easier and perceived as more socially acceptable to report no prior attitudes than to reveal socially undesirable thoughts (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliott, 2002). Barker et al. (2002) further clarified, "Research participants may not be able to provide the level of detail, or use the concepts, that the researcher is interested in" (p. 95), which may account for the limited responses from the participants within this study. Attitudes, feelings, and beliefs toward people with disabilities was an area of great

interest within this study, so it was disappointing that it yielded such limited data.

Feelings. Feelings of being happy, nervous, scared, and excited were reported going into the mentoring program by the participants, while afterwards those feelings were reported by the participants as being different and surprised. This was consistent with Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) where within their meta-analysis a direct inverse correlation was found between intergroup contact and prejudice. In addition, similar findings were reported specifically between groups with disabilities and those without (Novak et al., 2011). It should be noted that the participants who reported positive feelings going into the program were also those who reported having some prior contact with people with disabilities, while those who reported feelings of reservation had little to no prior experience with people with disabilities. This further supports the findings of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) as well as Contact Theory. Those who reported being excited and happy prior to their mentoring experience may have reported different feelings before their initial experience with people with disabilities.

Beliefs. Beliefs about people with disabilities appeared to be affected by the intentional pairing within the mentoring program. Before beginning the mentoring program, the Early College high school student mentors reported a belief that people with disabilities were less capable, while they reported a belief that people with disabilities were more capable following their time within the mentoring program. This was consistent with the findings of Novak et al. (2011). When interviewing coworkers of people with disabilities, Novak et al. discovered the coworkers had a more general acceptance of the individual with disabilities after he or she had time to get to know the individual, which allowed the individual with a disability to eventually work as an equal. This has huge implications for the general society and workforce. If these individuals

with disabilities were viewed by their peers as capable individuals, it would potentially allow these individuals to be viewed as equals within the workforce. Having individuals working would contribute back to society financially, both through the earning of income and in not needing government assistance programs, reserving federal, state, and community resources for those of greater need.

In addition, the Early College high school student participants coming out of the current study's mentoring program reported on student uniqueness and people with disabilities being "normal." Further adding to the literature and following the concept of Contact Theory, Kaye (2010) reported as individuals spend time together, they learn more about each other and realize their similarities while differences fade. This was consistent with the Early College high school student participants believing the students with disabilities were "normal" after their intentional pairing. This alludes to the participants thinking their mentees were like themselves. Along the same concept, the Early College high school student mentors involved in the current study also reported the belief that people with disabilities enjoy more simplicity.

In addition, it was noted by the participants several times that working with people with disabilities is not for everyone. Although many participants reported a sense of calling into special education or a teaching field based on the mentoring experience, it is important to note that some found the opposite, reporting the experience led them to choose another career path. It is important for students at this level to have a variety of experiences before settling on a future career or educational path. While it is important to those who were led into their future career based on their experience in the program, it is equally important for those who, based on their experience and other factors, voiced a preference for a different career or educational path. Both of these actions show how the

Early College high school students were willing to accept their experiences and use those experiences to reflect and make informed decisions within their own lives about their futures.

       Contact Theory. Contact Theory, as an extension of Social-Cognitive Theory, pairs different groups of individuals directly in order to improve the groups' relationships. Contact Theory recognizes that children can recognize differences in groups by the age of 10. All of the Early College high school student participants were aged 14-18; this recognition held true for their accounts of attitudes, feelings, and beliefs toward the elementary students with disabilities before involvement in the program. Although the Early College high school student participants indicated only minimal prejudices coming into the program, there were several negative attitudes, feelings, and beliefs. These were discussed in detail earlier in this section. However, there were reports after spending time in the mentoring program of positive thoughts and acceptance. After spending some time in the mentoring program, the Early College high school student participants reported the belief that the elementary students with disabilities were "normal." This supports the finding of Kaye (2010), who stated that as individuals spend time together, they learn more about each other and realize their similarities while differences fade. This is further supported by the current study as the Early College high school student participants reported satisfaction when the elementary students with disabilities recognized them each mentoring session and even more satisfaction when this occurred within the community. In addition, the participants reported learning their mentees' likes and dislikes as they continued within the program, giving more support for Kaye (2010) who reported this type of relationship growth as more time was spent together.

