

Evaluating The Arthur Project Program

2024-2025 School Year

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¹ It is important to note that a new approach encourages evaluators to build close relationships with nonprofit leaders and partner with them in the evaluation design and processes allowing them to drive their own evidence agenda. [E]valuators can provide a helpful external lens on a nonprofit's services, processes, and theories of change, serving as a critical friend in helping the nonprofit question assumptions, identify challenges, and test solutions." For more information, see https://projectevident.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/EmpoweringPractitionerstoDrivetheEvidenceTra in_BuildingtheNextGenerationofEvidence.pdf

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Executive Summary: The Arthur Project 2024–2025 Program Evaluation

Therapeutic Mentoring: Fostering Opportunity Within Unequal Systems

Middle school is a pivotal time in a young person's life—a period of rapid growth, vulnerability, and opportunity. For many youth in The Bronx and Brooklyn, this stage is marked by adversity that goes far beyond the typical challenges of adolescence. The Arthur Project (*TAP*) serves students who face a unique convergence of obstacles: adverse childhood experiences and trauma, intergenerational economic deprivation, systemic racism, exposure to violence, and a lack of access to mental health resources during a national youth mental health crisis. These challenges are not abstract—they are daily realities that threaten to derail academic progress, emotional well-being, and future opportunity.

Yet alongside these challenges, young people bring extraordinary strengths - creativity, resilience, cultural knowledge, and a deep capacity for connection - that, when nurtured, become powerful drivers of healing and growth. TAP's work is grounded in the belief that every young person holds inherent worth and potential, and that meaningful, trusting relationships can transform even the most difficult circumstances into pathways toward possibility.

The Complex Needs of Our Youth

The young people - and caregivers - TAP serves face multiple undue burdens:

- **Adverse Childhood Experiences & Trauma:** Every TAP student has either witnessed or experienced violence. Many struggle with anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress, which can undermine their ability to learn, connect, and thrive.
- **Intergenerational Economic Deprivation:** Most TAP families live at or below the poverty line, facing food and housing insecurity, unstable employment, and limited access to quality education. These conditions increase the risk of academic disengagement and involvement with the justice system.

- **Racism & Exposure to Violence:** Systemic racism and community violence compound the stress and barriers faced by Black and Latino youth, who are disproportionately represented in TAP's programs.
- **Limited Access to Mental Health Resources:** Schools in these communities are often under-resourced, with too few mental health professionals to meet the needs of students and structural barriers to access. The broader youth mental health crisis has only intensified these gaps.

TAP's Solution: Intensive, Evidence-Based, Whole-Child Mentoring

TAP's approach is both innovative and deeply rooted in research. We believe that every child deserves not just a mentor, but a therapeutic relationship with a highly trained, caring adult who can create opportunities for healing, growth and exploration. Our model is built on several key pillars:

Therapeutic Mentoring by Social Work Interns

TAP mentors are not volunteers—they are social work graduate and undergraduate students completing rigorous clinical training. Under the close supervision of licensed, embedded, clinical social workers, these mentors receive intensive instruction in clinical modalities, healing-centered engagement, restorative justice, cognitive behavioral therapy, and motivational interviewing. This ensures that every mentoring relationship is grounded in empathy, cultural responsiveness, and evidence-based practice.

Multi-Tiered, Individualized Support

Individual Counseling: One-on-one school-based mentoring sessions tailored to each student's needs.

Group Work: Small afterschool groups and Saturday community activities foster social skills and belonging.

Family Engagement: Parents and caregivers are supported by Education Advocates, who facilitate whole family programming and support mentors in partnering with parents

Youth Leadership Institute: Rising 9th graders participate in workshops that build leadership, confidence, and community connections, smoothing the critical transition to high school.

Holistic, Culturally Responsive Programming

TAP's curriculum is designed to address the "whole child"—not just academic needs, but emotional, social, and cultural development. Programming is informed by prevention science, trauma-informed care, and frameworks for radical healing in communities of color. Activities are tailored to each student's strengths, challenges, and aspirations, with a focus on building resilience, self-efficacy, and a sense of mattering.

Staff Commitment and Roles

TAP staff are deeply embedded in the school community, serving both as program leaders and as direct support to youth. They provide supervision to mentors, facilitate family outreach, and maintain an open-door policy for students seeking a safe space. Their dynamic but integrated role ensures that every student receives individualized attention and that programming remains responsive to emerging needs.

Connecting Needs to Programming

TAP's model is intentionally designed to address the specific challenges our youth face:

- **Trauma and Mental Health:** Mentors are trained to recognize and respond to trauma, providing healing-centered engagement and connecting students to additional resources when needed. A new clinical director responds to youth with more intensive mental health needs in a clinical setting.

