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Strengths of Urban Youth:

An Examination of North Philadelphia Teenagers and their Development and Talents

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Abstract

This study sought to expose the strengths of African-American teenagers in North Philadelphia, using a qualitative research methodology and principles derived from the strengths perspective used in social work. A nationally known strengths test was conducted with the youth, followed by individual interviews and focus groups. Issues discussed include the cultural meaning of "success," the ongoing debate of nurture v. nature, and strengths-based social work and psychology. The effects that the environment, the media, and stereotypes have on the opportunity for success and the way strengths are used are also explored.
Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Most people’s perception of urban youth is focused on the negative. Gangs, drugs, pregnancy- these teens are often portrayed as if they have nothing positive to offer. Growing up in a suburban area, I remember watching movies about the inner-city, hearing political rhetoric, and doing service projects to help those “poor” people. All of these experiences led to the development of a skewed world-view. The city seemed like a different world to me- a world in which people were killers and everyone used drugs. I started thinking about working in the inner-city, but with the very arrogant assumption that people needed my help and that they had few redeeming qualities themselves.

My perspective slowly began to change when I began to live in the city. Last year, I got involved with an after-school program held at a church in North Philadelphia, just blocks from my residence. As I began building relationships with youth and their families in the neighborhood, my viewpoint shifted dramatically. I experienced firsthand that many young people growing up in the inner-city have tremendous talents and gifts to offer our society. Contrary to the way the inner-city is often portrayed in mass media, these youth have experienced much that has shaped them positively. Even many of these young people themselves are unaware of their strengths because most have only been barraged about their weaknesses.

Through my social work education, I began learning more about the strength-based perspective. Strengths-based social work practice assesses the inherent strengths of a client or family, and then builds on those strengths (Sheafor & Horejsi, 2006). There are many myths that the strengths perspective is simply the re-labeling of weaknesses as strengths, or that it is a
glorified version of positive thinking. Instead, the strength-based perspective is a powerful tool which recognizes that everyone has intrinsic strengths that can be used as starting points for further growth. Acknowledging these strengths, however, will require a fundamental change in the way our society views urban culture.

A large part of this recognition means needing to change our vantage point to look for the worth in all situations. For example, in the North Philadelphia neighborhood, many people have labeled the teenage girls “boisterous,” but what if we as a society instead reframed our thinking to acknowledge the tremendous communication skills many of them are beginning to develop? Many of these girls are unafraid to express themselves, which in suburban culture is usually recognized as an asset, so why do we frame this characteristic differently for city kids?

**Purpose of Study**

Westerfelt & Dietz (2001) state that often research is focused on “what is going wrong,” but it is also very important to look at “what is going right” (p. 17). This year, the Church of the Advocate began a teen leadership development program that provided an opportunity for conducting my research. A review of the literature pointed me in the direction of examining teenage pregnancy or drug use, or looking at how urban youth development is different from the development of suburban youth. Then it struck me that I did not want to focus on the typical negative rhetoric about urban youth that is prevalent in both research and today’s society. Strengths are sometimes hard for people to pinpoint on their own, and I wanted to assist teens in further discovering their strengths. My research attempts to show the incredible strengths and successes of urban teenagers, instead of merely investigating their weaknesses.

I decided to pursue my research goal using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative part of my research includes both individual and group interviews, as well as
observations and insights from informal interactions. It is highly ethnographic since
ethnographies typically include participant-observation and in-depth interviews with key
informants in an effort to understand the view of the participants and discover the meanings of
behaviors. The quantitative piece of the research includes a strength test that all of the
participants completed, which measured each of their five greatest strengths. My overarching
goal was to help make these youth more aware of their strengths and how they can use their gifts
in their daily lives.

Before beginning my research, I decided to begin with an impromptu survey of twenty
adults, most of whom were white and all of whom stated that they grew up in suburban or rural
areas. It was a word association game where I said a word or phrase and the respondent said the
first word that came to their mind. The goal was simply to gauge gut reactions to minority
youth. I first said several unrelated words, to allow participants to lower their defenses, and then
I ended with the phrases “urban teens” and “city schools.” For city schools, many responses
included “bad,” graffiti,” or “run-down,” “race,” or “black.” Interestingly, several people also
said “dangerous,” which would seem to be more of a commentary on the youth that attend these
schools than the schools themselves. When prompted with “urban teens,” the highest response
was “black.” Since the majority of the respondents were white, it is possible that for some, it
was easier to simply categorize urban teens quickly as the “other,” and make it clear that they are
different, before making any other conclusions. Other responses included “drugs,” “gangs,”
“violence,” “trouble,” “pressure,” “moms,” “crime,” and “poor.” There were not any responses
that would be considered positive, which further affirms the need for research on the strengths of
urban youth. It is simply not alright for this group of young people to face these continuously
negative stereotypes.
The purpose of this study is to show urban youth in a different light than they are often presented. As shown through the simple word association game, people immediately think of negative images when confronted with urban teens, and I would like to show a different perspective. Through sharing stories of their families, schools, and relationships, hopefully it will become more apparent how the youth have developed the way that they have and provide greater insight into their lives. The other key component of this project was the use of a strengths assessment to help the youth discover their own strengths. Through this positive reinforcement, hopefully the teens will build on their talents, and their development will continue in a positive way.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Erik Erikson, an important psychologist renowned for his theory of stages of development, wrote a book entitled Identity: Youth and crisis (1968), in which he depicts adolescence as not a transitory period from childhood to adulthood, but rather the initial period of identity formation during which teenagers are preoccupied with how they appear in the eyes of others. Erikson’s views are of extreme relevance to the youth population targeted for this research. He explains that there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity and when youth feel their ideas and expressions are oppressed, they will fight “with wild strength like animals” (Erikson, 1968, p. 130). It is the inability to settle on an occupational identity that causes most young people to feel distressed.

Erikson’s work is from before the civil rights era, but, disturbingly, many of his thoughts on urban youth are still very relevant today. He quotes from W.E.B. Du Bois’ Dusk of Dawn:

“It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in the side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it; speaks courteously and persuasively, showing them how these entombed souls are hindered in their natural movement, expression, and development; and how their loosening from prison would be a matter not simply of courtesy, sympathy, and help to them, but aid to all the world. One talks on evenly and logically in this way but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited, they talk louder; they gesticulate. Some of the passing world
stops in curiosity; these gesticulations seem so pointless; they laugh and pass on. They still
either do not hear at all, or hear but dimly, and even what they hear, they do not understand.
Then the people within may become hysterical. They may scream and hurl themselves
against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a
vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in.
They may even, here and there, break through in blood and disfigurement, and find
themselves faced by a horrified, implacable, and quite overwhelming mob of people
frightened for their very own existence.” (Du Bois, 296-297).

African American youth must deal with being inaudible, invisible, nameless and faceless
to mainstream society. When they finally receive acknowledgement, it is usually in negative
ways. Males (1996) explains how in the 1990’s, Clinton berated youth, and cited “15 year olds
with guns” as the major threat to America (p. 10). At that time, 75% of both teenage mothers
and teenagers arrested for murder were nonwhites. These statistics make it clear that punishing
tenagers equals punishing blacks. Researchers avoid trying to find the root cause for these
statistical differences because they would then be faced with the reality that living conditions are
the true cause. When conducting research, income level is not asked as often as race; instead,
race becomes a smokescreen when in fact more accurate statistics show that poverty, not age or
race, is the biggest factor in violent crime (Males, 1996).

History of urban ethnographies

Perhaps the most well known and revered classics of sociological research is Street
Corner Society by William Foote Whyte (1943). Whyte (1943) employed participant
observation research and relocated to a Boston slum in an attempt to better understand the Italian
American subculture. He lived there for several years and did a detailed job of mapping out the
social worlds of gangs and "corner boys" (p. 3). Whyte showed for the first time that there is a
distinct social organization to low-income communities and slums. His research was
groundbreaking as it was the first time that an ethnographer had really attempted to understand
urban American culture in such a thorough and honest way.

Another critical ethnography on urban youth, Ain't no makin' it, came from Jay MacLeod
(1995), who started his research as an undergraduate student in a northeastern city. From his
work at a local community center, he identified two distinct groups of young men whom he
labels as the Hallway Hangers and the Brothers. All of the boys come from a low-income
housing project, but the Hallway Hangers are primarily white, older teenagers, many of whom
have already dropped out of high school, whereas the Brothers are younger teenagers, mostly
black, and are quite hopeful about what achievement in school could mean for their futures.
MacLeod conducts a few formal interviews, but gains most of his insight into the boys' lives
through casual conversations and informal activities.

Part I of his work consists of the boys aspirations- the goals and dreams that they have for
their futures. Some are already hopeless, but many fully believe that the "America Dream" is
theirs to achieve. Part II of his research, a longitudinal study, is even more intriguing because a
longitudinal study of this nature is rare. MacLeod returns to the housing project to discover what
has become of the young men and he finds that nearly all of them are working on the street or
imprisoned. This work is a testament to the prevalence of social inequality and the way it is
generational and so difficult to escape. The researcher confronts the idea that education is the
answer, as many "self-made" Americans would attest, and instead strives to show that even
education can be a dead end in the inner-city.
Fordham (1996) noted similar findings in her ethnographic work with thirty-three African American students at a Washington DC area high school. As an African American, the researcher’s perspective slightly differs from that of MacLeod. Unlike MacLeod, who seems to initially admire the boy’s who strive to achieve in school, Fordham seems to be more cynical and frustrated that some optimistic student’s have “sold out” to the white concept of education.

While the aforementioned authors paint an accurate description of what urban youth are up against, their works also tend to focus on the negative. In an attempt to examine potential opportunity factors instead of just risks, Furstenburg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff (1999) conducted an ethnographic study in a variety of Philadelphia neighborhoods in an attempt to see what factors contribute to urban adolescent success, and particularly examined the role of the family in over five hundred cases. The research showed that although meanings of success have local contexts and standards differ between families, most parents and children have mainstream notions of what it means to be successful. Virtually all participants acknowledged the importance of academic success (finishing high school) and staying out of trouble.

This study highlights the importance of parents and explains that parents in higher socioeconomic status (SES) communities can rely on the school system to virtually raise their children, whereas residents of less advantaged neighborhoods often find themselves needing to be more proactive and restrictive. Resourceful parents will seek out programs and opportunities that improve their children’s chances of doing well, regardless of neighborhood. This study concluded that, at least through the middle school years, the influence of parents is just as strong as that of neighborhoods. However, they also make it clear that neighborhoods and school districts do play a significant role and we must be careful about assigning all blame or praise solely to parents.
Way (1998) also looked to the positive in her qualitative study entitled *Everyday courage*. She focused her work on two in depth case studies of high school students in a Northwestern city. Way shows a refreshing group of young people who are committed to making changes in themselves and their communities. She examines the obstacles that the students face, while clearly showing their resilience and determination.

*Confronting differences*

In *Code of the Street* (1999), Elijah Anderson describes two distinct types of inner-city families: decent and street. He contends that all families fall into one of these categories. The decent family is portrayed as hard working and striving to raise children with a certain amount of hope for the future. On the other hand, street families are described as families that find it difficult to cope with their situations and lack consideration for others. He paints a rather negative picture of the street families, describing many as being involved in an abusive relationships, crack-addicts, or Alcoholics. At one point, Anderson contends that perhaps one of the problems with city school teachers is their inability to differentiate between street and decent students.

There have been a few contemporary texts that have attempted to explain racial differences as purely genetic. In *Why Race Matters* (1997), author Michael Levin attempts to prove that the genetic structure of blacks makes them less intelligent than those with white skin color. Throughout the text, it seems that he completely ignores the way race and socioeconomic status overlap in the United States, even though most of his statistics come from the US. Most professionals have scoffed at his research and labeled it academically unsound.

So why are there differences in the outcomes of white and black youth? The underfunding of the public education system in urban areas is often cited as a main reason.
McIntyre (2000) paints a grim picture for the hopes of the middle school students who participated in her action research project in a northeastern city. The researcher remarks that staying in school for these youth is like “treading water” (p. 124). That is a powerful analogy— for these youth, school is pointless, not going anywhere, exhausting, mindless, boring, the list goes on. McIntyre explains that inner city public school kids experience gross inequalities specifically due to a lack of funding, discriminatory educational policies and practices, and a shortage of qualified teachers.

Lesko (2001) echoes the importance of schools in every variety of environment. The author writes based on theories and research related to white, middle-class teenagers, but there are some key relevant ideas presented that are applicable to urban teenagers. The author adapts a well-known quote, “A nation’s politics become a child’s everyday psychology” to “A school’s politics become a child’s everyday psychology” (p. 171). Adults often choose to ignore their role in the development of this small-scale society. Schools serve the purpose of unifying and differentiating groups of students, and in inner-city schools this can have a disastrous result.

Lesko (2001) goes on to explain that global competition has helped remasculinize schools also. The modern welfare state was originally built on the idea of “child-saving,” but today, Americans have all but abandoned that principle and are firm believers in “self-sufficiency” (p. 3). MacLeod also debunks this myth of American achievement ideology in his satirical opening statement “Any child can grow up to be president” (p. 3). Lesko (2001) continues to explain that middle and upper-class Americans worry simply about their own children and believe people should simply work hard and climb the success ladder, not taking note that “white skin color and educational background provide the first few steps” (p. 181).
Steele (1997) attempts to further explain the identity-achievement paradox. Through his research on student attitudes toward testing, Steele has shown that students are highly susceptible to prevailing stereotypes related to intellectual ability. According to Steele, when "stereotype threats" are operative, they lower the confidence of vulnerable students and negatively affect their performance on standardized tests. He also notes that the debilitating effects of stereotypes can extend beyond particular episodes of testing and can have an effect on a student's overall academic performance.

Giroux (1996) also cites the poor working-class economy in many American cities as an important reason why many blacks, even those with degrees, find themselves unemployed. He states that it is unfair to talk about black crime without mentioning that the unemployment rate for young blacks is higher than 40% in most urban areas. The lack of options leads many youth to the streets, hoping to earn a profit by whatever means necessary.

**Impact of Media**

The role that the media plays in framing our societal view of African Americans, and particularly young people, cannot be overstated. In *Fugitive Culture*, Giroux (1996) makes a strong case that the media has led to a racial coding of violence—when we see reports about violent incidents, we are so often shown an image of a black man, that are minds now automatically conjure up one of these images when we hear about violent perpetrators. Giroux (1996) looks at how the various forms of media affect our perceptions. For instance, we are bombarded with the message that rap is perpetuating gun violence and that young black men have the highest death rate from firearm homicide, yet how often are we confronted with the message of drunk driving? Interestingly, when we are educated about the horrors of drunk
driving, race is left out of the equation. We do not focus on the fact that drunk drivers are typically white.

Hurwitz and Peffly (1997) report that the most common negative stereotype that whites report about African Americans is that they are violent and aggressive. Fueled by the media, many whites categorize blacks as being on welfare and being involved in criminal activities. While it is true that African American’s are arrested for more robberies and murders than whites, there are many factors that contribute to this phenomenon, and it is excessive the way the media consistently depicts African Americans as physically threatening.

Local TV news stations typically frame minorities within either crimes or ethnic cultural festivals. While it is beneficial to recognize the beauty of cultural festivals, it is also dangerous, lest the white majority feel justified in believing that ethnic groups really desire to be left out of mainstream society. It is also unwise to restrict coverage to individual positive or negative stories, leaving out an entire range of life (Downing & Husband, 2005).