Cameron et al. (2010) were among the first to use Contact Theory with children in research, although that research studied children with different ethnicities. However, much like the current research study, the students were intentionally paired within dissimilar groups. According to Cameron et al., participants reported being more likely to show friendship to a student in a different group on a future occasion following the intentional pairing. This was also a finding within the current study where the Early College high school student participants specifically used the word "friends" to reflect on their relationship with their mentees, the elementary students with disabilities.

Perhaps one of the most significant links to prior research in the field of Contact Theory and the current study is from a study conducted by Novak et al. (2011). In that study, coworkers of people with disabilities were interviewed. These coworkers reported a more general acceptance of the individual with a disability after having time to get to know the individual. The Early College high school student participants similarly reported a more general acceptance of their elementary mentees with disabilities after being in the program. This has huge implications for the school setting and the workforce. If these opportunities for pairings happen earlier in life for all parties involved, more equality will be fostered sooner. Aligned with Contact Theory, the current study showed improvement in relationships between two dissimilar groups, the Early College high school student participants and the elementary students with disabilities.

Question 3: Personal effect. In addition to the researcher analyzing themes in other areas of the interview process, when the Early College high school student participants were asked specifically about any personal effects that the program may have had, there was a significant consensus about the personal satisfaction and benefits of the

program. Some were intrapersonal, while others were interpersonal.

Intrapersonal. The Early College high school student participants indicated several specific intrapersonal gains as a result of their time spent in the mentoring program. They also addressed the areas of gains in personal achievement, confidence, and patience. This extends the findings of Kielsmeier et al. (2006) who also reported service learning connected community work and academic learning in a meaningful way and promoted growth both personally and socially. The Early College high school student participants within this study further reported an increase in confidence in their ability through their experience. This was consistent with Weiler et al. (2013) who also reported significantly higher scores in self-efficacy and self-esteem in students who participated in the mentoring opportunity than those who did not. Weiler et al. (2013) similarly reported that mentoring within the context of service learning led to generalization by the participants in the domains of socioemotional and identity pedagogy. Additionally, Astin et al. (2000) also reported personal self-efficacy as an effect of service learning as reported by students from various national colleges and universities. The findings of the current study confirm these same stated benefits of the mentoring program on the mentors.

Leadership skills and sense of responsibility as a result of their time spent in the mentoring program were reported by the Early College high school student participants in the current study as well. Astin et al. (2000) also reported an increase in leadership abilities as an effect of service learning. This result is further clarified by Kaye (2010) who reported that being involved in service learning allows students to apply the skills learned in a way that will improve the community, foster personal success, and develop leadership skills to make important decisions, all while helping others. This is

additionally consistent with the current study where the participants reported applying the skills they learned through the mentoring program in new ways within the community, especially with other children, whether or not they had a disability. This is consent with the findings of Yorio and Ye (2012). Within their meta-analysis on the effects of service learning, Yorio and Ye reported the participants' social, personal, and cognitive outcomes and concluded responsibility was one of the most meaningful aspects of service learning. Thus, the Early College high school student participants discussing their realization of responsibility through the program should have been an expected theme.

Interpersonal. Specifically, the Early College high school student participants addressed the areas of improvement in social skills. This supports the findings of Marshall and Perry (2010) who reported personal and social growth through service learning. Similar findings were additionally reported by Kielsmeier et al. (2006). This was also consistent with Maheu (2009), in which 12 college students who were engaged in a service-learning experience reported an increase in communication skills. The Early College high school student participants specifically addressed an increase in communication skills as an outcome of their time spent involved in the mentoring program. It appears that the nature of this mentoring program, including the playful atmosphere and freedom to express themselves, led to the mentors feeling more at ease as they spent more time with their mentees. From this, they were more relaxed and learned to communicate more effectively with their mentees, which led to generalization with socialization and communication with others, including their peers and adults.