- **Economic Deprivation:** TAP serves communities where most families live at or below the poverty line, with students at heightened risk for being pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system. Our holistic support system—including academic advocacy and family engagement—helps disrupt the effects of structural inequities.
- **Racism and Social Justice:** TAP’s antiracist training and commitment to equity ensure that mentors are equipped to support youth navigating systemic barriers and to foster empowering, reciprocal relationships.
- **Academic Engagement:** Through individualized goal setting, skill-building, and advocacy, TAP helps students re-engage with school, improve attendance, and prepare for high school and beyond.

Rigorous, Multi-Method Evaluation

To ensure that our work is effective and accountable, TAP employs a robust evaluation strategy:

- **Validated Surveys:** Students, mentors, and caregivers complete surveys measuring changes in mental health, socioemotional skills, and cognitive outcomes before and after program participation.
- **Qualitative Focus Groups:** In-depth discussions with youth, mentors, caregivers, and staff provide rich, contextual insights into program impact and lived experience.
- **Ongoing Monitoring:** Regular forums and close, structured supervision sessions allow for continuous feedback and program improvement.

- **Triangulation of Data:** By collecting multiple forms of data aligned with each program goal, TAP ensures that findings are valid, reliable, and reflective of the real-world complexity of our work.

Key Findings: Demonstrated Impact Across Multiple Domains

Socioemotional Outcomes

Confidence, Perseverance, and Mattering: Youth report significant growth in confidence, grit, perseverance, and a sense of mattering. They feel seen, heard, and valued by their mentors and community—a foundation for healing and growth. Survey data and focus group themes consistently highlight these gains.

Emotional Resilience: Students are better able to process emotions, seek help, and handle challenges. Mentors note increased self-advocacy, mindfulness, and the ability to articulate feelings—skills that are critical for overcoming adversity.

Cognitive and Skill-Based Outcomes

Communication and Problem-Solving: Youth show marked improvement in communication skills, goal setting, and problem-solving. They are more comfortable talking with adults, advocating for themselves, and navigating social situations.

Academic Engagement: Socioemotional development - most notably perseverance and confidence - directly contributes to increased academic engagement, better attendance, and stronger relationships with teachers and peers. Parents and caregivers report that their children are more connected, independent, and prepared for high school.

Qualitative Insights: What Makes TAP Unique

Mentor Excellence: Social work interns receive intensive, ongoing training and supervision, enabling them to build deep, trusting relationships and respond to complex youth needs. Mentors use empathy, patience,

open-ended questions, and motivational interviewing to break down hierarchies and foster authentic connections.

Staff Dedication: TAP staff play a dynamic role, supervising social work mentor interns and assessing and engaging directly with students and families when needed, ensuring no student falls through the cracks. Their presence in schools and commitment to open communication creates a safe, welcoming environment for all.

Family Integration: Families are intentionally woven into the mentoring process through regular communication, advocacy, and events. This partnership is vital: when families are engaged, youth are more likely to attend school, achieve academically, and develop lasting confidence. TAP supports families in navigating complex school systems, high school applications, and academic challenges, ensuring that parents and caregivers are empowered partners in their children's success.

Systematic Data Collection and Evaluation Methods

TAP's evaluation is grounded in best practices for social program assessment:

- **Mixed-Methods Approach:** Combining quantitative surveys with qualitative focus groups provides a comprehensive picture of program impact.
- **Alignment with Program Goals:** Each form of data is carefully matched to specific program objectives, ensuring that outcomes are measured in ways that matter most for youth and families.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Findings are used not only to demonstrate effectiveness but to refine and enhance programming year after year.

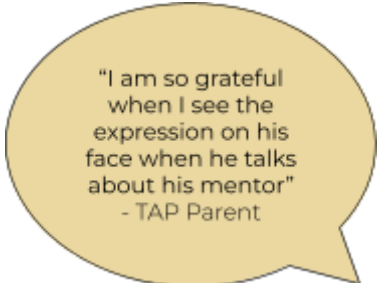
Recommendations and Implications

While TAP's impact is clear, the evaluation identifies areas for continued growth:

- **Expand Data Collection:** Increasing caregiver and teacher participation in surveys will further strengthen program assessment and accountability.
- **Deepen School Partnerships:** Access to academic data and closer collaboration with schools will enhance support for youth and allow for more robust outcome measurement.
- **Sustain and Grow Donor Support:** Intensive, individualized programming requires ongoing investment. Continued donor support is essential to maintain and expand TAP's reach, ensuring that every child who needs support can access it.

Conclusion: The Power of Relationships, The Promise of Opportunity

The Arthur Project's whole-child, therapeutic mentoring model is transforming lives. By addressing trauma, economic hardship, and systemic barriers with empathy, expertise, and evidence-based practice, TAP helps youth build the confidence, skills, and resilience they need to succeed. Our rigorous evaluation demonstrates that TAP is not only meeting but exceeding its goals—cultivating a sense of mattering, fostering academic engagement, and empowering families as partners in success.