Overall, news organizations seem to fail in communicating to audiences the reality of urban life. The troubles and hardship of life in the ghetto and the residents’ sense of injustice is rarely shown. The media has a responsibility to inform us about our society as a whole, but it only does so from the standpoint of a “white man’s world” (Hunt 2005, p.28).

To deflect these criticisms, news and broadcast media have created their own code of ethics. This is not an altruistic practice, but instead a defensive act to appease the public scrutiny. Downing and Husband (2005) explain that these codes of practice mostly revolve around being professional, but this does not necessarily equate to being moral. It is unclear exactly how ethical these outlets actually are because continued research is hindered by the media’s hesitation to allow researchers to investigate their practices.
Children Now (www.childrennow.org) is a national organization that strives to keep children a top priority in public policy. They cite extreme concern over the role of minorities in the media and the impact it can have on children of color at a young age. On television, African Americans are most likely to be featured in sitcoms. When people of color do break out of primary coverage in sitcoms or TV sports, they are often limited to the repetitive identification with criminality in drama and news segments. Also, African America girls and white girls typically do not appear playing together in commercials and advertisements. This likely has an impact on the way children perceive both themselves, and people of other races. Studies have shown that African American children between the ages of 2 and 18 view more television than other children, totaling nearly four hours per day (Children Now, 2002). This is an incredible amount of time to shape and mold young minds’ perceptions of the world.

Studies have also shown that minority children are more likely to be influenced by characters in the media than their white peers, probably because of their lack of options for racially similar role models (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1995). It has been found that consistent exposure to programming that either ignores Blacks or provides only negative images, can lead to low self-esteem in African American youth. The absence of minority characters in children’s programming sends children of color the message that they are not an important and valued part of society (Children Now, 2002). They may feel alienated and demonstrate lower self-esteem. On the other hand, children who view interracial relations on television may feel more free to interact with peers from other backgrounds.

Most frequently, blacks are shown in demeaning and limiting situations. Hunt (2005) addresses what happens when there is an exception like The Cosby Show. Families like the
Huxtables, in which the parents are a doctor and a lawyer, are the exception to rule. Hunt noted that most people mentally bookmark portrayals like this as unrealistic and not the norm.

In contrast, Giroux (1996) looks at films that violently portray white youth, such as Natural Born Killers (1994). Films of this nature typically express that these specific teens are experiencing extreme feelings of hopelessness and desperation. It is made quite clear that this is not the norm. On the other hand, black youth are almost universally portrayed as powerless in a way that clearly leads to criminality. Issues of poverty, historical, social, and economic factors are rarely mentioned or accurately explained.

**Success and the Cultural Meaning**

Curtin and Gasman (2003) address potential reasons that predominantly black institutions are consistently ranked below predominantly white colleges and universities. They focus their research on the way the meaning of success may vary for MBA (Masters of Business Administration) students of different backgrounds. The research found that the majority of African American students that attend historically black universities enter the non-profit sector, whereas African American students that go to predominantly white institutions intend to go into for-profit businesses. The implication is clear, as for-profit work averages a yearly salary that is 33% more than employees of non-profit organizations. Many African American students relate that they will feel successful if they are able to give back to their communities.

Rubenstein (2001) and Fraser (1991) emphasize the cultural importance of teamwork in the African American community. Success is achieved when each individual is contributing to the good of his or her community, all the while recognizing that his or her success was not achieved solely on his or her own. When a young person graduates from high school, the whole
family and neighborhood is congratulated, whereas in the more individualistic white culture, the student boasts of the success on his own shoulders.

In Urban Sanctuaries (1994), McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman contend that just like everyone else, inner-city youth desire a better life and a legitimate role in society. The authors base their book on the idea that the youth who manage to “make it” often survive because of their participation in neighborhood-based organizations. Community centers and afterschool programs can offer them support, guidance, safety, friendship and opportunities to learn and grow.

Larson (2000) says that youth based, teen-led groups and activities provide an environment of possibilities for teens that promotes growth and initiative-taking. These structured, community-based, voluntary groups can have a tremendous impact on students who feel unchallenged and bored at school. Research has shown that after participation in these programs, language begins to shift and youth start thinking strategically, ask for more clarification from others, think in terms of conditionals, and become more dynamic and expressive. In short, new challenge and responsibilities can awaken youth from their boredom and help them develop.

Identification of strengths

A movement has emerged within the helping professions wherein psychologists have begun to shift the way they think in dealing with people to a more positive approach. This is not a new idea, in fact it has roots back to the 1930s, when people were striving to overcome the Great Depression. However, positive psychology took a back seat to a more pathological approach as the world wars began because that is where funding was made available.

Throughout the twentieth century, psychologists were focused on “fixing” people and
distributed negative diagnoses. Finally, a number of psychologists have decided it is time to revisit the more positive approach. In 2000, *American Psychologist* focused their entire year’s worth of issues on the exploration of this topic. Seligman (2000) explains this new “positive psychology” is about identifying and nurturing people’s strongest qualities, and helping them figure out how they can best live out these strengths.

Bacigalupi (2001) reflects that positive psychology is on the right track, but the special feature in American Psychologist seemed to present a one-dimensional viewpoint. Photos of the authors suggested that all of them were white and the language within the articles suggested that white dominant culture was the only thing really targeted or explored. Bacigalupi challenges that such a large segment of society cannot be continually ignored. With such a large number of renowned psychologists of color, there is no reason why they should have been left out of the discussion. A common theme of positive psychology is thriving in adversity, which is certainly not something that white people have a monopoly on.

Social work practitioners have also begun to earnestly take an interest in the strength-based perspective. Sheafor & Horejsi (2006) say that the strengths perspective is “necessary in work with all clients and during all phases of the helping process.” In social work, a strength is considered anything important or positive that the client or organization is already doing or desires to do. Clients have serious complications and challenges in their lives, but rather than focusing on how to “fix” these negative aspects, it is now considered much more beneficial to discover the client’s strengths in coping with these problems and situations. Analyzing strengths becomes an incredible way to encourage and genuinely “see the good,” instead of constantly being critical. No matter how harsh the environment, every person has acquired some sort of strength in coping, and pinpointing it is the essence of this perspective.
Saleebey (2004) believes that currently most asset-building approaches are aimed at the community level or agency/policy level, but we must consciously shift our focus to asset-building on a one-to-one level of interpersonal work. In discussing people of color, Harrison-Hale, McLoyd, & Smedley (2004) state that major strengths overall are community institutions, most notably African American churches, and strong social support networks. They address the topic solely from a macro standpoint, and fail to really mention the strengths of individuals within these communities. This roundabout way of hoping to develop strengths in minorities seems to support Saleebey’s thought that not enough attention is given to recognizing strengths found in one’s personality.

In fact, most strengths-based books and articles do not analyze urban youth, or even African American culture. Several articles can be found on the strengths of women facing domestic violence, children with ADHD, children of divorced parents, gay and lesbian teens, adult children of alcoholics, and even people coping with chronic illness. Little, if any, is said about the strengths that many youth in the inner-city are likely to develop, or how to make their strengths clear to them. So much negative feedback is given to urban youth that many begin to believe and embrace the negative stereotypes and assumptions that are placed on them. A shift in the way helping professionals work with people could have a huge affect on this population and others.

So there is positive psychology which focuses on nurturing people’s strongest qualities, and then there is strengths-based social work which centers on positive influences, actions, desires or goals. Donald O. Clifton, named the Father of Strengths by the American Psychological Association takes these ideas one step further (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). He differentiates between knowledge and skills which are learned, and talent which is “any recurring
pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p.48). Even seemingly negative aspects of people can be reworked and applied as strengths in the right situations. By this definition, strengths are enduring parts of people that can be applied differently in each unique situation or context.
Chapter Three: Methodology

*Ethnographical approaches*

As important as the findings are from research studies, it is also quite notable that nearly all of the cited researchers provide tips for ambitious young researchers just entering the field. An intriguing compilation of these insights can be found in *Journeys through ethnography: Realistic accounts of fieldwork*, edited by Lareau and Shultz (1996). The editors compile appendixes and insights from a dozen of the past century’s most respected researchers. Particularly helpful were those coming from urban ethnologists Whyte and MacLeod, which have particular relevance to me as a white, college student. In *Doing ethnographic research: Fieldwork settings*, Grills (1998) also provides much insight. The researchers give advice about managing personal race and class baggage, gaining trust of participants, and recording and writing research findings.

Whyte states the importance of living in the community that is to be studied and goes on to admit that regardless of location, the status of “university student” can breed resentment that we must watch for. He makes clear that initial distance and coldness from the community should be expected, but as your reputation grows, it should give way to trust. Whyte thinks that whites who are honest about being an outsider to black culture will gain more respect. Even so, MacIntyre (2000) wrote in her research that toward the end of the study, she asked the youth if the fact that she was white mattered to them. They rolled their eyes and told her that “not all whites are bad” (p. 156), but their hesitancy to share without holding back shined through at times when they “slipped” and said something negative about whites. Class and racial differences can never be completely transcended, which must be kept in mind when drawing conclusions about what participants do, or do not, reveal.
Fordham (1996) recognized that even as an African American, her own cultural baggage was affecting her conclusions in different ways and emphasized the need to be aware of both estrangement and identification feelings. She cautioned that simply as an older mentor figure, we should be concerned about the level of authenticity interviews provide. Fordham feels that a major determinant of honesty is whether or not African American youth are willing to use "Black voice" with you. She defines this as the vernacular the youth would use with their peers, speaking perhaps in Ebonics, and speaking about race without the necessity of being politically correct. She encourages researchers to strive for this Black voice because it denotes genuineness.

Whyte (1943) writes that it is important to identify the key group leaders who will set the tone for the way the rest of the group responds to you and seek to build good relationships with them- this will help soften even the most closed group. Grills (1998) agrees and states that the richest data will be provided once people know the researcher well. It is important to engage people in conversation rather than trying to conduct a formal interview. Researchers should share their own views and challenge the respondent’s when appropriate because it usually brings about greater insight.

Grills (1998) adds that researchers should be aware that to people who may not share your upbringing and value on studies, the idea of research seems like a huge waste of time. Some may be hopeful that published or well-read work will make a difference in their lives or at least help people understand, but many feel it is unimportant. Whyte (1943) warns that if researchers are not careful, people will think friendship is based on academic necessity rather than genuinely being liked. He expresses the importance of confronting that thought: "I simply explained that to graduate from college I must write a lengthy paper and instead of doing it on a
lot of research in the library, ‘I’m gonna write it on you guys down here and what kind of jobs you want after school and stuff like that (p. 126).’” Whyte makes it clear that ethnographers must strive to understand, not to change. Since he strictly wanted to understand, he could be there while the boys drank and smoked marijuana. Interestingly, he says, “Bourgeois morality has diminished relevance in a place where the dictates of practical necessity often leave very little ‘moral’ ground on which to stand” (p. 137).

MacLeod (1995) gives similar advice about how to come in as an outsider, but also advises about logistics. He encourages taking notes immediately after returning home or leaving the site and to make summary notes first and then add details. Unless it is a formal interview setting, he highly discourages taking notes on site. He recommends group interviews when possible because the arguments that stem from them can produce much knowledge.

MacLeod also gives advice on how to proceed with the actual findings. He suggests beginning to look at theoretical frameworks in order to make sense of interviews as the study progresses and challenges researchers not to wait until the end, but to write down an organizational framework as it comes and record the development of your abstract thoughts and ideas. MacLeod advises researchers to make charts and lists as patterns emerge, to sift and resift the data until a pattern makes itself known.

**Study Participants and the Context of the Study**

Participants for this qualitative research study were all part of a teen leadership program held at a well-known historical African-American church in North Philadelphia. The program strives to enable teens to become more comfortable with leadership roles among their peers. Program participants are actually employees and are paid an hourly wage for their involvement. The youth are not only expected to participate in seminars that encourage their personal growth,
but also work together to plan activities that reach out to other youth in their community. Clearly the financial reward is a huge incentive for the teens. One student describes the teen leadership program as follows:

Trips, teen-talks, outings, group discussions- we do a lot of discussions. We plan, we get paid for planning ‘em, we get paid for attending ‘em- it’s fun doing this job. Other people from our neighborhood come, other people from other neighborhoods, mostly teenagers that’s interested.

There are approximately eighteen teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17-years-old on the payroll, all of whom identify themselves as African American. They come more or less frequently, depending on their other activities. Although the teens met with the director of the program to become enrolled, acceptance to the program was not highly competitive because the director was clear on wanting anyone who showed interest and commitment to be able to participate. Some incredibly gifted teens are involved, probably because seeking out a program like this requires a high level of motivation.

For the purpose of the study, eleven teens were involved- seven females and four males. The participants were picked as a convenience sample; the teens that most frequently attended the program and showed an interest in participating were included. Even though a few more teens took the strengths test itself, for the purpose of this study only eleven results are included because with these teens there was other information available about their lives and the possible origin and impact of their strengths.

For the protection of the participant’s confidential information, names have been changed. Several of the participants chose their own pseudonyms and most were regretful that their actual names could not be used, saying they wanted public recognition of their strengths.
Since they are all minor though, and sensitive information was shared, identifying information will remain confidential. For this reason, the name of the church where the leadership program is held is not mentioned, nor are the names of the youth’s schools.

**Description of the Testing Tool**

To evaluate the strengths of the students, the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, developed by The Gallup Organization, was employed. For the past thirty years, The Gallup Organization has been researching people’s talents. They have conducted over two million interviews with a variety of people who excel in their jobs as doctors, salespeople, professional basketball players, hotel housekeepers, pastors, soldiers, chief executives, and a wide array of professions in almost every field (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Through these interviews, they identified what sorts of gifts make people excel in certain situations. They narrowed the responses down to thirty-four patterns, or “themes,” as they refer to them. The themes could obviously not encompass every individual, and the same theme will probably apply to two individuals very differently. Appendix A provides a brief description of each of the thirty-four StrengthsFinder themes.

The assessment itself is an online appraisal found at [www.strengthquest.com](http://www.strengthquest.com) which gives participants 180 pairs of statements and for each one asks participants to choose which potentially self-identifying statement best represents him or her, and to what extent. Sometimes the items appear to be opposites, other times they are seemingly unrelated statements. An example of a pair is “I read instructions carefully” and “I like to jump right into things.” At the end of the StrengthsFinder assessment, five themes of talents are identified for each individual.

StrengthsFinder usually costs $25 per assessment, but upon hearing about the study, The Gallup Organization graciously donated enough tests for the participants to complete the
assessment free of cost. The test is said to be appropriate for those with a tenth-grade reading level. However, some of the teens in the study were as young as eighth grade and all of the teens have varying reading levels. Therefore, each participant was matched with a college student as a partner to sit with them and go through the test. If the participant felt comfortable and was able, they read the statements aloud, and if not, their partner did it for them. If any words or concepts were exceptionally challenging, the partner could explain their meaning.

Normally, the test is time limited and each pair of statements is only shown for 20 seconds so that immediate reactions are measured. For this study, though, this time constraint would not have worked because of the extra time needed for verbalized reading and potentially extra dialogue. Therefore, the researcher called The Gallup Organization and was able to get the timers disabled for each of the participants. Partners were, however, encouraged to make sure the assessment still moved along rapidly without too much dialogue that could potentially sway the participant’s answers. On average, the assessments did not take significantly longer. While Gallup states it takes their participants approximately 20 minutes to complete the test, the youth typically took about 30 minutes.