Through the interview process and later analysis, it could be concluded that the Early College high school student participants felt more at ease communicating with their elementary students with disabilities than they normally would with their peers or adults.

While the ease of communication through their time in the program strengthened, so did their generalization of those skills. One particular participant discussed at length how the mentoring program positively affected his socialization and communication. The researcher additionally noted this particular participant having a severe speech impediment at the beginning of the mentoring program. This participant also lacked the ability to carry on a conversation while maintaining eye contact and would avoid conversations if possible. However, during the interview, the participant appeared at ease, the speech impediment was less prominent, and eye contact was maintained throughout the interview. While age, maturity, social experiences, or any range of unknowns could have played a factor in this participant's success in the area of communication, the participant spoke highly of his time in the program being a significant factor in the attainment of those skills. It should be noted that this participant had been a mentor with the program since its beginning, being one of the participants with the most time spent in the program. This positive impact in the area of social skills, particularly communication, gave this participant a new confidence in himself.

The Early College high school student participants within this study also addressed an influence on the areas of humility; their view, perception, and treatment of others; and their thankfulness as outcomes of their time in the program. Similarly, Astin et al. (2000) reported service learning having significant positive effects in the area of personal values. The views, perceptions, and treatment of others are all within the realm of changes in how the participants think about and treat others. These personal effects were all interpersonal which should have been an expected outcome according to Contact Theory, since the theory itself focuses on interpersonal relationships (Allport, 1954).

Future. The Early College high school student participants indicated several

ways in which their time spent within the mentoring program influenced their future. Extensions of the mentoring program included several ways in which future careers were influenced. The Early College high school student participants additionally reported skills obtained within the program would be useful in future careers. Maheu (2009) similarly concluded that service learning benefits college students in the area of their own intellect and being more self-aware of their skills. The Early College high school student participants within this study also reported the mentoring experience led to career choices or career reinforcement for several participants. This finding was confirmed by the work of Astin et al. (2000) who reported service learning having a significant positive effect on students in the area of career choice or plan.

Based on participant accounts, the mentoring experience within this study also led to willingness and desire to help within the community. Astin et al. (2000) similarly reported that students involved in service learning made more of a connection with the community. The Early College high school student participants indicated they would willingly volunteer in future similar opportunities. This was equally found in Astin et al. where those involved in a service-learning opportunity reported the decision to continue service after the service-learning experience. The experience within the current study also extended to treatment of other children and acceptance of diversity. Novak et al. (2011) extended this finding to report that relationships with others are directly tied to one's sense of happiness and quality of life. Olsen (2008) reported a direct correlation between the amount of time teacher mentors spent in the field and their comfort working with students of various backgrounds. This again has important implications for the greater society.

Limitations of the Study

Within the current study, there are several limitations to note. Of the 20 Early College high school students invited to participate in the interview process, 12 of those students accepted. Although these 12 students represented a variety of prior experiences and time spent in the mentoring program, there may have been different views, experiences, or perspectives described by the other eight individuals who did not wish to participate in the study. In addition, it may have provided useful information to attempt to obtain the perspectives of those Early College high school students who began in the program but either dropped out or chose not to return in following semesters. This information could provide an entirely different account of the program, including the relationships and attitudes towards those with disabilities. It may also give the program stakeholders useful information when addressing program retention or recruitment for mentors or identifying otherwise unknown issues within the program.

Many research articles noted the importance of reflection on the part of the participants to get the most out of their service learning or mentoring experience. Although the time spent in the interview process was a time for reflection for the participants within this study, it should be noted that a time for active reflection within the mentoring program could prove to be beneficial for the mentors. If this had been a part of the program, more information may have been obtained from the participants.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of the current study have several important implications for both practice and future research in the areas of service learning, mentoring, and Contact Theory.