"I am so grateful when I see the expression on his face when he talks about his mentor"
- TAP Parent

Chapter 1: The Arthur Project Background, Goals, and Values

The Arthur Project Program Vision

The Arthur Project seeks to redefine youth mentoring, by centering therapeutic mentoring relationships as a catalyst for healing, empowerment, and transformative social, racial, and restorative justice. Additionally, their unique intervention methods, such as incorporating community, school, family and university partnerships, allow them to reach a larger number of students and provide more personalized support. Overall, their goal is to empower and inspire middle school students to reach their full potential. Without TAP's interventions or protective factors, these youth risk academic disengagement and threats to their emotional and physical health leading to further stress, trauma, and diminished opportunities (*Morsy & Rothstein, 2019*).

The Arthur Project Goals

TAP seeks to support economic, social and personal potential for underserved youth through intensive, whole child therapeutic mentoring, community engagement, and critical life skills development. The Arthur Project engages children and family, builds upon their relationship assets, and joins them to champion their most critical needs. It takes a unique approach to mentoring with clinicians-in-training ("interns"), social work graduate and bachelor students fulfilling their clinical training requirements while serving as therapeutic TAP mentors.²

TAP seeks to support economic, social and personal potential for underserved youth through intensive, whole child therapeutic mentoring, community engagement, and critical life skills development.

Intensively trained and closely supervised, the TAP mentors work individually and collectively with children and their families for the duration of their middle school years with opportunities

² Practicums or internships are required for social work students. Adherence to social work values and perspectives is a crucial part of any experiential placement. As many schools of social work note, these experiences are intense, yet part of "social works signature pedagogy" for many important reasons. For more information about potential challenges see Street, (2019).

for further high school engagement. Criteria for mentee participation includes chronic absenteeism or other indicators of academic disengagement, such as low grades, strained relationships with teachers and peers, dissatisfaction with school and/or behavioral challenges, and/or unmet mental health or social emotional needs.

In addition to the mentors' university advisors and an external supervisor, mentors are directly trained, supported and supervised by a TAP team of on-site licensed social workers and staff. This provides a safety net for more intense challenges that call for further resources to holistically serve and support the youth and their families. TAP's new Clinical Director works directly with TAP youth in furtherance of TAP's intention to incorporate a clinical model. Having these services within TAP provides holistic support for youth who need more intensive services. In this way, students can access free, school-based support for even the most complex mental health needs. Moreover, TAP social work students' training experience contributes to workforce development through an intensive year-long training program that includes topics such as clinical modalities, healing, restorative justice, social justice, cognitive behavioral therapy and motivational interviewing.

The Arthur Project Program Goals

1. Cultivate youths' social emotional wellness
2. Promote mental health
3. Develop trusting and caring adult relationships
4. Increase academic engagement
5. Provide youth with leadership, goal achievement, problem-solving and communication skills
6. Provide life skills to successfully transition to high school and beyond
7. Foster family engagement
8. Encourage culturally responsive community engagement

9. Apply an antiracist, social justice lens to mentoring in furtherance of awareness and attunement to wider social impacts and social change
10. Foster reciprocal mentor benefits including workforce development, social justice advocacy, and civic engagement

The Arthur Project Core Values

Beyond the goals, the written curriculum, slate of events, training activities, and all other programs operate and implement within a set of core values. TAP has well-defined core values that guide the program's implementation. When these values are clearly defined and assessed, programs are authentically delivered consistent with the program's philosophies of change. While this is not an implementation evaluation, it is important to recognize how TAP's core values are manifested in the program design and reflected in the students' and mentors' observations and reflections. For instance, throughout the focus groups sessions, also referred to herein as forum groups, the participants explicitly and implicitly spoke of TAP's core values of empathy, collaboration, equity, and accountability.

The Arthur Project Mission

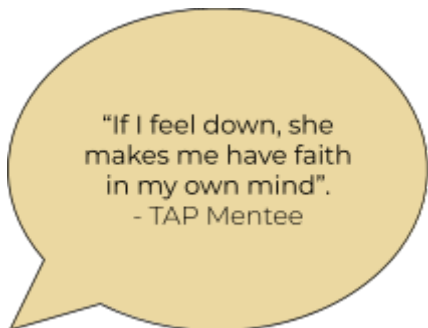
The Arthur Project's mission is to create a replicable model that professionalizes traditional mentoring by using clinically focused mentors to work intensively with youth throughout middle school. Through the science of relationship-based learning, we foster a profound sense of mattering that expands opportunities in the lives of children and families. The Arthur Project seeks to redefine youth mentoring, by centering therapeutic mentoring relationships as a catalyst for healing, empowerment, and transformative social, racial, and restorative justice

The Arthur Project Narrative

Originally founded in 2016, TAP has grown, used qualitative and quantitative data to make programmatic changes and evolved to include a family Educational Advocacy sub-program. An example of TAP's participatory framework, the Family Educational Advocacy Program is based upon what TAP learned from caregivers over six years—they wanted advocacy centered

on their child's education. Hence, TAP refined the role and changed the title. A core tenet of TAP's approach is that all successful youth intervention relies on the combination of effective relationships with informed, trained, caring adults, strategic development of self-efficacy, life skills and mental health.