At the end of the questions, the five themes are generated based on the answers provided. These are called the person’s Signature Themes and they are given in the order of intensity, so that the first theme on their list is the one thought to be the strongest. With 34 possible themes, each person’s results are so unique that they are one in 33 million. A list of all of the themes is included in the appendix. Some are easily understood by their label, like for example “empathy.” Other themes are more ambiguous in the title, like “woo.” In this case, the label is not a word, but an acronym that stands for “winning others over.”
To ensure that the youth are not frustrated by what they might perceive as unclear descriptors, each participant was encouraged to close the webpage directly after finishing the assessment. They agreed to wait to find out their results until there would be appropriate time for explanation and discussion.

Lopez, Hodges, & Harter (2005) reported on the validity and reliability of the StrengthsFinder assessment, based on studies done by The Gallup Organization. The reliability of the assessment is high. Most test-retest correlations were above .70, meaning that on average, between three and four of the five identified themes will remain the same for an individual. Additionally, each of the 34 themes has between four and fifteen items that they are scored for. The validity of the test has also been measured through several studies where follow-up interviews have been conducted with people to conclude if the assessment results are truly accurate. Although the StrengthsFinder assessment has been found to have a high level of validity with adults, the follow-up interviews with the participants of this study were thorough since validity has not been proven for their age group.

**Stages of Data Collection and Analysis**

In order to complete the StrengthsFinder assessment, participants had to come to the college campus, where computers would be available. It was arranged for half of the youth to come in November, and the remainder to complete the assessment in February. At some point during the month following each participant's completion of the test, a one-on-one interview was arranged. At this time, the results were given to the participant and discussed and examined. At this time the researcher and participant were also in conversation about the participant’s thoughts and ideas of the sorts of factors in their life that may have contributed to the development of
these strengths. The length of these individual interviews varied, but on average was about an hour.

Each interview with a participant was tape recorded. The researcher explained to the youth that the tapes would be transcribed without identifying information, and then deleted. None of the teens objected to this practice and all of them signed an informed consent form stating this at the beginning of the study.

There were also two recorded focus groups during the year, with five students participating each time. This was a time when common strengths and common ideas about what impacted individual’s development were discussed. It was interesting to get the teen’s responses in a structured group see how the context of a debate shaped and furthered their thoughts.

Most important to this whole process was simple observation. Spending time simply being with the youth and engaging in conversation with them was crucial. I attended several of their planned activities and was also there once or twice a week afterschool to be part of their planning and brainstorming sessions. Recreation was also an important time of observation and some days when the program wasn’t structured, we played basketball and double-dutch in the gym. One time I even went roller-skating with group. Often a group of girls would come back to campus with me after the program and we would enjoy hot chocolate together. One afternoon the program was cancelled and one of the girls and I ended up playing board games for several hours. Several times throughout the year, I would simply run into one of the youth on the street or on the subway. There was ample opportunity for informal observation and these interactions often provided the richest insight into the lives of the youth.

Limitations of the Study Method
The first limitation is the demographics of the researcher. As a female, it was easier and more appropriate for the researcher to gain insight into the lives of the girls in the study. Hanging out with one of the boys outside of the program would have been inappropriate. It is also possible that during the one-on-one sessions, the boys may have been exaggerating or not telling the entire truth at times in an effort to present themselves as tough. Romantic relationships of the boys was usually not a topic that was able to be addressed due to the risk of making them feel uncomfortable or making them feel like they had something to prove.

Race was also a factor that cannot be ignored since the researcher is Caucasian and all of the participants are African American. While at times there were meaningful and important discussions surrounding this topic, it cannot be assumed that the participants felt comfortable revealing all of their thoughts on the matter. With time, the youth responded well to the researcher, but it was clear that the skin color could not be completely overlooked. One time, I admitted my ignorance about the meaning of a slang word used and asked for clarification and one girl looked at me shocked and said, “psh, and we thought you could pass for black.” Clearly the youth never actually thought I was African American, but it appears several were able to accept me into their group. My ignorance in different areas was a constant reminder of my white skin though, and I recognize that the teens were probably not always completely open with their feelings about race.

The second limitation in the method of this study was the use of partners for the StrengthsFinder assessment. Although the use of these partners was deemed necessary for aforementioned reasons, it is quite possible that it impacted the participant’s responses. The college students who assisted me by being partners with the youth during the test taking were mostly Caucasian which I’m sure registered with the youth and potentially affected their
responses. Additionally, every effort was made to secure partners of the same-sex and was mostly successful, but one pair was a male participant and a female volunteer. In that situation, it is quite possible that the desire to impress could have played a role. In general, having another person there to observe responses could have led the participants to alter their responses, perhaps even subconsciously. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the disarming of the question timers could have allowed the participants too much extra time to think through their responses. Self-describing tests in general cannot be deemed as accurate as many people will want to describe themselves in the best possible light in hope of more positive results.

The target group of the StrengthsFinder assessment is also a limitation. The Gallup Organization advertises the test primarily for those 16 and older. While much of this age recommendation is due to the reading level, another piece of it is the situations referred to in potential statements. Some statements reference business-type scenarios that young teens obviously have not had the chance to experience. Without the proper frame of reference, their responses could possibility be skewed. At the time, there was no alternative test of this nature aimed at teenagers. I spoke with several StrengthsQuest experts and they advised me to go forward with the test. While recognizing that the results may not be 100% accurate, many of these teens will not have another similar chance to be told their strengths in this way, so I felt it was important to allow them to take advantage of this opportunity. The Gallup Organization just recently created an assessment for younger teens, ages 10-14, called StrengthsExplorer which may have been more appropriate for the teens in this study, but it was not yet available at the time of study.
Chapter Four: Findings

Overview of Strengths

Although this is a qualitative study, it is interesting to look at the overall group’s themes before looking at each individual’s identified themes. Table 1 charts the themes of all of the participant’s StrengthsFinder assessment results. Achiever is by far the most common theme, with eight out of eleven participants receiving it. Ranking next most prevalent are the strengths of competition and strategic. Other common themes that three participants have are adaptability, command, communication, consistency, positivity and responsibility.

Table 1: Tally of StrengthsFinder results of all eleven participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th># of teens with strength</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th># of teens with strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achiever</td>
<td>//</td>
<td>Futuristic</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activator</td>
<td>//</td>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>Ideation</td>
<td>//</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Includer</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranger</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Individualization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td></td>
<td>Input</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Command</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>Intellection</td>
<td>//</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>Leaner</td>
<td>/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>Maximizer</td>
<td>//</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>///</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>///</td>
<td>Relator</td>
<td>//</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>///</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative</td>
<td>//</td>
<td>Restorative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer</td>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Assurance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td></td>
<td>Significance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>///</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>/</td>
<td>Woo</td>
<td>//</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since only eleven youth took the assessment, it is expected that many strengths would not appear in the group’s tally. Belief, connectedness, context, developer, discipline, empathy, harmony, individualization, restorative, self-assurance, and significance were not identified themes for any of the eleven teens in this study. Some of these are logically not found due to their age. Perhaps other themes were not prevalent because of the environment in which these teenagers live. However, while it is interesting to note the themes that were not present, no conclusions can be drawn from such a small sample and the focus of the assessment is to look at the identified strengths, not the ones left unidentified.

During correspondence with a Clifton StrengthsFinder consultant, it was learned that the five most common themes in the database of over 1.8 million people are achiever, learner, relator, strategic and responsibility. It is not certain to what degree they are more prevalent, but it does potentially mean that the commonality of those strengths in our participants is not unusual. Strategic and responsibility, which four and three participants had, respectively, may not be as unusual then, but still notable in showing that urban people are usually thought of as being different from suburban, and this shows that they have many of the same strengths. The theme of achiever, however, may be even more significant since a very large number of students were assessed to possess this strength.

**Description of Participants**

In the following section, the eleven participants are described in detail with information given on their families, schools, strengths, and other relevant information. For convenience purposes, Table 2 is provided to give a brief overview and comparison of the study participants. The table is presented in the order that the students are introduced, which was based simply on how their stories connect.
Table 2: Description of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age, Grade</th>
<th>Type of School</th>
<th>Five Strengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15, freshman</td>
<td>Catholic girls high school</td>
<td>maximizer, responsibility, adaptability, futuristic, relator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khadija</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14, freshman</td>
<td>co-ed magnet high school</td>
<td>strategic, relator, achiever, adaptability, command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16, junior</td>
<td>public high school</td>
<td>command, deliberative, consistency, focus, achiever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>17, junior</td>
<td>public high school</td>
<td>competition, communication, activator, positivity, achiever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiera</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>17, junior</td>
<td>public high school</td>
<td>adaptability, responsibility, intellection, woo, achiever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jahquial</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>16, junior</td>
<td>Catholic boys high school</td>
<td>positivity, achiever, relator, woo, strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantaya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>14, sophomore</td>
<td>girls magnet high school</td>
<td>communication, strategic, competition, achiever, consistency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daleesha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13, 8th grade</td>
<td>charter middle school</td>
<td>achiever, learner, competition, intellection, deliberative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roderick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>15, sophomore</td>
<td>public high school</td>
<td>maximizer, ideation, achiever, arranger, command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>15, sophomore</td>
<td>charter high school</td>
<td>activator, responsibility, includer, analytical, positivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charley</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>13, 8th grade</td>
<td>charter middle school</td>
<td>ideation, input, command, strategic, adaptability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tiffany

Tiffany is a 15-year-old female who is a freshman at a Catholic Girls high school and has always lived in North Philadelphia. She is the youngest of four children; she has a sister that is 23-years-old and two brothers who are 19 and 16-years old. Her oldest two siblings both graduated from high school and her sister even completed a year of college, but dropped out after becoming pregnant. She now works in an office. Her oldest brother also has a young child and Tiffany describes him as doing “nothing, he stays home” and is unemployed. Tiffany describes a very positive relationship with her mother, who has a stable job as a social worker, but shows frustration with her father who is unemployed and “sometimes” lives with their family. He is an alcoholic who is frequently in trouble with the police for various reasons and Tiffany says, “It’s not that I don’t like him, but I don’t like the things that he do.” He comes home drunk and starts arguments with family members, and then typically borrows money from his children that he cannot repay, despite promises to do so. Tiffany is quite tiny, but she possesses a great boldness. During group discussions, she does not speak overly frequently, but when she speaks, she does so with clarity and deliberativeness.

Tiffany’s five themes, as judged by StrengthsQuest, are maximizer, responsibililty, adaptability, futuristic, and relator. Tiffany’s theme of responsibility shines through when she tells me that she gave up her study hall to attend a second math class, simply for the extra help to pull her grade up. Tiffany says she wants to be a doctor or a lawyer “because I like to help people and I want a job that can help me live wealthy.” Tiffany tells me that her mom is demanding her to go to college and that she would have no choice in the matter, but fortunately she would like to go anyway because she thinks it will lead to getting a good job. She says, “I’m
not saying anything against having kids (early) or anything but I don’t wanna have to ask anybody for anything. I wanna earn what I want and stuff like that.”

Her adaptability is also very clear when she says that if those dreams don’t work out, she will be “something just as good.” She seems quite determined to make something of herself, and loves to dream about what that might be, but at this point is not quite sure. Tiffany is confident that she will make something of herself, regardless of what happens.

Khadija

Khadija is a 14-year-old female who is a freshman at a co-ed magnet high school. She lives with both her parents and her 17-year-old brother, and also has a 21-year-old sister participating in a job training program. The family has lived in more middle-class communities in the past, but they have resided in North Philadelphia for over eight years now. Her mother is currently going to college full-time and her father is a disabled veteran who she describes as “the man.” She’s his only child (her siblings have different fathers) and admits she is spoiled by him. Although Khadija’s family appears “intact,” she reveals to me that for several years when she was younger her father and mother split up and her brother and sister went to live with their own fathers. However, her family has been back all together since her mid-elementary school years.

Khadija’s relationship with her brother is rocky. He is still enrolled in high school, but finds himself frequently in trouble with the police for assault or robbery, which causes a great deal of stress on their family. Khadija relates to me that when she was graduated from middle school, her brother was in trouble with the police and her parents missed all of her graduation events, which was very hurtful to her and frustrating to her that her brother received more attention for the negative actions than she did for her achievement. When I ask Khadija where
she thinks her brother will be in a few years, she gets very disturbed and tries to think of ideas, but then says it’s scary to think about and lets her voice trail off.

Khadija’s five themes are strategic, relator, achiever, adaptability, and command. She is excited about her strengths overall and feels like they mostly fit her. She definitely has a strong sense of self and immediately responds with her feelings on whether or not a strength fits her. When starting to go over Khadija’s results with her, I initially pulled up the wrong results. She took one look at the list of strengths and said “this isn’t me. I’m definitely not competitive.”

When she sees her accurate results, Khadija says that she would have labeled herself as having some of the same strengths the test provided. “I would say some of the same stuff- like communicating with people, and planning stuff, and finishing stuff that I start, basically being an achiever dude, you know, just stuff like that. I think I get my point across with communication.” And definitely achiever- “If I just sit around all day and don’t do anything, I get so frustrated. Like, what was the day for?” Khadija agrees that she is strategic is certain ways but gets really upset about the thought of always asking “what if” questions. She explains that her mom does that with her brother all the time: “What if he’s late because he got arrested again?” She sees how “what if” questions can send people into an unnecessary and irrational panic. Khadija is very social and chats non-stop in informal conversations, but in the more formal setting of a focus group, she becomes much quieter so it makes total sense that she would have the strength of relator.

Khadija has a strong idea about what she thinks is fashionable and is often wearing brand-name clothes that are stereotypically popular among white youth. Primarily because of this, she is often teased by her peers as an “Oreo”- a word used by the youth to describe someone they feel is black on the outside, white on the inside. They are constantly taunting her for “acting
white.” When I ask her how she feels about this or if it bothers her, she says “I try to do stuff that will stand out. Not so that it will be better than somebody else, but because I want it to be different.”

Khadija says she plans to go to college and at this point she would like to be a dancer or a lawyer. She said the lawyer idea sounds good right now because she likes to argue. While having a conversation about the ethics of the justice system, Khadija makes clear that she would much rather be a defense attorney for someone who’s guilty than a prosecutor against someone who’s innocent. She seems to have a deep understanding of the injustice that often occurs in her neighborhood.

Michael

Michael is a 16-year-old male who is a junior at a public high school. He has seven siblings and is second to youngest. He currently lives with his mom and step-dad and two teenage sisters who are also in high school. His step-dad has been around as long he can remember and although he knows his biological father, they do not have a strong relationship and have not seen each other for several years. Michael’s mom currently works as a custodian and his step-father as a food service employee and Michael shows great respect for both of them. His older siblings all completed high school and live in Philadelphia still. One sister is in her second year of college, two have jobs in retail and a nursing home, one brother is training to be an electrician, and the remaining sister Michael describes as “off, bein’ crazy.” His mother was fearful that if one of her children dropped out of high school, the other children would think that dropping out was acceptable, so she was firm in making sure that everyone finished and so far all of his older siblings have. Michael’s family has always lived in North Philadelphia, but have moved around to many different houses and has periodically lived with his grandmother.
Michael is shy, but seems to have a quiet confidence. He is one of the few students who decided to read the descriptions of his strengths aloud rather than listening to me read them. Before we start, I ask what he thinks his strengths are and he tells me he knows he is good at working with his hands, but is concerned because obviously the test could not measure that. I affirmed him in that skill, and we then discussed the type of things the test does measure and the difference between strengths and skills.