For practice.

Current program. The Early College high school students had several insights for program improvement of the current mentoring program. This strongly included the request for training before beginning the mentoring sessions specifically addressing the disabilities of the elementary students. Based on challenges identified by the participants, this awareness training should also focus on ways to appropriately exercise authority and strategies to help make transition times smoother for the elementary students. It is recommended that this informational session occur with a mental health professional who is trained in working with students with disabilities and in fostering therapeutic relationships in combination with the therapists and exceptional children's teachers who offer support for the elementary students with disabilities within the program. It appears the current training model occurred before the first mentoring session each year but focused primarily or only on handling the horses, completing activities with the horses, and the elementary students' safety. This training should continue in addition to adding the requested disability awareness components. This should allow the Early College high school students to be more comfortable in their abilities when entering the program and make for a smoother beginning of the program each school year. Addressing the needs identified by these Early College high school students could alleviate some of the anxiety felt at the beginning of the program and in turn could address the challenge of having enough mentors each session and future recruitment of new mentors. This awareness component should also lead to a more therapeutic relationship between the mentors and mentees.

The Early College student participants indicated through the interview process that they enjoyed the time within their mentee's elementary school more than the time

spent in the community-based aspect of the mentoring program. This included not only their sense of happiness but seeing the enjoyment of their mentees by being in their "home" environment. This is a surprising finding considering Herrera et al. (2000) indicated more benefits through community-based mentoring than school-based mentoring. With this finding, it is recommended that the current program expand the school-based component of this program.

Time for participant reflection throughout the experience is an important component of both service learning and mentoring. However, the interview process of this study for the Early College high school student participants was the only time they had to reflect on their experiences. Based on Marshall and Perry (2010) and Kaye (2010), allowing additional guided reflection or a reflection assignment as part of the mentoring service-learning program should prove a valuable part of the mentoring experience. This could provide additional value to the mentors' experiences and allow for discussion and collaboration for program improvement.

Other programs. With the overall positive experience reported by the mentor participants within this mentoring program, there are some implications of the findings that may prove useful for similar programs, in creating new programs, or expanding the current program. The Early College high school student participants spoke highly of the playful atmosphere of the program, having fun and being silly with their elementary mentees. The atmosphere may have contributed to their overall positive experience and should be continued in the program.

The Early College high school student participants spoke highly of their relationship with the elementary student mentees. Specifically, they spoke of the relationship growing stronger throughout their time in the program and the mentees

opening up and becoming friends through the program. Although there are several

intentional pairings within mentoring programs that were discussed in the literature, the

one-on-one and small group pairings used within this mentoring program appear to be a

key factor in these positive relationship outcomes. It is recommended that similar

pairings be thoughtfully planned in future programs.

Greater society. Novak et al. (2011) reported that relationships with others are

directly tied to one's sense of happiness and quality of life. This is the premise for social

inclusion in the workplace. However, there remains the challenge of social acceptance

for people with disabilities in the workforce. Considering the findings of this research

study, it can be concluded that intentional pairing of people without disabilities with

individuals with disabilities will most likely cause a positive effect in attitude, belief,

feelings, and tolerance toward those with disabilities. This leads to the support for

inclusive classrooms during the early school years and before, if possible, in order to

address these groupings before those students enter the age where differences in groups

become more noticeable, around age 10. If this can occur so early in life, those

relationships will already be in place when those individuals enter the workforce. This

will lead to a smoother workplace environment from the beginning of the career of the

individual with a disability.

When individuals with disabilities are unable to obtain or retain a job, many times

they must seek government assistance programs. Not only does this put a strain on

society, especially those workers who provide the taxes as funding for those programs, it

also leads to a more sedentary life for the individuals with disabilities which can lead to a

more dissatisfying life experience through fewer relationships and activities. However, if

these individuals could enter the workforce with support where appropriate while being

viewed as a valuable member of the working team, positive relationships will be made and the individual may be more likely to become self-sufficient while also contributing taxes back to the community and American society as a whole.