In collaboration with stakeholders, TAP designs and implements numerous evidence-based programmatic fundamentals, including a model of *whole child*³ therapeutic mentoring. Trained and closely supervised, the TAP mentors and staff work individually and collectively with children and their families for the duration of their middle school years with opportunities for further high school engagement. Criteria for mentee participation includes chronic absenteeism or other indicators of academic disengagement, such as low grades, behavioral challenges or social emotional needs. Referrals can come from the youth, family, or school staff.⁴ All youth voluntarily participate in the program. In addition to the mentors' university advisor, mentors are directly trained, supported and closely supervised by a team of on-site TAP licensed social workers, a Clinical Director (*an experienced LCSW*) and an Executive Director who is also an experienced LCSW and holds a PhD in social work with 20 years of clinical practice. Both the Clinical Director and Executive Director are integrated into programming as a resource and safety net for more intense challenges that may need



³ Recognizing TAP's intensive and multidimensional interventions, TAP has determined that a new model name is important to accurately capture its framework that includes therapeutic mentoring but moves beyond to include more intensive whole child and family support.

⁴ Referral Percentages: 5% self-referral, 21% principal or teacher, 39% guidance counselor, 30% family or guardian, 4% other.

further resources to holistically serve and support the youth and their families.

The Arthur Project currently runs the mentor programs with 260 students in 6th through 8th grade in The Bronx and Brooklyn Boroughs of New York City.⁵ The mentors are usually matched with 3-6 mentees who become their primary focus. Collectively, each year, TAP mentees can spend up to 500 hours, including family and Saturday programming, in focused programming, far exceeding most mentoring programs. Mentors provide services to students through three tiers of intervention:

1. Individual school-based counseling sessions
2. Small afterschool group work
3. Saturday community-based activities and events.

Rising 9th grade students can also participate in TAP's Youth Leadership Institute as they transition to high school. It also supports a smaller subset of 40-50 parents and guardians at each school through the Education Advocacy Program. These parents receive individual and group support through workshops and events to achieve individual and family goals, with a focus on strengthening family relationships, supporting whole family academic engagement and building skills and social capital (Greenawalt, 2025). In addition to the Education Advocacy program, mentors also partner with parents and guardians in support of their students through regular outreach and communication and with specific support around high school applications, navigating IEPs, and strengthening family-school relationships.

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The Arthur Project staff are directly involved in the mentoring experience in several meaningful ways that directly implicate program

⁵ TAP began new programming in the Bronx Debate Academy in Fall 2025, and next year's data will include this school.

outcomes. First, the quality of a mentoring relationship is built on trust, empathy and a sense of mattering. TAP staff work in the school and offer an open-door policy to all mentees who frequently stop by the office to talk or simply to decompress and relax in a safe space (Staff Forum, 2025).

Further, TAP staff, licensed social workers, act as practicum supervisors, giving an hour of dedicated individual “supervision” to mentors on a weekly basis. Case conferences are held that address clinical approaches, mentoring activities, and challenges while incorporating curriculum from Community Learning Days that are offered to support continued development of best practices. Acting as liaisons for the school and school community, TAP staff provide structure for family outreach and program implementation.

At the heart of TAP is the hope each of the students and families graduates the program with the knowledge that not only do they matter to their mentors, but to the community and world beyond. Consistent with TAP’s focus on collective wisdom and equitable relationships, the program recently updated their multidimensional framework based upon student feedback⁶, to be more streamlined and understandable by the youth. These dimensions act as a guide for programming, activities and events, and as the students set personal goals, these dimensions create a better sense of interconnectivity. The dimensions are:



1. School and Career
2. Finance
3. Health and Wellness

⁶ It is noted that changes to programming are generally based upon feedback and responses from the primary stakeholders, including students and guardians. To this end, TAP builds in multiple programming elements that seek feedback and foster a sense of agency for students, families and the community.