Michael’s five strengths are command, deliberative, consistency, focus and achiever. Command is not something that is immediately recognizable in Michael from the outside, but he explains the way in which he sees it in himself. He feels like he has really become more comfortable in a leadership position since joining this program. He is often peer selected to make decisions and feels he is usually the one delegating responsibilities. Michael also explains being deliberative in an interesting way by saying it shines through by the way he decides whether or not to get involved in fights. He says he tends to try to evaluate carefully whether or not it is worth it for him to be fighting, but he also stresses that often, for self-defense purposes, he is left with no choice in the matter.

Like many young men in the neighborhood, Michael’s future goal is to get into the NBA. If that dream does not work out for him, he says he wants to be an electrician. Even though neither of these goals would require college, Michael says he would still like to go and says it is motivating him to do well now. “When I go to college, I don’t want no Ds on my report card, so I’m just trying to finish up these classes- on the honor roll.” Michael is proud as he tells me that he is currently on the honor roll. He seems to be very responsible, a characteristic that is confirmed as he tells me that he has a weekend job at a restaurant that requires him to wake up at 6 am every Saturday.
Terrance

Terrance is a 17-year-old male who is a junior at a public high school. He lives with his mother and 20-year-old brother. He does not have a relationship with his father and he has another older brother who is unemployed. His mother currently works as a food services employee at a nearby university and his brother works in retail part-time. As a young child he moved around often, but has always lived within the same North Philadelphia neighborhood. He is very hesitant to speak much about his personal life and always tries to change the subject back to focus on his individual qualities. One of the adults revealed to me that as a young child Terrance got dragged from crack house to crack house with his mother, but Terrance never personally tells me this. He simply says that his relationship with his mother frustrates him more than typical mother-son relationship but will not reveal anything further. Terrance is very outgoing and extremely articulate and willing to share opinions during group discussions, but he is much less willing to share about personal information in a one-on-one setting.

Terrance is very excited about the strength test and the idea of our interview being recorded makes him feel like this is a very professional, important experience- almost as if he is on TV. He is also very concerned with anonymity, though, and at one point when I say his name aloud, he becomes highly agitated and asks who will hear the tape. After I promise him that no one will hear it and his name will be changed, he thinks it is amusing and begins referring to himself in the third person, recording his name on the tape repeatedly.

Terrance’s five themes are competition, communication, activator, positivity, and achiever. Terrance and I both agree that these strengths seem to describe him perfectly. He is competitive in virtually everything that he does- “Like, when my group got a task, I try to get it done before the other group get they task done so I can always be recognized that I am willing to
work so I’m always in a good position.” He’s constantly comparing himself to others and trying to make sure he appears to come out on top. Terrance also laughs at communication showing up as a strength- “I do got a story- every day, every time I go to school. They got me” (referring to Gallop). He stops me as I read the description of positivity when it says, “you inject drama into every project” and laughingly asked if they wrote these descriptions especially for him. Terrance truly is quite dramatic, but also typically looks at the bright side of things. He is frustrated about not having anything to put on his resume and we come up with ways he could format these strengths onto a resume.

Terrance tells me emphatically that he definitely plans to go to college because it opens up new possibilities and experiences. He tells me that he thinks it is better to go to college because he is currently unsure of what career he would like to pursue in the future. Terrance says that the idea to go to college was his own, but his family seems to be supportive and excited about the possibility. Perhaps because of the difficulties he may have gone through with his family, he is very individualistic and says, “What I do only affects me. I make all my own decisions.” Despite his assertions that people’s actions only affect themselves, Terrance acts otherwise later that same day while walking down the street when we encounter a woman Terrance knows. She is clearly strung-out and upset, but Terrance speaks very kindly to her and suggests that she go home. After she passes by, Terrance tells me how sad her family must be that she is “suffering” like that.

_Kiera_

Kiera is a 17-year-old female and is a junior at a public high school. She lives with her mother, who is unemployed, and her 23-year-old sister who works in an office. She also has an older brother, who is currently in jail. Her mom dropped out after eleventh grade, but both of her
siblings completed high school, although neither went on to college. Her mother is clearly quite proud of her kids and proudly displays all of the awards they receive, including their high school diplomas, which hang prominently. Kiera never mentions her father. She has always lived in the same house in North Philadelphia. Kiera began the teen leadership program halfway through the year and because of that, feels disconnected from the other youth. She is very unsure of herself until she is spoken against, and then becomes very loud to defend herself at all costs.

Kiera’s five top strengths are adaptability, responsibility, intellect, woo, and achiever. She doesn’t really recognize any of those strengths in her initially and it becomes quite a struggle to try to determine how, if at all, these strengths are relevant to her. We finally agree that adaptability and responsibility definitely are apparent because of how disruptive her home life can be. She describes her relationship with her mom as “disruptive” and explains that her mother is always talking to her and asking her to do things while she is trying to do her homework. She says that they are close, but she looks forward to getting away soon. With her brother coming home soon, she is also slightly hesitant and says that he can be very controlling and bossy.

Despite the uncertainty we both feel about how Kiera’s strengths fit her, she is extremely excited about the certificate, seeming to simply thrive on recognition, and then she says “these explain me perfectly,” perhaps to validate the authenticity of the certificate. Kiera is very unsure of herself and throughout the interview she seems very nervous to say something wrong. When I ask an open ended question, rather than coming up with original ideas, she always asks me to give her options or examples of how she could respond.

Kiera is frustrated that college keeps getting emphasized, and she is very uncertain of if she will go. She feels torn in that decision and says she does not feel good about the thought of
having to start school all over again and also says that it seems like it would be a lot of work and very difficult. When I ask what she would do if she doesn’t go to college she says, “you mean what do I wanna do when I grow up? Somethin like that? I wanna be a doctor, a lawyer, a lot of different things.” I ask if she realizes you have to go to college to be those things and she replies yes, laughs and says that if she doesn’t go to college, she’ll probably end up “Layin in the house, watchin TV, eatin ice cream.” We laugh, but I’m truly concerned for Kiera’s future. She tells me school is not really a priority for her and she is currently failing two classes.

**Jahquil**

Jahquil is a 16-year-old male and is a junior at a Catholic Boys high school. He is the oldest child and has two younger siblings on his mom’s side and two younger siblings on his dad’s side. Growing up, he lived with his mom and two younger siblings who stayed with his grandmother. They recently moved out and at first he went with them, but then this year he decided to move back with his grandmother, saying it is closer to his school and more convenient. Three of his male cousins, all from different parents, also currently live there and are ages 27, 19, and 17. His 40-year-old uncle who is unemployed lives with them as well. Although Jahquil has never lived with his father, he sees him frequently. His dad lives in Philadelphia also and Jahquil describes their relationship as “the same” as anyone else’s. Jahquil’s parents each went on to college, but completed less than a year, although Jahquil is uncertain why. Jahquil is an extremely positive young man and presents himself well and very respectfully. He is well-liked and when he speaks, most of his peers seem to respect what he says.

Jahquil has great self-knowledge and says his greatest strength is that he is a fast learner. StrengthsQuest found his top five themes to be positivity, achiever, relator, woo and strategic.
Jahquil truly defines positivity and he is smiling nearly every time I see him. He agrees that being positive is an important thing to him because he just does not see the point in being negative so he tries to keep others excited about things when they're being negative. He also thinks strategic describes him very well and says he's very curious and always wants to know "what if?"

We discuss the paradox of having both woo and relator as themes, since they are seemingly opposite relational strengths. Jahquil describes how he sees it in himself like this: "I know a whole lot of people around here because I hang around here all the time and I love making sure I know everyone. So yea, I know a whole lot of people, but when I don’t know people... I don’t know. Sometimes I like to meet new people. But other times, no, I just wanna hang with people I know- who I can really talk with”

Jahquil is currently hoping to go to college, but mostly because “people say that college fun so I wanna go” Now that he has made the decision to go, though, his parents are putting even greater pressure on him and are constantly reminding him about his future plan. They seem to be very excited and proud that he wants to go on for more school. As of now, Jahquil hopes to study dentistry, which he got excited about after hearing about it at a career development day at school. It sounded interesting to him and he was told he would make a great salary and the market would have large job availability.

Quantaya

Quantaya is a 14-year-old female and is a sophomore at an all-girls magnet high school. She and her mother live with her aunt, uncle and two baby cousins. Quantaya’s mom has been disabled since being shot in a drive-by shooting that happened while waiting outside a nightclub as a teenager. She has been confined to a wheelchair since Quantaya was a baby so she cannot
work. Quantaya says she loves her mom but their relationship is “the worst relationship anybody could have with anybody ever.” She is clearly frustrated by her mom’s disability and blames her for being “hard-headed” that night and going out even though her father told her not to. She even says she wishes her mom could provide better discipline and “beatings” because she would probably benefit from more authority. When I ask if her mom finished high school, Quantaya says her mom dropped out after tenth grade because “she went to a bad school anyway so there was no point to finishing”

Quantaya has two six-year-old half siblings born a week apart (to two different mothers) on her dad’s side that she does not see very regularly. Her father has been in and out of jail as long as she has known him, and he is currently in prison out-of-state so she does not get to see him. Quantaya is very clear about her frustration with her family situation. With her aunt and uncle always “butting-in,” she feels like she has two sets of parents and gets nagged often. She is also expected to baby-sit her young cousins frequently. Quantaya has lived in North Philadelphia in the past, but currently lives in Northeast Philadelphia, which she does not like and describes as “boring, like the suburbs.” Quantaya is very outspoken and seemingly confident. She knows what she does well and expects others to recognize it as well.

Quantaya’s top five themes are communication, strategic, competition, achiever, and consistency. Her strengths seem very apparent within her and she agrees with the descriptions of all of them. She says she thrives while communicating and has enjoyed various forms of it ever since she was little. She also seems very affirmed in recognizing how being strategic can be a strength. She says, “my mom thinks I’m like that- like I ask too many questions, she say I wanna know too much. But you ask questions to find out stuff so... (shrugs) I don’t know. I don’t see it the way she do.”
Quantaya agrees that competition often drives her to do well. She always asks her peers what grades they receive to make sure she’s truly doing well. She also makes sure she dances at every function she has the opportunity to and loves to show off her skill from many years of classes as well as her raw talent. She is clearly an achiever in many ways and says she always makes sure her homework is in on time. Her desire for consistency and fairness is also quite clear:

I hate that, when people get treated a certain way- especially in school, that is so annoying. Like, you can treat somebody a certain way cuz you want, and then everybody else like… I don’t like unfair things, I’m always telling somebody “that’s not fair” and they’re like ‘life’s not fair.’

Quantaya has a clear recognition of injustice both in her neighborhood and in her school and gets frustrated when other people are not as bothered by it.

She is quite frank about race issues with me and how she is very frustrated by stereotypes attributed to her. Interestingly, Quantaya is horrified when I refer to myself as “white” and she tells me I shouldn’t say words like that and put myself down. We agree on the term “European American” and she continues on:

I don’t know, people always make it seem like they so much higher than African Americans, but I don’t see it, cuz if you put me up against a European American, I gonna come up the same- if we the same age, same gender- so I look at us the same… she ain’t no better than I am and I’m not better than she is, so stop playin’ like that. But, I’m gonna change all that when I get older and become the first women president- AND I’m African American. Watch that.
Almost as if realizing the impossibility of her dream, she later tells me her real future plans. She hopes to go to college and get a business degree and also to go to hair school and then she plans to open and own her own salon. She again becomes confident and proud of her skill and explains to me that she taught herself how to braid hair and now braids “everyone’s” hair.

Daleesha

Daleesha is a 13-year-old female and is in the eighth grade at a charter middle school. She lives with her mother and 11-year-old brother. Her mom currently works at a hospital and is going to college to become a nurse—she initially started college right after high school but had to drop out when she became pregnant with Daleesha. It’s pretty clear that Daleesha feels some guilt about that and is very proud that her mom’s back in school now to become a nurse. Her mom has always worked second shift so Daleesha is very independent afterschool. Daleesha has always lived in the same North Philadelphia neighborhood with her mom, but at times they have lived with her aunt and grandmother also. Daleesha has never met her father and it is not clear if she has any additional siblings from him. She is an extremely articulate young girl and speaks very intelligently about herself and her community. Because of this, she confides in me that most people consider her a “geek.”

Daleesha’s five strengths are achiever, learner, competition, intellection, and deliberative. Her strengths are perfectly clear to both of us; Daleesha is extremely intelligent and wise for her age. She says:

I’m a very, very big thinker. Like if I could, for the rest of my life and get paid for it, I would just think. Like, my brain is constantly thinking about things and I have so many questions and when I finally find the answers, then those answers sometimes lead to other questions. So, I think about a lot of things that kids my age wouldn’t really think about.
Daleesha has a beautiful curiosity about the world and she has self-taught a lot of what she knows, just in reading during her free time. She always has a new random fact and cannot wait until she gets to go to college. At this point, she says she hopes to be either an archeologist or a criminal justice lawyer.

Daleesha first gained an understanding of prejudice after continually being given the lowest position on various teams at an all-white camp. When she came home and explained what happened, her grandma presented the idea of prejudice to her and to her why that might have happened. She credits that talk as the inspiration and challenge to be certain she makes something of herself. She wants to rise above those ridiculous expectations. She does a beautiful job of articulating her feelings about prejudice.

**Roderick**

Roderick is a 15-year-old male and is in the tenth grade at a public high school. He lives with both of his parents and his 18-year-old sister who is in her first year of college. She originally went away to go to school, but has recently moved home to continue locally. Both of his parents finished high school and have well-respected jobs in the area of education, but Roderick is uncertain if either of them attended college. He attributes much of his success to his parents loving relationship. Roderick describes himself as spoiled and based on what he has describes, it would seem that his family may have a higher income than most of his peers. He has always lived in the same house in North Philadelphia, though, and is currently attending the same high school that his parents went to. Roderick is a bit of a comedian and often attempts to make his peers laugh. He is also a hard worker though, and talks professionally and tries to be serious during our conversations.
Roderick’s strength are maximizer, ideation, achiever, arranger, and command. Roderick clearly demonstrates these strengths in a variety of ways. He explains maximizer as always trying to see the good in people. He is constantly worrying and looking out for his peers and says simply that he “wants the best for everybody.” He also considers himself to be a strong achiever and says, “I like to achieve in everything I put my mind to- if I put my mind to it, I achieve it. That’s just me.” The only strength Roderick hesitates to recognize is command. He says he prefers to think of himself as a team person and not the boss. He calls himself a leader, but is sometimes afraid to delegate. He eventually agrees, though, that he simply has a commanding presence and is respected by his peers.

Roderick would like to go to college for culinary arts, and is already practicing with a variety of cookbooks. Interestingly he is the only youth to also mention having children someday as a goal in a positive light. He says his future goals include being a chef and taking good care of his kids.

Monica

Monica is a 15-year-old female and is in the tenth grade at a small charter high school. She currently lives with mother and her 9-year-old brother. Until recently, they were also living with her father (who was not married to her mother), but “it wasn’t getting along so we moved” just this past year. She still sees her dad often and usually stays with him on weekends, but describes their relationship as “closed” and does not feel comfortable opening up to him. Both of her parents finished high school but did not go on to college. Her father is a truck driver and her mom used to work in a factory, but Monica thinks her mom has a new job now, but is not sure what it is. Monica is very quiet, unless directly harassed and then she becomes very
defensive and loud. During groups discussions though, she barely speaks and it appears she lacks confidence.