The mentors within this research indicated that they would be more willing to volunteer for future opportunities if they came up. They also reported a sense of responsibility in relationship to the community. The Early College high school student participants additionally reported the mentoring experience having an impact on their treatment of others, especially children. The participants also shared that they learned skills within the mentoring experience that would help them with future job skills. With all of this information to consider, it is easy to see the positive impact similar experiences have for the community as a whole.

For future research. There are several implications for future research as a follow up with the current study. Although the Early College high school student participants indicated that their time spent in the program would have an impact on their futures in several ways, it would be interesting to follow up with these same participants in several years in order to evaluate the long-term impact, if any. It would prove useful information to get their voices on their time spent in the mentoring program after being away from the program for several years, to see if new themes emerged or previous indicated themes continued long-term. Outcomes on careers, volunteer opportunities, and skills used would also be interesting.

It is important for researchers to continue studying programs similar to this mentoring program in the same fashion in order to garner perspectives to validate or challenge the findings of this study. It appears that these participants were a true representation from this program, and it is presumed that similar information would be

gained from a similar program. However, this may not be the case. It would also be beneficial to see if different styles of mentor and mentee groupings offered similar findings.

The Early College high school student participants additionally shared information that was valuable to the study but valuable as areas of future exploration through research. The participants shared the idea of teamwork or "comradery" as a benefit arising from their experience in the mentoring program. This was not a specific area addressed in this research study but may have important implications in the future and should be explored in future research. In addition, the participants shared the perceived benefits of the program to the mentees and noted their growth throughout their time in the program. It would additionally be beneficial to study this impact from the mentees' perspectives and how these intentional pairings through a mentoring program or specifically a therapeutic horseback riding program may impact those students with disabilities in regards to academics, behaviors, and personally.

Methodology. One of the major themes discussed in Astin et al. (2000), Maheu (2009), and Weiler et al. (2013) was the effect service learning and mentoring had on academic attainment and intellectual development for the mentors. This was not an area specifically explored with the current study but may lead to interesting findings. In addition, although several areas of personal improvement were noted by the participants, academics did not surface as a theme which is contrary to previous research of Astin et al. (2000) and Kielsmeir et al. (2006). It may be beneficial for future research to include an instrument or questions on a survey that specifically address effects of the mentoring service-learning opportunity on academic attainment and intellectual development.

In addition, there was interesting information to be gained by having the

participants share their experiences, even in the areas of attitudes, feelings, and beliefs. However, due to the limited data within this area, it may be beneficial to have a prementoring measure of attitudes, feelings, and beliefs compared to a postmentoring measure. The impact of purposeful pairing of individuals within such a mentoring program, although conclusive of other findings, was limited. The qualitative nature did provide voices of the participants, quotes, and specific stories that would not have been possible by other means. However, having an assessment tool such as a survey for the participants to complete prior to their involvement in the program and again at its conclusion, developed to measure attitudes, feelings, and beliefs may have given the researcher more data to analyze along with the interview data.

The interviews within this study were conducted in such a way that the participants appeared at ease. Some chose phone interviews, while others chose to meet face-to-face. Having this option allowed the participants to accommodate the interviews within their schedules. The questions appeared to thoroughly address all of the research questions. Future researchers are encouraged to use this interview protocol within similar programs to compare those findings with those discussed here.

Using the ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software was convenient to organize and retrieve data when coding for themes and linking those for analysis. It also allowed for simple organization of information. Using this program allowed for quick access to information and quotes when needed. This organization produced material ready to display and discuss for the purposes of this research. This program is recommended for future qualitative studies, whether the information obtained is only through transcriptions or mixed media.