4. Community and Culture

5. Family, Friends and Relationships

Also consistent with TAP's focus on healing and liberation, multiple program components, events, and goals include French's, et al., (2019), framework for radical healing in communities of color. These include:

- Collectivism
- Critical consciousness
- Racial hope
- Strength and resistance
- Cultural authenticity and self-knowledge

Three years ago, TAP also introduced Healing Centered Engagement as a strengths-based, anti-oppressive evolution from trauma-informed care (Ginwright, 2018).

The Arthur Project's vision is to expand the power of relationships in a child's life. It recognizes that - due to institutional barriers like racism - Black and Latino/a/x/ youth are placed against multiple undue disadvantages in reaping the benefits from relationships with others and with institutions and systems, unlike their white peers. It also recognizes that due institutional racism, race and socioeconomic status have been historically and inextricably linked in the United States and as a result, a disproportionate number of Black and Latino/a/x are living at the below the poverty line. The combined effect is these young TAP mentees - and their caregivers - experience disproportionate levels of stress, have disproportionate unmet health and mental health needs, are less likely to have access to quality education, are pushed out of school, and are less likely to have opportunities for upward economic mobility.

For these reasons, The Arthur Project has chosen to work in communities where families are living at or below the poverty line, have been historically disenfranchised, marginalized, under resourced and underfunded by philanthropic efforts; students suffer from higher push out and dropout

rates and have disproportionately high justice system involvement. This rests on the belief that there is a significant opportunity - through the therapeutic mentoring relationship, family educational advocacy, and intentional opportunities for leadership and civic engagement - to address these issues of equitable access and to leverage the mentoring relationship and social work skills and values to strengthen the relationship between young people and the individuals, institutions and systems around them, in addition to increased mental health outcomes, healing, life skills and socioemotional skills.

The Arthur Project is based upon several key programmatic elements, including a model of whole child therapeutic mentoring as defined by The Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring (Werntz, 2025):

1. Explicitly focuses on reducing negative mental health symptoms and increasing psychological well-being and thriving among youth:
2. Is delivered by emerging professionals
3. Uses evidence-based practices to target underlying mechanisms of mental health challenges; and,
4. Is supervised by licensed mental healthcare providers

“While it includes harsh punishment practices and failure to provide appropriate educational and behavioral interventions and resources, the school-to-prison nexus is much broader in scope with additional forces that make it more likely that a youth will be pushed out of school and become justice involved. Factors external to the schools include food and housing insecurities, poverty”. (Institute of Research and Poverty, 2020).

As with therapeutic mentoring programs and consistent with TAP’s mission, it works through a strength-based model, designed to provide youth the opportunity for building interpersonal, life, problem-solving, and social emotional skills, in addition to a sense of mattering and belonging. Specifically, therapeutic mentors offer more structured activities than more informal programs. It builds on the youths’ assets to develop communication skills, enhance conflict resolution and healing and build confidence related to the youths’ goals with individualized, tailored growth plans.

Consistent with TAP values, therapeutic mentoring is culturally responsive, individualized and integrated with the youths' families, schools and communities (Therapeutic Mentoring Practice Guidelines, Children's Behavioral Health Initiative, 2015).

The Arthur Project recognizes that true impact can only be made when a child's family is also supported. Generally, students that have parents or guardians who are engaged with their schools and their learning attend school more regularly, have higher grades and graduation rates and are more academically engaged overall (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Further, positive mentoring relationships are more likely when the mentees' parents are acquainted, their expectations are aligned (Meissen & Lounsbury, 1981, as cited in Heller & Spencer, 2018), and there is clear and consistent communication. Establishing a mutually respectful relationship can enhance mentoring outcomes (Jones, et. al., 2025). To that end, TAP includes programming that provides liaising services to families of students enrolled in TAP. The TAP Education Advocate works closely with families to support them in whole family academic engagement, mentee academic engagement and transitions to high school. The Advocate also acts as a liaison between the school and family to give technical assistance and navigate the complex online processes of applying to high schools while helping mentees identify strengths and interests in support of identifying the best high school for each mentee.

This aspect of programming was developed in response to TAP families expressing their desire for TAP to support their youths' high school readiness, including high school application preparation. Positioning youth to actively explore different high schools and choose those that align with their interests and academic needs has the potential to increase academic engagement and center youth voices in their choices (Vaughn & Witko, 2013). Further high school application processes can be unfamiliar to TAP parents and guardians leaving youth to attend their default high school that may not be in the youths' best interests.

TAP's Youth Leadership Institute further provides transitioning 9th graders with the opportunity to engage in spring and summer workshops designed to strengthen their connection to one another, to the program and to their wider community. This year's participation included 25 students in each location. Additionally, these activities will frame the possibilities for the

future and forecast leadership and community opportunities as they move into high school and beyond. There is specific focus on high school articulation, including preparing for and selecting an appropriate high school, in addition to personal development, relationships, social and interpersonal skills, finances, conflict resolution, civic engagement, and social justice.