Monica’s strengths are activator, responsibility, includer, analytical, and positivity. Monica decides to read her strengths aloud and after I help pronounce a word she had been struggling with, she becomes very indignant and defensive exclaiming, “I know these words!” And to her credit, she did know almost all of the words and clearly had a wide vocabulary and advanced reading ability. Monica agrees with all of the strengths. She is definitely an activator and always tries to just get her work done right away. She tells me that in groups, when others are sitting around waiting for the teacher’s instructions, she’s already busy at her desk completing the task. Monica is also very much an includer and I see her being kind to youth in the program who are not well liked. When I ask her about it, she shrugs it off and makes it clear that they are not actually her friends (she’s still concerned with her image), but that “they’re not awful or anything.” She tells me that at school she gets along with everyone and she gets sick of people judging others based on how they look or how they think they act. Vanessa says, “it don’t matter how she look, or how you feel about somebody, you always should respect that persons rights and feelings.” She is very positive and enthusiastic about all she does. The only strength Monica was hesitant about was analytical, but in our discussion about it, we realized she was being analytical about whether or not it described her!

Monica has wanted to be nurse ever since she was young and volunteered with her mom at a nursing home. She is taking plenty of steps now to already begin pursuing that goal. She is on the health technology track in school meaning she takes special medical tech classes and visits two different hospitals every week through her class. She is also CPR and first aid certified through the Red Cross. After proudly telling me all this, though, she tells me that she
really just wants people to know about her personality and character— that’s what she’s most proud of.

Charley

Charley is a 13-year-old female and is in the eighth grade at a charter middle school. She is the middle child and lives with her mom and five of her brothers and sisters. She has seven siblings total; another sibling is currently in college and an older brother lives with her dad and has his own baby now. She describes her dad as having many girlfriends and is never quite clear in describing the type of relationship she has with him. Both of Charley’s parents went to college and her mom works as a teacher and her dad as a chef. She has lived in North Philadelphia for four years now and previous to that she lived in an inner-ring neighborhood of the city. Charley is an extremely talented young girl, but it seems hard for her to focus her thoughts and talents, especially when distracted by peers or when she is trying to be a comedian. Although all of the teens are unique for different reasons, perhaps Charley is most eccentric. She won’t take a lot of things seriously, but then when she is writing or doing art, she transports to her own world and is entirely focused.

Charley’s strengths are ideation, input, command, strategic, and adaptability. She is very intelligent and often tells me random historical facts. Ideation seems to fit her perfectly as she tells me matter-of-factly, “I collect ideas.” In typical Charley form, she adds her stream of consciousness:

…and poems. Poetry. I like the old poetry, like African American poetry because it talks about how it was back then— especially Langston Hughes— big fan. Girl, I love a debate to express ideas. Let me have a debate. I be debatin’ in the classroom. ‘Well we’re not free.’ I’m like, ‘alright, well let this world be free... in every free civilization people still
gonna be dead, gonna be hungry, I’m like alright, see you on the flip side, you go head
and die a drunkard or something like that pursuing your freedom’.... I love getting ‘em
like that!

Charley seems to like to provoke people physically also, but not actually throw the first punch.
She says she only fights in self-defense and really doesn’t fight often, but a couple of years ago
she broke her arm fighting a boy. Charley does not seem fearful of much and because of that, I
think she enjoys being in charge which fits in with the strength of command.

Since Charley does not really take the strength evaluation seriously, she says the
strengths they found are wrong and her real “strengths” are, “complainer, lack of seriousness,
dramatic, funny, people-person, and creative.” We had a better discussion about her those things
apply to her and how all of those things can be useful at various times. Even so, she spent most
of our conversation about strengths joking, possibly to hide truth and keep from being
vulnerable.

Charley speaks as if she has a great self-esteem and talks about its importance. She
relates the frustration she feels when people judge her:

Don’t call me ugly, that just means you have no self-esteem yourself. I’m beautiful, I’m
sexy. I’m cute. I’m marvelous. That’s me, because I really think people need to feel
good about themselves. People tell me that no matter how great you are, people will
always find something to say... So when people tell me I’m ugly, I say I know I’m not
ugly, I’m sexy. People want others to feel bad about themselves so they can feel better
about themselves.

Even with all of this outward show, it’s clear there is more going on underneath and several
months after this interview, she gave me a copy of a poem she wrote entitled “Behind closed
doors there are lonely thoughts in my head.” It is a beautifully written poem that rises far above typical “teen angst” type poems and I think would resonate with adult audiences. Charley is extremely talented, but also still very young and trying to figure herself out.

**Common Themes**

Throughout the one-on-one interviews, focus groups, observations, and miscellaneous conversations, several common threads emerged between the teens’ lives. There are several themes that kept coming up again and again, and certain similar beliefs and ideas that may impact the way strengths are expressed, are developed or hindered, and the situations in which they present themselves. The following sections will address the youth’s thoughts on neighborhoods, media, school, and relationships.

**Neighborhoods**

In discussing what things have shaped their strengths, by far the teens gave the most emphasis to their neighborhood. Opinions vary, but they almost all agree that where people are raised has a profound impact on them. Some youth are firm that they are not pleased with their neighborhood. When I ask Charley how she would describe North Philadelphia to someone just arriving for the first time, she said, “I’d tell them to get out as fast they can, get a U-Haul truck and I’ll help ‘em pack. It’s too much violence. Too much...fighting. It’s not safe here.” She then tells me she wishes she could move somewhere else.

Similarly, Kiera found little reason to brag about her community. She described the people in her neighborhood as:

**Drunks! Junkies, dirty... and that’s it. They be trashin’ the place. Like, you see a trash can right there, and they just throw it right on the ground- their parents didn’t teach ‘em**
better. Either their mom didn’t care or they’re deceased. It’s disrespectful (to) throw it on the ground.

Kiera conveyed her frustration with the low level of self-respect she feels people in her neighborhood have. When I asked her if she felt safe where she lives, she said she knows that things are dangerous but she feels safe. She quickly adds, “I probably shouldn’t.” Kiera tells me in detail about how two people were murdered in front of her house last summer. It clearly has had a profound affect on her, even though she says it is simply a common occurrence in the neighborhood.

Other teens have even more mixed feelings. Daleesha feels a definite loyalty to her community and explains to me,

It’s not the best neighborhood but it’s like home. It’s kinda like a neighborhood where everybody kinda knows everybody. And you know… sometimes we do have fights. It’s not the best neighborhood, it’s not the greatest neighborhood, but it’s home, so I really can’t complain with that.

Daleesha tells me that she is not exaggerating when she says she witnesses drugs being dealt on a daily basis. When I ask if she feels safe in her neighborhood, she articulates:

I don’t really feel safe. I still have to realize that I’m living in a neighborhood where there’s a lot poverty and a lot of drugs and a lot of crime going at the same time. So sometimes I feel safe and sometimes I really don’t. It depends on the activity that’s going around- that’s if I feel safe. Our family’s real close though- because we have to be.

While at the young age of 13, Daleesha recognizes the abundance of poverty in her neighborhood, it’s clear that others want to ignore it or pretend like it is not a factor. Roderick tells me:
I don’t know nobody that’s in poverty. Everybody I know… they not poor, I don’t…
This one guy… I wouldn’t call him poverty because he has a house and he eats but he
just… he was poverty. He used to be cuz he live house to house. He older. He a friend
of the family. I wouldn’t name him that probably cuz if he need something to eat, we
give it to him.

For Roderick, poverty seems to be equivalent with homeless or desperate and he is not
ready to equate most people with the label. Apparently the word “ghetto” is not as stigmatizing
to him, though, because he is quick to label his community in that way:

To me it’s cool…. cuz I know everybody. It’s cool, I don’t do nothing- it’s just a regular
neighborhood. All neighborhoods are the same thing, they argue, fight, the cops be
around. I would describe it as the “ghetto”. Ghetto mean trash everywhere, nasty, um…
spray paint on the walls, and all that. That’s ghetto. That’s how it is around the
neighborhood. Fights and arguments and cops and drugs. Everything.

Monica describes all this activity simply as “action.” She is hesitant to describe in detail
what she means by action, but eventually says:

Well, I don’t go outside that much. There’s a lot of action out there. People like to hang
out on corners a lot, like to make noise. There’s a lot of houses. My neighbors… they
ok. Like everyday, all you see is cops goin’ back and forth, back and forth, and people like
to have conversations outside of your house even though they don’t even live there…
that’s the dumb part. People like to blast the music at the crack of dawn, even though…
people gotta go to school, people gotta go to work. I hate that…. Action.

Monica began to get agitated just describing it and then proceeded to tell me more stories about
what goes on on her block. She related one story to me in which two women across the street
started threatening each other with knives. She vividly described their conversation and seemed to be amused by the whole thing. She tells almost disappointedly that she is not sure what ended up happening because her mom came out and told her to mind her own business and close the blinds.

Tiffany is similarly frustrated with the noise level in her neighborhood and tells me “they’re nice people, they just need to know when it’s time to go to bed.” She tells me stories of intense situations on her block, but then tells me that she’s not worried because usually people go to the next block to do the shooting. I am skeptical that it is always so strategic, but she forcefully tells me that her block is safer. She admits to me that most fights do end up with guns being shot, though, and explains matter-of-factly that the violence is a cycle. “There’s like a lot of little kids around outside, and they see them doing it and they’re like ‘why not? Why can’t I?’ So then they’re next.”

It is clear from her comments that Tiffany has firsthand knowledge of various culprits. When I ask if she has ever had to give a police report, she looks at me like I’m dumb and tells me that that would be a horrible idea for fear of retaliation. She tells me condescendingly that everyone in the neighborhood knows the name of a young man responsible for multiple killings, but nobody will say anything because they don’t want to be next. When I ask if she is often fearful of being “next,” she tells me that she usually feels safe. “If anything, I’ll end up getting in the middle of something because of one of my brothers.” Apparently one of her brother’s friends ran into her house while running from the police and basically held her hostage as he screamed at the police trying to enter the house after him. The incident ended without anyone getting hurt, but Tiffany feels that if something ever does happen, it will probably be in connection with her brother.
Surprisingly, Michael, a quiet and respectful young man also had a story about his involvement with the police. He tells me about last year when he and his friends were looking for another place to swim after the pool they were at closed for the night. They decided to climb the fence at another public pool and began swimming after-hours and the police soon arrived. The boys ran, but Michael had his four-year-old nephew with him so they fell behind and Michael grabbed a bike he thought belonged to one of his friends. The police caught up with them and tackled him to the ground and put handcuffs on him, right in front of his young nephew screaming and crying. Michael still feels very negatively about the extreme measures of the police: “They think just cuz they have a badge, they can do anything they want. Badge means nothing.” He goes on to say that the cops judged him and his friends based on race and look, and he does not believe the treatment would have been the same if they were white.

Some of the teens hint about the importance of connections in their neighborhood. Michael tells me, “I’m cool with everybody so I ain’t got nothin’ to worry about. It’s safe for me.” When I ask Jahquil about his neighborhood, he smirks and says, “Um, it’s not bad. It’s a good neighborhood. It ain’t bad- people make it seem bad. It can be safe. Well, you’ll be safer like that if you have connections.” About a month after this interview, I was walking home from having been back in the neighborhood after dark and I saw Jahquil across the street. I was not sure if he would acknowledge me because he was accompanied by a large group of boys whom I did not know. To my surprise, he looked over and said, “Is that Ms. Stephanie?! What… why would you be in this neighborhood this time of night? You should know you aren’t safe here now. You don’t know enough people- and you stand out (because of skin color).” The boys all nodded in agreement and Jahquil kindly suggested that he walk me back to the main street.
Jahquil was quick to add connections are not always a good thing and sometimes they can work against a person:

Sometimes they’ll get you in more trouble! Knowing a whole lot of people can get you in more stuff, but if you stay to yourself, you’ll be safe. Like if I stay in the house all day and don’t go outside, I’ll be safe. You’re more likely to get something happen to ya if you know a lot of people cuz they’ll be wantin’ you to help and have their back with stuff. Sometimes family gets you pulled into situations- that’s the worst, because you can’t turn your back on family.

Khadija says she doesn’t really want any more connections in the neighborhood because she feels like the girls that live near her only try to start trouble. She tells me that a few times they have gotten in her face for no reason and so she wants nothing to do with them. Khadija then tells me that for as much as North Philly has a bad rap, she does not think it is warranted. She expresses her love for the neighborhood but then adds that interestingly adds that she wouldn’t want to live there when she gets older.

Quantaya is the only one of the teens that does not live in North Philadelphia. She used to when she was younger, but for the past several years she has lived in Northeast Philadelphia, a section of the city that still struggles, but does not have nearly the same stigma as North Philadelphia. Interestingly, Quantaya regrets living in the Northeast section and tells me that there are not enough corner stores and the projects are nasty with “a lot of non-African Americans.” She feels like her community is very suburban and explains to me her reasoning:

You wouldn’t find that like in regular projects, its like... in NE, it’s like 75% non-African Americans... and you would think they’d be 75% African Americans in the projects, but there’s not. It’s only like 25%. Because non-African Americans make a lot
of money, so they don’t live in the projects… but not in this case. All of them live in the projects. I don’t get it but there’s so many non-African Americans that it doesn’t feel like a city still.

When I ask why she thinks the racial divide is like that, Quantaya says she doesn’t know but it is what she has seen to be true, through the media and in real life. When I ask about her opinion of North Philly, she tells me that she thinks it is safe, just more interesting and fun and she would love to move back. But when I ask if she would like to move back there to raise a family someday, she quickly says: “No way. I wouldn’t… I don’t think nobody would… I wouldn’t wanna raise my kids down here and I don’t think nobody else would want to either.” She proceeds to tell me that it is not a good place for kids to grow up which is amusing coming from a 14-year-old who wishes she was currently living there.

During a focus group with Khadija, Tiffany, Roderick, Monica, and Terrance, many of the same thoughts resonate, but there is clearly some tension between varying opinions. When Monica describes the neighborhood as “dirty,” Terrance snaps, “I don’t live in no dirty neighborhood, I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He goes on to describe in a very positive light saying:

My neighborhood that I live in… my neighborhood is fun. It got a lot of activities in the summer and different community centers and places you can go, internet sources… my neighborhood is good- to me. It’s not the best place. You do got some crime and some good things but for the most part to me it’s good, looking over all those things. Like the festivals. There’s tons of summer festivals.
Interestingly, contradicting everything Terrance just tried to convey, he states, “They sell fun t-shirts that say ‘North Filthy.’” When I ask about the connotation, Terrance simply says that it is important not to take everything too seriously.

The teens go on to say that their neighborhood is the same as any other, “except maybe those suburbs,” says Roderick. They all seem grateful for this and Tiffany says suburbs are too quiet, Roderick adds that “they ain’t got no corner stores,” and Terrance laughs as he says, “and you gotta go all the way to the end of the block to cross the street!” The conversation becomes tense when Roderick says that suburban clothing is different and Monica comments that people outside of the city are more educated. Tiffany, Terrance, and Khadija all become very agitated at these remarks, and Terrance exclaims, “It is NOT a whole different world!” and goes on to say that the only real differences lie in noise level and pollution.