Conclusion

While benefits of mentoring to mentees is a well-studied topic, the benefits to the mentors continues to be an area much less researched. Weiler et al. (2013) reported those studies of mentoring within the context of service learning being even more rare. This study attempted to garner how the mentoring service-learning experience affected the Early College high school student participant mentors personally. It also attempted to study the participants' attitudes, feelings, and beliefs in relationship to their tolerance toward people with disabilities as reported by the participants through individual interviews. An analysis of the data through coding and the use of the ATLAS.ti software program revealed commonalities between Early College high school students' perceptions of being involved in the program and its effects in the areas of tolerance, relationships, and personal effects, including future careers and skills.

The Early College high school student participants identified their experiences within the mentoring service-learning program, which could be compiled into a collective phenomenological experience. Through data collection and analysis, the participants made several indications of the benefits in the areas of relationships, responses to those with disabilities, and personal gains. Kaye (2010) categorized service learning into 13 separate identities. At the beginning of this research project, the category of special needs and disabilities was identified as the area of inclusion for research. Kaye (2010) also explained that service learning in the area of special needs and disabilities can take on several different forms including advocating, lobbying, direct service, and donations. Based on the findings of this research and prior research, it could be argued that simple inclusion and interaction could be the best form of service learning for its implications.

With the number of people being diagnosed as having one or more disability

continually rising, so are those who depend on government assistance programs for basic daily needs. One of the most significant barriers to those individuals working is the negative American attitudes and lack of tolerance and knowledge about those individuals. However, it has been shown that given an opportunity and some support, these individuals tend to succeed within the workforce (Novak et al., 2011). Through Contact Theory, an extension of Social-Cognitive Theory, it has also been shown that intentional pairing of two unlike groups can work to eliminate prejudices and negative stigma. This is true for people with disabilities and their nondisabled peers as well. In practice, allowing people with disabilities into the mainstream workforce with support could allow for more positive experiences for both the individuals with disabilities and the other workers, allowing those individuals with disabilities to work and volunteer to maximize their contributions back to society. This is support for continued inclusion in the school setting and the need for more intentional programs pairing those with disabilities with the mainstream society.

It was surprising to find a few areas within this study that were not supported by previous research. Maheu (2009) and Weiler et al. (2013) stated participants in service-learning programs and mentors within mentoring programs reported academic growth as an effect of their time spent in these services; however, academic growth was not reported by any of the Early College high school student participants in this study. In addition, although the participants in this study reported more satisfaction and benefits from the school-based component of the mentoring program, previous literature in the field of mentoring reports the opposite of increased benefits from community-based mentoring (Herrera et al., 2000). However, most of the findings within this study were supported by the literature related to Contact Theory, mentoring, and service learning.

The themes and perspectives drawn from this study unveiled interesting insights about experiences and perceptions of the Early College high school student participants who served as mentors to elementary students with disabilities. The participants shared their overall positive experience within the program, favorite experiences, and challenges. They also shared how their relationships with their mentees were changed throughout the mentoring experience. This relationship led to better attitudes, feelings, and beliefs about people with disabilities as a whole. In addition, the mentoring experience led to personal benefits for the mentors, including future career choices and skills.

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Appendix A

Participant Informed Consent/Assent Form

Participant Informed Consent/Assent Form

Dear Participant,

I am an educational doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University and am conducting a research study titled, "A Study of High School Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Students with Disabilities." This letter serves to invite you to be a part of this study. The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge about the Early College students' perceptions of the mentoring program and how participation in the program affects the Early College students' attitudes and beliefs in relationship to the program and toward people with disabilities. You are not required to participate and if you do choose to participate initially, be aware that you are free to withdraw at any time.

Data will be collected at the conclusion of the mentoring program for the 2013-2014 academic year. Data collection will involve individual interviews with Early College high school students. During this interview, you will be asked a series of open-ended questions about your experience with the mentoring program. The interviews are designed to last approximately one half hour in length. During the interview, feel free to expand on any questions further or discuss related information in the context of the study. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed at a later date.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this study. Your name will only be recorded by the researcher during data collection, but will not be linked with the research beyond that point. No identifying information will be associated with the research findings and names will be kept confidential. The expected benefits of participation are the opportunity to participate in a research study that may provide useful information about the mentoring program and the effect on mentors within the program and a byline in the acknowledgements section of the published study to all of the participants.