Throughout the program, the youth identify and address issues in their local and wider community, engaging in power mapping and present their chosen projects to the larger community. Because research indicates that middle school is a crucial time for school engagement and ninth-grade status is the single-best predictor of whether a student will graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005), TAP seeks to support the crucial transition from middle to high school.

TAP's Education Advocates also train mentors in supporting caregivers and whole families while collaborating with school and CBO partners in developing and implementing workshops, training, events, and gathering for parents, guardians, and whole families. Consistent with these efforts and with The Advocates' support, mentors are encouraged to reach out to mentee families on a regular basis as evidence indicates that mentors who know the mentees' families had better outcomes than those who did not (Jekielek, et. al., 2002). Over the years, TAP has cultivated ever-growing familial partnerships through several engagement strategies that include power sharing, equitable relationships, empowerment and listening to the needs and goals of TAP families. These manifest in whole family events which are tailored to be responsive to emerging needs and interests of mentee families.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy's reports that this type of family collaboration and centering of community voices and support can foster the development of social capital and reduce stress (Center for the Study of Social Policy, nd). Moreover, based upon additional stakeholder forums, efforts have been made to introduce and integrate the Education Advocacy program earlier and more cohesively with the mentor program.

At the heart of TAP is the hope each of the students and families graduates the program with the knowledge that not only do they matter to their mentors, but to the community and world beyond.

Chapter 2: Needs For The Arthur Project Interventions

Structures and Systems' Economic Needs Fall Disproportionally on Youth of Color

TAP and its stakeholders seek to solve complex social problems that impact youth and their families in TAP communities. These problems have multiple bases in social, economic and legal structures and systems. Columbia University's National Center for Children in Poverty and Economic Security reports that the past 15 years has seen an increase in the income gap with the U.S. among the highest of all modern nations. This gap further persists significant educational inequalities for low-income students from underrepresented communities whose parents did not attend college (Black, 2017; Cataldi, et. al., 2018).

"This is a population under attack," (TAP Principal, 2025) further illustrating the importance of organizations like TAP that provide protective interventions to reduce the youths' risks that include, dropping out, behavioral and mental health challenges, substance abuse, unemployment, and justice involvement.

Nationwide, school districts with the most students of color receive 15% less per student in state and local funding than the whitest districts; schools with high levels of Black or Latino enrollment have nearly twice as many first-year teachers as schools with low Black or Latino enrollment, and Black students in New York City have a 68.1% on-time graduation rate (Yin, 2017) compared to an 85% national rate (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2020).

The Arthur Project middle schools are in The Bronx and Brooklyn, New York City. According to 2018 data, 87% of all public students attending schools in The Bronx were eligible for free or reduced priced school lunches⁷ (Kids' Well-Being Indicators Clearinghouse), indicating the socioeconomic level of

⁷ Eligibility for free lunch indicates household incomes at or below 130% of the federal poverty line.

the youth and the underserved nature of the public schools.⁸ Further, New York State Education Department reported that, during the 2017-2018 school year, 27% of Bronx County students were Black or African Americans and 62% Hispanic or Latino, suggesting that the TAP program focused on students who are more likely to be from under-resourced communities, with lower graduation rates, higher chronic absenteeism, and less experienced teachers.

One principal put the chronic absenteeism rate at 40% and explained that a lot of school families were experiencing situational trauma and insecurities related to employment instability, immigration uncertainties, and substance abuse. He noted, “this is a population under attack,” further illustrating the importance of organizations like TAP that provide protective interventions to reduce the youths’ risks that include, dropping out, behavioral and mental health challenges, substance abuse, unemployment, and justice involvement. He also agreed that TAP was professional and its mentors well-trained to provide therapeutic mentoring. “As a principal, these [TAP mentors] are not random volunteers. “Their level of training in mental health and socioemotional learning are critical features.”

Relationship Inequalities

Due to institutional barriers like racism - Black and Latino/a/x/ youth are placed at an undue disadvantage in benefiting from relationships with others and with institutions and systems (Sterne, 2021). Similarly, as race and socioeconomic status have been historically and inextricably linked in the United States, a disproportionate number of Black and Latino/a/x are living at the below the poverty line. The combined effect is these young people and their caregivers experience disproportionate levels of stress, have disproportionate unmet health and mental health needs, are less likely to have access to quality education, are less likely to have opportunities for upward economic mobility and are more likely to be pushed out of school prior to high school graduation and become justice involved (Rovner, 2023).

⁸ In recent years, New York City has opened free lunches to all students regardless of income, and, accordingly, does not track student income by free lunch eligibility any longer.