Roderick disagrees and says that the disparities exist in the way people act because of the differences in the communities that they were raised in:

[There are differences] because like, how they was brought up and how we was brought up. Like, we was brought up in the streets, they was brought up in the house. Like we was raised like around drugs and stuff and they’re raised around doctors and lawyers and stuff like that.

At this, the rest of the group gets even more frustrated and they all speak over one another, with Tiffany saying, “they probably use even more in the suburbs,” Terrance saying, “the suburbs is where we get ours from,” and Monica adding, “no, they have better drugs there.”

After this debate, attention quickly turns to the media, which many of the youth attribute as the root of negative stereotypes.

*Media*
The media’s portrayal of African Americans and other minorities has had a huge effect on people’s impressions of these teenagers and their neighborhood. Nearly every teenager who participated in this project spoke in some way about the media’s effect on them or the way people stereotype them and put judgments on their neighborhood. Sixteen-year-old Jahquil expresses quite plainly the way he believes TV and movies effect people’s expectations.

This is a good neighborhood- it ain’t bad. People just make it seem bad, but I don’t think it is… TV, movies and stuff make it seem bad. We’re not bad at all. Just cuz it don’t look clean or if there’s trash on the ground, don’t mean it’s bad. People see it in movies and then they expect us to be bad.

Overall, the teens seem to fault the news organizations most of all. Michael continues talking about his neighborhood in a positive light and say, “On the news, they be sayin’ it’s the most violent area and a high percentage of crime happening and all that stuff. They never talk about the good stuff… like the festival.” Khadija also seems to understand the way the local news stations portray her community.

You know on the news, they always show “bad” news. Stuff happens other places. Stuff happens in, you know, those “nice, peaceful” suburban neighborhoods, and they only show what happens in neighborhoods like this. Like, “this guy got shot on Wednesday.” Alright, but somebody else could of got shot in some suburban place, town and you know, you’re not talking about that. So I think it’s that you watch the news and see all the supposedly bad neighborhoods. And then people think, “wow, don’t wanna go there, might get shot” and it’s not even like that. Maybe (reporters do that) because most of them are from those little suburban towns and they don’t want their little bad news broadcasted all over the TV. So why not go for the neighborhoods “we” don’t live in?
Michael talks about his frustration also, but believes that the news is rooted in some degree of truth. He says that the news twists things around because “we do got a lot of killings every year so then they just got it out for us.” He claims he does not care about the impact of the news and says it is not worth it for him to worry about. He seems clearly agitated while talking about, though.

During a focus group, Roderick makes clear that he thinks the suburbs are not any different in their levels of crime, but people there have better resources to cover themselves. He says, in the suburbs “there might be a drug dealer on this corner, one on that corner, but you don’t think he a dealer because of his background and family. Here it’s automatically thought.”

Terrance chimes in:

Exactly- but that ain’t necessarily true! The media look at the suburbs different just cuz how it looks. They wouldn’t call them “drug dealers,” they would call it some drug “scandal.” And when cops recover drugs from some hidden location or something, it’s just not the same. It’s the same thing, it’s just not done the same way. It’s more sneaky up there than here. Here it’s more out in the open and everybody knows about it. TV make sure you know about it.

In a continuing discussion about race from a one-on-one interview, Quantaya, a very discerning fourteen-year-old, comments on the portrayal of African Americans in the media:

You see it everyday. Everyday you turn on the TV- there’s a lot of non-African Americans. Every time- all the rich, high and famous people… except the people that sing, and the rappers and stuff. Well, not all of them, but the majority of them. Like, even baby commercials, there be a whole bunch of non-African American babies on TV. Like, you might see one or two (African American babies). I was looking on the back of
the cereal box the other day and it's about the Disney- something... and there's a whole bunch of non-African American kids laying on sleeping bags and one African American child in the corner- isolated. So I don't know... I guess it's just... "the way it is."

Eastman (2000) confirmed Khawana's suspicions and reported that African America girls and white girls typically do not play together in commercials and advertisements. Similar to Michael, Quantaya is quick to make known that these observations have not had a negative impact on her. It is almost as if the teens are already so frustrated by the existence of this inequality that they do not want to concede that it has been able to affect them. They don't want to give the stereotypes any more control.

**School**

Many of the youth feel that negative attitudes about African Americans spill over into their schools. The teens go to a variety of different kinds of schools including middle and high schools, co-educational and single sex schools, public, charter, magnet, and Catholic schools. Only two of the students, Michael and Terrance, attend the same school. Therefore, there is a wide variety of feedback regarding schools.

Michael is very frustrated with the way he feels stereotyped by teachers, both black and white. He feels like many of them gave up on him before he was even given the opportunity to succeed. Michael also seems to wish that there were more repercussions for negative behavior at his school, because the lack of it simply shows the apathy of the teachers. He says:

They treat everybody the same. Some of the teachers- they think that you can't learn, that you don't know nothing. That's why they don't wanna talk to you, that's why they don't really talk to you or say nothing to you when you do bad. They just don't care.”
Roderick has also felt that some teachers hold stereotypical views of African American students, but his comments seemed rooted more in a specific incident. He has not been getting along with his art teacher and is currently failing the class. He accepts minimal responsibility for this and mostly tries to blame the teacher for not understanding him:

I don’t like the teacher- she’s racist. She doesn’t like me. I talk. I had her last year too. Like two days ago I came in the class, I was quiet and I did my work, but she still picked on me so I went back to me. I started throwin’ stuff- she tried to get me suspended! I had my paper in my hand, I shot it in the basket, I missed so I picked it up and my boy came to mess with me so I pretended like I was puttin’ it in his shirt but I didn’t, I put it in the trash but she wrote me up. It’s crazy. I didn’t get suspended though.

Roderick admits that he contributes to the problem, but that his teacher treats him this way now regardless of if he has a good day. He says, “I play. I do my work but I play at school- that’s just me.”

Terrance, who attends the same school as Michael, seems to see their public school in a very different light and keeps with his theme of portraying the neighborhood positively. He quickly becomes defensive and explains:

My school is good considering what people see it as. Because it’s a bad neighborhood that it in, so when they see something bad happening in the area, they definitely assume that the high school’s the root of it, but it’s really not like that- some people here really need to see the inside of it to understand. People make this neighborhood look as though it’s bad, but it’s not.

Terrance also has a very different attitude about school and explains his love for learning:
I like everyday when I get up and go to school... they give me something to come for, so I don’t think that I would ever want to drop out because I would be sittin’ at home doing nothing. When you at school you continuously learn. So I don’t understand why people drop out.

Daleesha feels similar about the benefits of her school. She tells me excitedly about several of her classes, including a social studies class that gets to go at a local theater company once a week and learn about African American culture and heritage through drama. She says that school is more of a challenge for her now at a charter school which provides her with almost daily competitions that she especially loves.

Several of the girls that attend magnet or charter schools say that it was not really their choice to go to those schools. Tiffany says that her mom forced her to attend her current school because of its good reputation and close location to her job. Quantaya is furious with her mother for making her go to her current all-girls school that she does not enjoy. She also says that they expect way too much, but quickly adds “it’s not like I can’t do it. It’s just a lot of work.”

Roderick also describes his school as challenging and says that teachers push them hard and make it difficult to skip school. When I ask if people still do, he just smiles and says “well yea, we’re smarter than they think.”

There is clearly a dramatic difference in peer relations described by everyone who attends a single-sex school. Jahquil refers to his group of friends as a squad. He explains it simply as a group of guys who have random connections from “networking” and decide to become a more solidified group. Jahquil says that it is far easier to focus at an all-boys school because usually girls are the only distraction anyway. He also explains that there are far less fights because
“most fights are about girls anyway.” Not all of the girls feel similarly grateful for their single-sex schools. Quantaya explains the necessity of “squads”:

Girls are terrible- they spread crazy rumors. I don’t get rumors spread about me. If you do one thing to mess with one person, and like their whole squad hear about it- cuz everybody have their own squad at school- they gonna spread rumors about you round the whoole school. You better have a squad! Or the gay girls gonna get you. You better ride if somebody messes with someone in your squad… you better act like you gonna ride… If they start arguing, you better be there like “what?” or they gonna come and beat you up. That happens all the time.

Quantaya tells me that year her squad even had a name but the school principal said they were acting like a gang so they had to drop the name. When I ask Quantaya what she thinks the difference is between squads and gangs, she explains that really the only difference is that gangs are more violent and use weapons. A squad is pretty much just a clique that looks out for one another, but if you back down when somebody needs your back- you’re out. Quantaya brags that her squad is the ultimate and there are tons of other little “wannabes runnin’ round the school.”

**Relationships**

The girls that attend all-girl schools seem to feel even more pressure to be involved in a romantic relationship due to fear of being labeled a “dyke.” Both Tiffany and Quantaya mentioned this fear separately in their individual one-on-one interviews. Quantaya feels there is an extreme amount of pressure to have a boyfriend and talk about him often, make sure people see him, otherwise people might be suspicious. She makes it clear that she is disgusted by homosexuality, and claims that her school is “gross” and promotes homosexuality at her school with “rainbows posted everywhere.” She claims to be scared of other girls in the bathrooms at
school and even goes as far to say that she would feel safer if boys were there. Charley also
comments that she is very fearful of what she perceives as homosexuality at her school.

Tiffany makes a similar claim of fear that (homosexual) girls “might try somethin’.” She
is grateful that people know that she has a boyfriend of nearly three years who is 17-years-old.
He is still in high school and although they go to different schools, they have many mutual
friends and both of their families are supportive of their relationship. When I ask if pregnancy is
a concern for them, she tells me, “Well, I guess it’s always a concern.” She goes on to say that
they are not anticipating it and are “taking the necessary precautions,” but if something did
happen she would keep the baby. She tells me she does not believe in abortion, and thinks that
she would be able to finish school and rely on her mom for extra support.

Many of the other girls have been involved in less lengthy relationships. Kiera tells me
she has had a “honey” for a few months. They were introduced by friends, and as she describes
it “just started kissing one day” and when she asked what he thought of her, they decided to start
being serious. He is also still in high school, a senior. When I ask what he wants to do next
year, Kiera tells me that he wants to go to college for film but she doesn’t know if she will be
able to stay with him if he’ll be around naked girls all the time. At first, I’m confused, but then
as we continue talking, I realize she means he hopes to be a pornographer. When I ask for
clarification, she says, “yes, that’s the word.” In general, she tells me that she doesn’t approve of
a lot that he does and he is often “running round the streets, getting in trouble.” She tells me they
are “being smart” (using protection), and also tells me that she could never tell her mother about
the relationship, because it would be “too much drama,” so her mom thinks that they are just
friends.
A few of the girls are dating older guys. Quantaya has had a boyfriend for a couple months which her parents do not know about. He is older and did not finish high school. Quantaya tells me that he works a job that pays a lot, but she doesn’t know what it is. When I look at her questioningly, she swears to me that he isn’t working corners (dealing drugs) and she would never be with a guy that did that, but it certainly is disconcerting that she doesn’t know where the money is coming from.

Many of the teens feel like they cannot tell their parents about their relationships. Charley describes her dad as the “typical American dad” who is highly embarrassing and has always said “You don’t need a boyfriend- I’m your boyfriend.” Charley has had several short lived relationships and has never mentioned them to her parents.

At the time of our one-on-one interview, Khadija claims that she doesn’t feel any pressure to have a boyfriend, but also tells me that she has several crushes currently. She says that she probably wouldn’t tell her parents about a relationship if she became involved with a guy because her parents don’t believe that she could balance school and a relationship which annoys her. She adds that she definitely wouldn’t tell her parents about a boyfriend “if he’s older- if he’s 18, 25, 30- you just don’t share that”. She also states that she wouldn’t know what to do if she got pregnant because she doesn’t really believe in abortion, yet doesn’t like kids.

Several months later, Khadija tells me about how she met this “gorgeous” guy at the mall. When she is giving me details, she also mentions that he is 22-years-old. Trying to picture this young teen with someone my age was highly upsetting to me but she was really unwilling to listen to my concerns and jokingly called me “ageist.” I tried to find other reasons to encourage her to end this relationship, but it was to no avail. She stopped speaking about him to me and I was frustrated with myself that I had alienated her. About a month after that initial conversation
though, Khadija excitedly tells me she has met a new guy. I hesitantly ask how old he is and she proudly tells me, “only 17!” Even though this is still three years older than her, in comparison it is a success and I happily let her give me all the details.

On the other extreme of girls being fearful of telling their parents about relationships, Monica’s mom is encouraging her to have romances. Monica is currently single and claims she doesn’t feel pressure for a boyfriend, but her statements seem to indicate otherwise.

I don’t even know how to flirt! That’s what my mom says at least— and my mom’s a flirt. That’s why— my mom’s a flirt so everybody think I’m gonna be a flirt. I don’t even know how to flirt. My mom is like “ok, flirt with me.” Like how am I gonna flirt with you!? I don’t know how to flirt! She’s like “now rub my leg.” I’m like, “I don’t wanna rub on you!” My mom be trippin’. Like, my mom is quiet, like me. Everybody think, oh the quiet one’s get in trouble, that’s what everyone say in school. Cuz I’m the quietest one, they like “the quietest one is a freak.” I’m not a freak! I’m not a freak. I mean, ya’ll can say that, but I’m not a freak. They’re crazy.

Monica has many close guy friends and although they sometimes act like they like each other, she says they just “play.”

Daleesha is the only teen who tells me she has not been in a relationship yet. At the age of thirteen, she tells me she doesn’t feel pressure for a relationship because boys her age are “lame.” She adds that it is frustrating that people expect so much more maturity from girls, but for boys they just sigh and say “boys will be boys.” Daleesha tells me that she gets called a “pretty geek,” but she doesn’t mind and just does her own thing.

The only young man to talk with me about his romantic relationships has been Roderick who tells me that he has had a girlfriend of a few months. His parents know about her (which is
seemingly uncommon) and approve of the relationship. Roderick seems to indicate that they have not gone far sexually, but when discussing sex as a group, the teens tease him otherwise and he allows it.

During teen talk time, each of the youth seem to have horror stories about very young youth getting pregnant or contracting STDs. After each one, they are outraged, but interestingly seem to talk as if they are decades older than those they are discussing, when in reality many of them are the exact same age. They all agree that 12 is far too young to have sex, so I ask what age they think is appropriate and a variety of answers are thrown out ranging from 15 to 18 to 21 to Terrance saying “whenever you’re under your own roof” and another youth adding “and ready to deal with the consequence.” Interestingly, almost all of the youth give a different response than what they have actually personally done, as many reported during one-on-one interviews.

When discussing the consequences of sex, the young men continue to refer to certain people as “these girls.” Finally Monica picks up on the trend and exclaims, “what about you boys?!” Roderick arrogantly responds “we don’t rush, we not stupid,” and all the females jump on that statement and agree that it is a double standard that girls are called “slutty” and assumed more promiscuous simply because of the visible consequence of pregnancy. The five girls in the group all agreed that they do not support abortion and Monica says, “If you’re able to make a baby and you’re gonna wanna kill it, what’s the point of havin’ sex? That’s dumb.” But they did not feel like because a young woman chooses to carry a baby, things should be assumed about her.

The teens seem to be frustrated with the varying extremes of parental responses in the community. Several comment on their relationship with their parents. Roderick describes his
relationship with his parents as critical to his development. He is very proud that his parents have remained married all this time and credits their relationship to the way he has turned out:

Cuz without a mother-father bond, you gotta visit your father, you gotta visit your momma here, that’s confusing, you just get all mixed up in the brain, so if somebody tell you ‘let’s go do somethin’,’ you ‘bout to do it because you don’t got time to get to your mother and your father (to ask). So with my bein together, I can run to both of them together while they both just there. And not have to call this one, call that one, or live with my grandma or something like that.