Discussing personal experiences may cause great emotion to surface in some individuals. If you feel you need to discuss these emotions further, please feel free to contact Kristin Bearden, school counselor, at 828-738-3353. I would be happy to share the findings of this research upon its conclusion if you so wish. If you have questions or need further clarity on the study or your participation, please do not hesitate to ask. By signing your consent, you fully acknowledge the intent and purpose of the stated research study. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep. Thank you for your consideration to being a part of this study.

Name of Participant: Phone Number:
Email:
Signature of Participant: Date:

Ashley N. Davis, Ed.S.
Gardner-Webb University, Doctoral Student

Appendix B

Parent Informed Consent Form

Parent Informed Consent Form

Dear Parent,

I am an educational doctoral student at Gardner-Webb University and am conducting a research study titled, "A Study of High School Students' Perceptions of Mentoring Students with Disabilities." Your child, _____, has been involved in a mentoring program with students with disabilities over the past one to three years and has been invited to be a part of this study. The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge about the Early College students' perceptions of the mentoring program and how participation in the program affects the Early College students' attitudes and beliefs in relationship to the program and toward people with disabilities. Your child is not required to participate and if he or she does choose to participate initially, be aware that he or she is free to withdraw at any time.

Data will be collected at the conclusion of the mentoring program for the 2013-2014 academic year. Data collection will involve individual interviews with Early College high school students. During this interview, your child will be asked a series of open-ended questions about his or her experience with the mentoring program. The interviews are designed to last approximately one half hour ATLAS.ti in length. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed at a later date.

There are no known risks associated with participation in this study. Student names will only be recorded by the researcher during data collection, but will not be linked with the research beyond that point. No identifying information will be associated with the research findings and names will be kept confidential. The expected benefits of participation are the opportunity to participate in a research study that may provide useful information about the mentoring program and the effect on mentors within the program and a byline in the acknowledgements section of the published study to all of the participants.

Discussing personal experiences may cause great emotion to surface in some individuals. If your child feels he/she needs to discuss these emotions further, please feel free to contact Kristin Bearden, school counselor, at 828-738-3353. I would be happy to share the findings of this research upon its conclusion if you so wish. If you have questions or need further clarity on the study or your child's participation, please do not hesitate to ask. By signing your consent, you fully acknowledge the intent and purpose of the stated research study. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep. Thank you for your consideration to being a part of this study.

Signature of Parent: Date:

Ashley N. Davis, Ed.S.
Gardner-Webb University, Doctoral Student

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Date of Interview: Time of Interview: Location:

Interviewee:

Description of Project: The purpose of this research study is to better understand the mentoring program experiences for the Early College high school students. You will be asked a series of questions related this purpose. You are not required to participate in this study and can choose to leave the study at any time.

Questions:
1) How long have you been involved in this mentoring program?

2) What have been your experiences with the mentoring program?

3) Tell me about your relationship with your elementary student mentees. Did this relationship change over time?

4) Before you began this mentoring program, describe your attitudes, feelings or beliefs about children with disabilities.

5) Have those attitudes, feelings, or beliefs changed as a result of your mentoring experience? If so, how?

6) Describe your favorite aspects of the mentoring program.

7) What are the challenges or suggestions for improvement within the mentoring program?

8) How has involvement in the mentoring program affected, shaped, changed or reinforced your goals or plans for the future?

Additional Researcher Notes:

Debriefing Statement: Thank you for your time spent in this interview process. Remember that strict confidentiality of identifying information will be kept during this study. After the data is reviewed, there may be need for future interviews. Remember that you are free to discontinue participation in the study at any point. Thank you!