Chronic Absenteeism

Students who are chronically absent are placed at serious risks of falling behind academically, having lower grades and test scores and exhibiting challenging behaviors (Garcia and Elaine, 2018). Chronic absenteeism has increased over the last several years with (MacGillis, 2024) describing it as America's hidden education crisis, and during recent stakeholder fora, one of TAPs school partners revealed that 40% of the students are chronically absent (Community School Director, NY Edge, 2025). Ultimately these youth are placed at significantly higher risk of disengaging with school (Burrus & Roberts, 2012). Youth who drop out of high school are three and one-half times more likely to be arrested than youth who graduate from high school. These same youth face lifetime incarceration risk that is eight times greater than other youth (Dilulio & Morison, 2006).

Among the TAP schools, chronic absenteeism is significantly higher than average for New York City schools. For instance, at the North Bronx School of Empowerment, 39% of students are chronically absent while the city average is 20% (New York City Schools, General Information, 2018-2019). Additionally, multiple TAP mentors reported that their mentees struggle with regular attendance and/or being on time for school (Mentor Forums, 2025). There are many reasons that students are chronically absent, including parents and guardians' poor health, nonstandard work schedules, changes in the household composition, extensive family responsibilities, and inadequate support and advocacy for students within the educational system itself (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, as cited in Garcia and Elaine, 2018). Low-income families and children living in historically underserved areas disproportionately face these challenges.

Mental Health Crisis

The U.S. is experiencing a community-wide mental health crisis, exacerbated by the stressors of the COVID pandemic, disruptions to learning, and ongoing social unrest. Incidents of challenges with mental health, self-injurious behaviors, and suicidal ideation and attempts are skyrocketing – particularly with young Black and Latino/a/x youth. Results from the National Comorbidity Survey found that 48.3% of Latinos and 46.8 % of Blacks between the ages of 13 and 17-years-of-age suffer from mental health disorders (*Alegria et. al., 2015*) while a recent study found that US mental health care gaps are

intensifying with more than 20% of all youth experiencing major depressive episodes who do not receive any treatment (Hochul, et al., 2025).

Research also indicates that youth in under-resourced communities are exposed to a higher level of adversity, including trauma exposure, than similarly situated youth in better resourced communities (Abramson, 2022). TAP's 2023-2024 evaluation found that all of TAPs youth had either experienced violence or witnessed violence and a moderate to high level of youth had experienced anxiety further underlying the need for trauma and healing-based programming. Social injustices, such as systemic racism, mass incarceration and consequently community loss (Albrecht & Abramovitz, 2013), and economic and legal resource deprivations can further lead to community and individual trauma that have adverse impacts on mental and social health, perceptions of safety, and economic and educational outcomes (Child Trauma Institute). Existing racial inequalities are further exasperating the mental health crises for TAP youth (Mendel, 2023).

The Arthur Project programming and ideologies are informed by the tenets of prevention science that require targeted intervention (Cavell & Elledge, 2025).

Further indicating a critical need for TAP, a 2022 New York state audit found that “too many NYC public schools are understaffed with mental health professionals, are not adequately training staff, and too few have services readily available. The audit additionally found that DOE provides little oversight to ensure students receive the required mental health instruction critical to developing their awareness and resilience” (Office of the New York State Comptroller, 2022). New York’s audit discovered that only 1,101 of New York’s 1,524 public schools has at least one social worker, 423 had no social worker at all, and of the 1,524 public schools that had at least one social worker, 910 do not meet the recommended school counselor-to-student ratio of 1:250 (Officer of the New York State Comptroller, 2022).

School-to-Prison Nexus⁹

The school-to-prison nexus reveals itself in multiple ways. While it includes harsh punishment practices and failure to provide appropriate educational and behavioral interventions and resources, it is much broader in scope with additional forces that make it more likely that a youth will be pushed out of school and become justice involved. Factors external to the schools include food and housing insecurities, poverty (Institute of Research and Poverty, 2020), and lack of equitable resource allocation (Corapi, 2025). Further, data illustrates youth of color from marginalized communities are disproportionately placed at-risk (American University, 2021).

The Arthur Project youth experience increased risks of becoming entangled in the school-to-prison nexus. According to a capstone report by the New York University, Wagner School of Public Service, 55 percent of TAP mentees are Black/Caribbean/Caribbean African/African American, 40 percent Hispanic or Latino/a/x, and all of youth attend Title I schools that indicate families are living near or below the poverty line (2023). A significant number of TAP youth¹⁰ have Individualized Education Plans indicating a

“100% of TAP 8th grade youth reported that they had witnessed or experienced violence and a meaningful number reported feelings of anxiety, depression and/or post-traumatic stress” (TAP Youth Mental Health Assessment, 2023)

specialized learning need that further places them at a heightened risk of dropping out and becoming justice involved (Chesmore, et al., 2016). In fact, almost 60% of the incoming class of 6th graders at one TAP school have IEPs, far outweighing the city average of 18.9% (New York State Education Department, (2023-2024). Adverse childhood experiences (ACES) can also increase risks of dropping out and becoming justice involved. Researchers report that childhood trauma can lead to difficulties with self-regulation and conduct problems that, in turn, can lead to suspensions and expulsions if

⁹ The term “nexus” extends the construct of the pipeline by focusing on pathways that ultimately lead to justice system involvement.