Many teens comment that it’s either a problem because young people are hiding their sexual relationships from their parents, or in some cases, the parents are allowing and encouraging sexual activity in their children.

**Accounting for Strengths**

*Nurture v. nature*

The teens have varying ideas and opinions about what has enabled them to have the strengths and talents that they possess. A lot of their thoughts fit right into the ongoing nature-nurture debate common in psychology today. Jahquil breaks it down as follows:

Some of it’s just part of who you are. But part of who you are is experience... I think that everybody is born with the ability to know right from wrong, but you don’t come out the womb knowing right from wrong. You gotta be taught. So I think its experience and what you’re taught. Cuz some people go through things and it makes them who they are.

While willingly recognizing that part of a person is innate, he also clearly believes that a person’s life experiences play a large role in making them who they are. He goes on to say that he did not always possess the strengths he has today and he certainly does not think he was always
an achiever. He says as a younger boy he “used to be bad, but my mom straightened me out—
that’s for sure.”

Khadija is also quick to point to parents and the environment that one is raised in as important factors of who people become. During a discussion of violence in the city, she says:

Obviously people aren’t born stabbing each other. I think it’s a lot of who you hang around with and what kind of parents you have and where you grow up and stuff like that. And sometimes if your parents just don’t care then people just be like runnin’ around, like you have a whole bunch of kids just roaming the street… I’m not even allowed to walk around by myself.

But then gets angry and counters her previous statement by saying that people can be bad in the suburbs too and she knows stuff happens everywhere. While recognizing that truth, it is interesting that she sees a limit put on her (not walking by herself) as being the thing that has made a difference in her life.

Michael also believes in the origins of his strengths as somewhat intrinsic, but also learned. He says:

I think part of it is just me, but part of it is my family too because I just be doin’ what my mom said. Like, she said something years ago and then it just comes back to you years later.

Like many of the youth, Michael is able to pinpoint exactly how he believes strengths were instilled in him as a young child. Michael tells me that as one of the youngest of eight children, his mother was very strict about fairness because she had to be. He says his mom tried to treat them all equally and wouldn’t give one of them something if she couldn’t give it to everyone.

Therefore he attributes his strength of consistency to the reinforcement of that on him as a child.
Other strengths he sees as developing quite later and his strength of command, liking to delegate and direct people, he thinks comes from the leadership program just this year. Michael says he used to be uncomfortable in leadership positions because of his shy and private nature, but then after always being picked to be a leader in the leadership program, his confidence was built up and now he enjoys leadership tenfold.

Interestingly, the only youth to strongly believe in the nature side of the debate is Terrance, who arguably comes from one of the toughest family situations. He tells me “hands-down” that he thinks he was born with his strength and that they’ve always been with him. I take it a step further and ask if he thinks he would be the exact same person even if he grew up in Oklahoma. He says, “Absolutely, I think anywhere you put me, I’d be the same” and is quite hesitant to give any credit to his family or community.

“The Difference”

So do the teens think that their nature or environment completely account for the track that they are currently pursuing? We explored if they think they act differently than other teens in their neighborhood and what outside factors they believe contribute to that behavior (or lack of negative behavior). Daleesha has a lot to say on the topic:

Why do people drop out? No, they’re not born like that. There’s a lot of different things, like now, I know amongst teenage girls, there’s a lot of teen pregnancy and they probably didn’t plan it to be that way but just, so much stuff happened in their lives, that they went to the male gender, looking for comfort and it happened so fast that they wound up pregnant. And some kids couldn’t handle school so they dropped out and they think the only way to make money is to sell drugs. I know a lot of em, a lot of em- they lost their lives. And, when you be dealing drugs, there’s always the possibility that you’ll get killed.
because somebody gets killed like everyday so you know, it’s just… a lot of things that are happening that somebody would say that [leads to] underachieving. There are a lot of things that could get in my way- that’s why I’m careful in everything I do.

Kiera also seems motivated by the overwhelming negative information she is faced with about her peers. She admits that she is having a lot of difficulty with her classes, but she is sticking with it and tells me she will definitely graduate. When I ask what made her decide to choose to stick with it, she says:

My drive to learn came from basically me seeing what’s happening around me. I never wanted to live that lifestyle, I never wanted to be that way, so I felt that the only way I cannot live that lifestyle is that if I went to school and I learned as much as I can- to be something.

Roderick’s motives also seem to come from a resistance to becoming like others he sees not achieving their dreams as well as the desire to rise above low expectations.

The difference between me and them? It’s either they have parents that wasn’t caring or [they] just decide that it wasn’t for them. People think that school’s not for everybody, but if you can try, it’s for you. And so, I didn’t drop out because first, my parents would be on my back. And then, second, for me, I wanted to [be] different than other Black African American males because schools tell me 50% of African Americans does drop out of high school. So then, me being African American, I try to succeed and so, and I’m gonna go to my prom. That’s gonna be a touchy moment right there. [But] for them (people who have dropped out), they just didn’t care. They thought it wasn’t for them and they just gave up. They didn’t try hard enough.
Some of the youth definitely agree with his statement and think that many of their peers aren’t willing to work hard enough. In separate interviews, Terrance says that he thinks people who drop out of high school are simply “lazy,” and Khadija says, “They probably just didn’t try hard enough.” Terrance later recants his previous statement and says that for many teens there are extenuating circumstances, but also faults individuals for bringing some of their problems on themselves: “Probably problems at home, problems that they’ve created from school… different reasons that just affect them.”

At different points throughout the year, the teens bring up a number of different factors that influence people’s behavior. While the condition of their neighborhood motivates many of the teens in the leadership program, they cite that many of their peers may feel unable to rise above the poor conditions and dead-ends faced. Almost all of the teens also mention that having children at a young age and getting involved with drugs are factors that prevent teens from succeeding. But the teens make statements like this not with the demeaning rhetoric of outsiders, but with the first-hand knowledge or experience of a loved one who has gotten stuck in one of these situations. Seven of the eleven participants cited that their mother stopped pursuing her education when she became pregnant for the first time. Additionally, eight of the eleven participants have had at least one member of their immediate family, either a parent or sibling, spend time in jail, and four of them have family currently serving jail time.

Some of the teens are not condemning of the choices that these people have made, but simply want to ensure they are able to rise above factors that have disadvantaged others. In speaking about her uncles, Tiffany says:
Like, a lot of my uncles, they steal and stuff like that... and I don’t think I’m gonna have to do that but I still don’t want to have to go through that anyway so I’m working really hard. I wanna live in a nice neighborhood someday.

In this short statement, the language Tiffany uses is extremely important. By using the phrase “have to,” Tiffany makes clear her belief that often people are left with no other options. She is not ashamed of her uncles, but more so seems to feel bad that they have to “go through that.”

Just as opinions of urban life are mixed in mainstream society, the opinions of these inner-city youth are clearly mixed about the ethics of what some people resort to or the expectation some people have about receiving assistance from programs or government. Khadija says:

If you work hard for something and somebody else gets the same thing, and they did nothing for it- then you did it all for nothing. It’s unfair. And I don’t like when people just get something handed to them instead of working for it. I would rather work for something than just have something handed to me… I guess I believe in the whole fairness stuff and equality stuff.

Cliché as it may sound, many of the youth also think that believing in themselves is of crucial importance. When I ask why Charley thinks she is on a different track than some of her peers, she explains her drive and coping mechanisms: “Self-esteem and self-confidence. I believe in myself. And I read a lot of poems. It’s a good escape from all the shootin’. People are so stupid with all the shooting.” Monica also addresses the important of finding positive outlets and says plainly that pessimism hinders some people from achieving their goals. She also speaks to the importance of having someone continually challenging actions and behaviors:
Their negativity [stops them]. And what they say. Cuz like some people now, when they used to be in my place [they said], “oh yea, I’m gonna graduate, I’m gonna do this, I’m gonna do that.” Soon as when they get there, they doubt themselves and they just stop. If you wanna do something, go head and do it, don’t let your friends [stop you]. My mom, my dad, my whole family... they push me on like, “go head girl, go succeed your dreams, see what you want, don’t let nobody stop you.” And I- I like to do that. I don’t let... some of my friends, they want other things, they’re like, “You should be what I wanna be” and I’m like “No! You be what you wanna be, I’ll be what I wanna be.” My mom pushes me on everyday, that’s what I like to hear from her. She [tells] me everyday- and my grandma too- “You need to graduate so you can go to college.”

While Monica speaks as though she is immune to peer-pressure and can easily stand up against it, Daleesha makes it clear that it is a big hindrance for many people. “Basically wanting to fit in with the “in” crowd, wanting to be popular [is difficult]. That’s something: people, kids get in my way. Cuz in school, you kinda get picked on for not following the crowd.”

*Meaning of Success*

Toward the end of the year, the teens filled out a worksheet asking the simple question, “What does ‘success’ mean to you?” The answers were very interesting. All of the teens had previously mentioned the importance of education, many talked about their hope of making a decent amount of money, and quite a few talked about getting a good job. Yet, the only one to explicitly mention any of these things was Roderick who wrote, “Success means to do something and accomplish it. Like me, I started high school and I know I am [going] to finish it.” Most of the teens gave vague answers and simply wrote something about how success means achieving
whatever goals they set for themselves. Perhaps they leave their answers purposely vague so that they will be able to claim success regardless of what happens in their lives.

Overall, the ideas mentioned above were not the focus for many of the teen’s definitions of success. Khadija even specifically counters that idea when she writes “success is not about money, but it’s about getting things done that you hope to get done.” Kiera explains that to her, success is having strong ties with her family and having good friends for support. Monica explains that “a person is successful if they are happy in life.” She continues on to say that people are successful if they have faith and pride in themselves. Jahquil agrees and simply writes “happiness.” Tiffany defines success as “when you achieve something that you never thought you could do.”

Some of the teens also seem to define success as working as hard as possible in order to achieve something desired; in other words, success is found in the process and determination that it requires. Michael writes that success is “completing something no matter how long it takes to do.” Similarly, Daleesha writes that it is “to have complete focus on what you do.”

*Perceived Value of Strengths*

In order to further understand what is deemed valuable in the culture which the participants are a part of, nine of the participants completed a survey of which strengths they thought were important and which they believed to be unimportant. The survey was done after all of the participants had already been told their strengths, so it is possible that the knowledge of their own signature themes affected their decisions. Appendix B provides a list of all thirty-four strengths and a tally of which were ranked important and unimportant. The themes that were widely determined to be quite valuable were achiever, communication, focus, and responsibility.
The themes that were deemed valuable were quite varied, perhaps because the knowledge of personal strengths influenced wide spread of choices.

When asked to choose themes that were not important, or as I one student expressed, “You mean ones we think sound stupid?”, students chose similar themes. Some of the explanations for their selections were more interesting than others. For instance, three students chose woo, but that was probably simply because they enjoyed making fun of the word. More notable, empathy and harmony were deemed to be not valuable. Full exploration of these choices was not done, but it is easy to speculate that most of the participants probably would look at these themes as weaknesses and not strengths. In their communities, many expressed how important it is to act tough. To be harmonious or empathetic would work against a guise of toughness, and therefore must be abandoned. It is also interesting that no participants received either empathy or harmony as one of their themes.

Most interesting is when a theme is received with mixed feelings from the youth. Discipline was a theme that was chosen by six teens in this exercise, but interestingly three ranked it as important and three decided it was not valuable. From discussions on discipline, youth seem to recognize that it is important, but then seem unwilling to do what it would mean to become disciplined. Many admit their parents should be more strict with them, or they perhaps should be receiving consequences in school more frequently, but none are willing to actually submit to either of these forms of discipline. Interestingly, none of the participants had discipline show up in their signature themes.

**Development of Strengths**

There were a few occasions in which I was able to create groups based around the student’s signature themes and even sit in with a group and watch and encourage the interactions
of the student’s signature themes. Khadija, Charley, and Tiffany were put in a group to begin to brainstorm and plan an upcoming event. The event they decided to work on was a Spoken Word performance night. It was great to see their different strengths interact and balance each other.

For example, Charley was the most creative in the group, full of new ideas, some realistic and some extreme. When she was told a thought was impossible, she would go to great lengths to try to prove it was manageable. Tiffany also had ideas, but was reluctant to compare them to the previous poetry night hosted by the youth. She was the most encouraging throughout the meeting. Finally, Khadija was the one keeping everyone on task when distractions arose. She was very eager to complete their assignment and move on to the next task.

The girls’ strengths tie in perfectly with their behavior when functioning as a group. Charley’s strength of ideation is very evident in her abundance of creative suggestions. Even when ideas were seemingly absurd, Charley would engage her strategic theme in an attempt to prove their possibilities. Tiffany had ideas, but many of them were pointed out to be old and already done by the other girls who then went on to describe why the various ways were unsuccessful. Tiffany refused to talk about the past failures, but instead pushed how successful her thoughts could be with a little tweaking for the upcoming event. Her futuristic strength shone through. Lastly, Khadija’s strengths of achiever, command, and strategic were very important for the group, who kept managing to get side-tracked. Khadija took charge of the group and kept trying to convey to the girls the importance of completing it and writing down concrete things, rather than just throwing ideas around.

As the session progressed and these tendencies became more evident, I mentioned them to the girls. At first, they seemed embarrassed, perhaps at what they perceived as predictability, or maybe because they did not really believe the themes the assessment identified as much as
they originally claimed. However, as the meeting progressed, it was evident that the girls became more comfortable with the idea of the distinct roles and importance to the group. As I continued to point out the uses of their strengths, they began to smile and get excited about their strengths.

It was also interesting how the students’ signature themes interacted with one another during a focus group. With Khadija, Tiffany, Monica, Roderick, and Terrance participating, some themes stood out. Most noticeable was Terrance’s theme of communication as he spoke quite articulately throughout the session. The only issue was that none of the other participants involved possessed that strength and it was quite clear that he was intimidating them and dominating the conversation. Halfway through the group time, I decided it was appropriate to point this out to Terrance and ask that he back off from speaking so much, while affirming his strength and reason for doing so. Rather than being upset, Terrance beamed that I had complimented his communication skills in front of the group and he respectfully consented by still providing a considerable amount of feedback, but making certain others had the chance to speak.

Roderick’s strengths were also quite evident as he participated. Engaging his strength of achiever, he continually encouraged and challenged the group to provide deeper insights whenever he felt they were not taking the time seriously. He was also very much a leader in the way he prodded the group, emphasizing his theme of command. Monica allowed her strengths of positivity and analytical to be evident, as she continued put a brighter spin on people’s insights, but also simultaneously challenged people to examine their thoughts as well as the thoughts of others. Khadija was clearly a relator in her interactions, and rather than speaking to the whole group, she would make direct eye contact and refer to only one person when she
spoke, perhaps because it made her feel that the environment was more intimate. She also used her strength of achiever as she always tried to provide input, even if just the slightest thought, to know that she had participated. Finally, Tiffany used her futuristic theme by continually trying to bring back the focus of what transforming things are going to be done through her and her peers, rather than focusing on negative things of the past. As I pointed out many of these strengths, the student’s each seemed affirmed and excited that they had a distinct role to play. They also seemed to further assert the validity of the assessment. After I affirmed Terrance of one of his themes, he smiled wide and said, “See, I knew all my strengths was gonna be true cuz I was so honest answering the questions.” The other participants seemed similarly excited in observing their strengths actually put to work.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusions

Nurture v. Nature

The ideas of strengths and success are interesting concepts because they appear to vary between cultures. For instance, in Spanish the word for ambitious, ambicioso, carries a negative connotation, but here in America, for the most part, ambition is considered a virtue. While many participants in the study pointed to friends and family as the meaning of success, it is likely that many white Americans would suggest things of greater “ambition.” In fact, Webster’s Online Dictionary defines success very narrowly as meaning either “to turn out well, to attain a desired object or end, favorable or desired outcome,” or “the attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence” (Websters, 2006). Family and friends are definitely not mentioned. Clarence, from It’s a Wonderful Life, would be disappointed that many Americans no longer seem to take to heart his admonition that, “No man is a failure who has friends” (Capra, 1946). These youth still seem to believe that statement though, and the valuing of family and friends in their culture can be seen as an important strength.

Despite these people oriented ideas on the meaning of success, most of the participants had the strength of achiever. When we reflect on the commonality of this trait among the youth, the age old question continues: what came first, the chicken or the egg? In other words, did the participants of the leadership program apply and become participants because many of them possess the themes of achiever, competition, and strategic; or did the leadership program itself teach students to develop these strengths? Clifton, the creator of the StrengthsFinder assessment, suggests that strengths are set at a young age. Buckingham and Clifton (2001) explain how the
brain’s threads are woven and, in summary, say that each person’s synapses, or their connections between brain cells (neurons), create their talents. The human brain grows quickly and by age 3, individuals have developed about a hundred billion neurons with fifteen thousand synaptic connections. The odd part is that by age sixteen, over half of the connections will be lost. The strongest synaptic connections become talents which are the most important thing for strength building. They explain that “nature forces you to shut down billions of connections precisely so that you can be freed up to exploit the ones remaining” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 61).

Interestingly, this way of looking at strengths leaves room for nature and nurture to both play equally important roles. Buckingham and Clifton (2001) go on to explain that talents have their own “built-in feedback mechanism” (p. 62). Since people feel satisfied when they do something well, they will continue attempting to repeat it, thus strengthening the synaptic connections over time. Therefore, both nature and nurture may play a significant role. People may have tendencies or certain strong connections genetically, but then their experiences make it such that these strengths get intensified.

Why is it that strengths are rarely looked at within urban culture? It is my perspective that it is easier to bury urban youth beneath the complications of their neighborhoods, families, schools, rather than striving to look for ways to support and encourage youth and build upon their strengths. It would be silly to pretend like there are not significant cultural differences between urban and suburban youth. These differences clearly exist and it is very important that we look at the context in which people live. However, all this does not mean that races have innate biological or mental differences.

Within any culture there are some people who seem to have more visible talents and strengths. We recognize people who we as a society deem exceptional. Why is it that more of
these people are not African American? Is it possible that they simply do not have as much to offer our society, as Levin (1997) suggests? Much research suggests that people from different cultures are remarkably similar biologically. Pinker (1997) describes a famous study in which a group of remote New Guineans were shown photographers of Anglo-Americans expressing a variety of emotions. These people, who had never seen photos or met Americans before, identified the emotions exactly in the same way as numerous other cultures. Pinker concludes that individuals from different cultures do not have radically different personalities.

Buckingham and Clifton (2001) agree and state that race, sex and age do not play as important differences as the network of mental connections. Gallup has calculated that score differences between major demographic groups tend to average less than .04 points and practically speaking, these score differences are insignificant. Although I was unable to obtain statistics for all thirty-four themes, Gallup made data available for three themes regarding race. They found that for the theme “achiever,” nonwhite individuals score higher than white individuals by .048 points. For “arranger,” white individuals score higher than nonwhite individuals by .016 points. Lastly, for the strength of “empathy,” white individuals score higher than nonwhite individuals by .030 points. Gallup does not cite any predicted reasons for these trends, but does admit that occasionally these statistics are statistically significant. They go on to say that many of the small differences between demographic groups are favorable for nonwhites. Gallup also makes it clear that even significant differences do not indicate that one group has a “better” theme score than another, only that certain trends might be prevalent for particular groups.

*Effects of the Neighborhood*
In *Code of the Street*, Anderson (1999) describes decent families and street families and tries to explain the need to differentiate between the two. Through his writing though, it is entirely likely that many readers unfamiliar and intimidated by the city are left with a negative image of street youth, and the lasting impression is the description of these negative characteristics. Also, while it is understandable and agreed that there are different types of parents, it seems dangerous to label entire families. Some youth in the study come from what Anderson would probably consider “street” families, but these individuals are rising above their family status. Whenever labels are placed on people, it is smothering, and also risks producing a self-fulfilling prophecy. Although Anderson would have likely labeled several of the participant’s families “street,” none of the participants felt that way about themselves, with Terrance even once saying “none of us is street.” It is important to never underestimate the power of self-fulfilling prophecies, many of which are the only thing these youth have to cling to.

The type of neighborhood a person is raised in and resides in, perhaps has as equally far reaching effects as the person’s race or class. Most research shows that race and class are completely intertwined, and typically the type of neighborhood a person is raised in is also tied to those demographics. In the neighborhood where the church used in this study is located and most of the youth reside, 96% of people report themselves as Black or African American according to US Census data. The per capita income for 1999 was $9,438 whereas the US average was $21,587. Additionally, in this neighborhood, 49% of families with children 18 and younger residing in the home are living below the poverty level, with 29% of those families making under $10,000 per year, versus just 9% of families living in poverty in the US overall.
With statistics as overwhelming as this, the assumption is that the next generation will turn out similarly. While generational poverty is a reality that is hard to rise above, poverty in no way denotes intelligence or capacity for learning. Have we given up on youth simply because of where they are born? It is unconscionable that we allow city schools to continue serving as holding centers the way that they do currently, with very little actual education taking place. This is relevant to my study because this data in every way affects the youth’s development and the ability to build on strengths.

It is quite frustrating to see how the strengths of several of the participants are being stifled by their environment. An example of this is found in Kiera’s theme of intellection. During a one-on-one interview, Kiera told me school is not really a priority for her and she is currently failing two classes. She is clearly a bright girl and articulates herself well in our conversations, but school has managed to lose its appeal for her. Kiera attends a public school that has a bad reputation. Greatschools.net, a website that provides statistics for schools in the United States, reports grim test outcomes for students at her public high school. The percentage of students at or above proficiency levels in 2005 was 11% in English, 34% in Writing, and 5% in Math. Outcomes for the entire state of Pennsylvania averaged 45% higher for these three subjects. Kiera tells me school is exhausting because it is either too advanced or too “babyish.” Many teachers are faced with the dilemma of either backtracking to help catch up students, thus alienating the on track students, or staying at grade level and further distancing the majority of students who are struggling. Because of one extreme or the other, Kiera has in effect, “shutdown” and reports that she rarely feels as if she is learning. Her talent of intellection, meaning she is probably “introspective and appreciates intellectual discussions,” is not being given the chance to be adequately developed. For Kiera, at this point, school is simply a place to go during
the day for the next year and a half, to ensure she gets her diploma. Most of the youth report that attendance, effort, and behavior at public schools are more important than actual understanding of a subject area.

In the neighborhood where the program takes place, 45% of adults 25 and older do not have a high school diploma or equivalency, and only 6% have received any sort of college degree (census.gov). So while it is disheartening that Kiera feels school is meaningless for her, it is an incredible strength that she is striving to obtain her diploma at all.

Implication of Strengths

The strengths that were most common among the youth participating were achiever, competition, strategic, adaptability, command, communication, consistency, positivity and responsibility. At least three youth were found to have each of these themes and so it is appropriate to make some conclusions based on the interviews and time spent with the teens to explain possible reasons for the prevalence of these traits.

Eight out of eleven teens have achiever as a strength, a hugely significant finding. All of these teens desire to rise above their current living situations. Although many of them claim loyalty to the neighborhood they live in, virtually all of them simultaneously express a desire to leave the neighborhood as adults. All of the teens express a desire for college, which is important since only 6% of people in their neighborhood have a college degree. This is where competition is very understandable as a common theme as well. The fact that so many people have low expectations for the youth, based primarily on their class and where they live, spurs on competition for many of the youth. As Daleesha so eloquently expresses:

Not a lot of people would look at me and think and see me as someone that wants to achieve, you know, that wants to be something in life… they would just think “Oh well,
she’s not going to achieve and she’s not going to be this and she’s not going to be that.”

So, it kinda creates a competition everyday, not just in school but in life period, the competition to make people see that I’m not just like… a stereotype. Stop stereotyping me. I come from a neighborhood with a very enormous amount of poverty and drugs and underachievers. So everybody gets stereotyped, and it’s for different reasons but the majority of the reason I get stereotyped is because of the color of my skin and where I come from.

Many of the other youth express that they similarly feel that pressure and need to prove themselves.

Adaptability is also an understandable strength for several of these teens to possess. Although the teens have varying opinions of their neighborhood, they all agree that it is chaotic. The chaos of the neighborhood, and sometimes the school or home life, creates situations in which some of these teens have had to become highly adaptable. This means they are laid-back and relaxed by situations that might cause stress in others. In order to negotiate their everyday lives, many youth have also had to become strategic.

Perhaps because of their superior leadership skills and also because of an environment that often necessitates being more forceful, several youth have the theme of command. Communication works alongside this. The youth have learned to express themselves powerfully and persuasively in an attempt to make sure they are heard.

Three teens had the theme consistency, previously called fairness. The youth possess varying feelings toward public assistance, but one thing they all seem to agree on is that the unemployment rate in their neighborhood is very unfair. Similarly, many recognize the faults of the local schools and become frustrated. This unfairness they are confronted with on a daily
basis probably helped to create this desire for equality. At the same time, however, many have recognized the futility of negativity. Negative attitudes do not solve problems, they simply perpetuate misery. Many youth have learned to focus on the positive and seek it in every situation.

While each of these predominate strengths will play out slightly differently for the individual who possesses them, it is interesting to look at them as a whole and see what insights they can provide into the feelings and thoughts of the group.

Strength and Limitations of the Study

Limitations of the study

There are several limitations that I encountered during the course of this project. While the youth were quite excited to hear about their results and have their strengths described to them, they were less interested in taking it an additional step and working to develop those strengths further. All participants received worksheets provided by Gallup that explain action steps for each theme, but it seemed like too much work for the teens, who reported they had too much to worry about with school and the leadership program already. Unfortunately, the director of the program did not quite catch the vision of developing the youth’s individual strengths, and while she provided time for taking the test, she was hesitant to allow extra time for development. As previously mentioned, occasionally specially arranged small groups were attempted, but overall there was a minimal amount of strength development, which is regrettable.

Working within the confines of this program was manageable, but at times difficult simply because of so many other goals the program wanted to complete. My schedule also played a role. Whereas during the first semester of work, up to three afternoons could be spent with the youth, during the second semester my schedule was not as accommodating. In the
spring, only one afternoon per week was able to be spent with the teens. This is unfortunate because the second semester is when the assessments had been completed and it would have been possible to do more strength development. Because of this, the study in many ways took more of an ethnographical focus which was not the original intention.

It is also unfortunate that there is not data available for youth as a group, because this would provide an interesting control group and allow for some comparison. In general, if the Gallup Organization released more data, it would provide interesting material for this study.

Another limitation is that it is unknown exactly how participants answered the individual questions that led to their signature themes. If the test were able to be hand scored, rather than computerized, it would probably provide some interesting insights.

A final limitation is the generalizability of quantitative research. This study is not a reflection of African American youth as a whole, or urban youth overall, but instead, just a snippet of the exceptional African American, urban youth who participated.

*Strengths of the study*

There are many strengths of the research, most important of which is the benefit to the participants. Although a few of the youth initially seemed uninterested in the assessment, they were elated when it was explained that this was not a test they could fail. All eleven of the participants expressed their excitement in some way that they would be told what things they were good at. Many expressed how often media, parents, teachers, and other adults, try to focus on negative things and point out weaknesses. Having the opportunity to affirm these exceptional youth in things they are genuinely excelling at was a tremendous opportunity. Hopefully the effects of the affirmation will be far reaching and even if the youth do not remember each of their signature themes, at least one or two will be stuck in memory and a reminder of worth.
Also important, The Gallup Organization is a nationally recognized and respected organization. The youth were given the opportunity to take this mature test and feel important, recognizing that they are as valuable and important as the business people and other respected adults who take this test.

Another strength of the study is the way it impacted me, the researcher. In many ways, last year I was unaware of the strengths of the youth in the neighborhood. My views had become jaded and I believed that the negative effects of poor neighborhoods, tough family situations and struggling schools had already taken their toll on the youth. Even I was unaware of the variety of strengths these youth possess, thanks in part to exactly their often difficult environment.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

The Gallup Organization does not seem interested in drawing sweeping conclusions about demographic groups, and makes it clear that strengths can best be examined on an individual level. It would be quite interesting to conduct a quantitative study in which a large number of people living in an urban setting participated in the StrengthsFinder assessment.

Another idea would be to do an action research study with youth involved in a leadership development program. It would also be interesting to be able to do pre-tests and post-tests to see if the leadership program has a significant impact on changing or developing strengths and to further test the validity of the StrengthsFinder assessment.

Further research may also be appropriate to determine if the StrengthsFinder assessment is culturally sensitive. Supposedly extensive research has been done to ensure that there is not a statistically significant difference between cultural groups, but little research seems to have been done on varying races within the US. It may be appropriate to target these populations and find out if in fact the assessment is sensitive to varying demographics.
Lastly, if I had a chance to redo the project, further emphasis would be put on the development of strengths, rather than simply the knowledge of strengths. In the future, hopefully there will be opportunities to make strength development part of the main goal of a leadership development program with inner-city youth.

**Final Reflections**

I chose to do this study after realizing the amount of negative stereotypes put on urban youth, but interestingly, I did not even realize how biased I was at the beginning of my research. Although I hoped to find strengths in the students, for the most part, I was also stereotypical and limiting in my impressions of the youth. This project opened my eyes and further changed my perspective about people, and particularly youth, in the inner-city.

The focus on strengths has also impacted my social work practice overall. I am currently an intern at a child welfare agency, doing family preservation with families at risk of losing custody of their children. Although these families all have significant issues to work through, I have become more intentional about finding the strengths in families rather than focusing on their problems. It is truly refreshing to be able to pinpoint the positive contributions families are making in my work with them. I hope to permanently practice social work through the lens of the strength perspective.
References


### Appendix A: Summary of 34 StrengthsFinder Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achiever</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activator</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to &quot;go with the flow.&quot; They tend to be &quot;now&quot; people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arranger</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to figure out how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Command</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone in the world with consistency by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberative</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Futuristic</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harmony</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don’t enjoy conflict; rather, they seek areas of agreement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideation</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includer</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make an effort to include them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualization</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how people who are different can work together productively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellection</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maximizer</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Positivity theme have an enthusiasm that is contagious. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relator</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restorative</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-Assurance</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Significance theme want to be very important in the eyes of others. They are independent and want to be recognized.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategic</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Woo</td>
<td>People especially talented in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with another person.</td>
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</table>
### Appendix B: Results of StrengthFinder Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th># of teens with theme</th>
<th>Deemed Valuable</th>
<th>Deemed not valuable</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Achiever</td>
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