¹⁰ While 16 parents/caregivers noted that their child had an IEP on TAP enrollment forms, another 42 marked that they were unsure.

not properly assessed and supported (*Porche, et al., 2011*).

As previously reported, 100% of TAP 8th grade youth reported¹¹ that they had witnessed or experienced violence and a meaningful number reported feelings of anxiety, depression and/or post-traumatic stress (TAP Youth Mental Health Assessment, 2023). This raises risks of academic disruption and justice involvement. TAP seeks to dismantle the school-to-prison nexus for its youth by providing services that reduce and mitigate individual risks and increase protective factors, such as increased academic engagement, a sense of mattering and self-regulation. These needs and those indicated by the TAP community provide the foundation for TAP's goals and objectives while evidence-based best practices, quantitative and qualitative data provide the bases for the aligned program activities.

Middle School Students

Middle school is a stage of both risk and opportunity, as middle school is a time of intense social and emotional change. There are many studies that have documented the benefits to mentor programs during this transitional time and others who have reported that the school location may intensify positive outcomes (Hochul, et. al., 2025). Many of the goals of mentoring, such as increased resilience, perseverance and self-actualization, may be optimized during middle school years (Price, 2012, as cited in Lindt and Blair, 2017). Importantly, supporting students who are chronically absent could be especially beneficial during the middle-school years when early signs of dropping out appear (National Mentoring Resource Center).

Alignment

The Arthur Project programming and ideologies are informed by the tenets of *prevention science* that require targeted intervention (Cavell & Elledge, 2025). As we study the specific program elements, we can see that TAP is a program grounded in research and best practices that aligns complex needs with outcomes through layered programming steeped in guiding philosophies that place youth at the center of their own growth and

¹¹ As the youth mental health crisis continued to grow, in 2023, TAP began to assess its youth for mental health needs through a validated mental health assessment tool.

aspirations. The needs are well-established for youth who experience poverty, under-resourced communities, racial discrimination and oppression, and trauma. These youth experience a complex mixture of correlates that often converge to perpetuate inequalities, justice system involvement, and intergenerational poverty. While each student brings with them unique strengths, research and experience help us understand these major risks and develop corresponding programming that is grounded in evidence and participatory action research that focuses on stakeholder voices and innovative responses with a preventative approach.

For each well-established need, TAP utilized one or more of its inputs to develop corresponding activities. And, for each of the activities, there are theoretical or evidence-based foundations upon which the activity is based.

For each well-established need, TAP utilized one or more of its inputs to develop corresponding activities. And, for each of the activities, there are theoretical or evidence-based foundations upon which the activity is based. These form the basis for TAP's goals that can be directly linked to its outcome measures. Further, TAP's core values guide the program through a strength-based approach that emphasizes empathy and support combined with anti-oppression, accountability and liberation. However, TAP has an agile model that also embraces stakeholder voices and innovation and adapts programming to reflect current conditions and new ideas in a flexible approach that emphasizes equitable relationships and collective wisdom with a participatory action research model.

As a result, this evaluation represents a moment in time and should be viewed as dynamic. Additionally, any evaluation has limitations that relate to causal sequencing. Inequalities and oppression, trauma, chronic absenteeism and mental health crises have many complex individual, social, economic, and structural influencers. These are often interdependent and difficult to fully deconstruct. As a result, many TAP activities respond to multiple, overlapping needs. Intersections run between and among programming elements and multiple activities often align with several goals focused on developing TAP's youth sense of mattering, socioemotional skills, academic achievement, and distinct strengths. TAP provides a unique combination of established best-practices, and because it is important to collect data that is most aligned

with the TAP's goals (Wilson-Ahlstrom, et. al., 2014), this outcome evaluation has been carried out based upon TAP's 2025 theory of change.

Retention

95% of TAPs mentees completed the program year.

Evaluation Questions

1. Do TAP interventions foster caring and trusting relationships?
2. Do TAP interventions result in mental health improvements?
3. Do TAP interventions result in socioemotional growth?
4. Do TAP interventions result in increased academic engagement (as defined by social processes that foster a sense of mattering, relationship building and student investment)?
5. Do TAP interventions result in cognitive growth including goal attainment, communication, essential life skills, and problem-solving.
6. Do TAP interventions result in whole family academic engagement operationalized to increase participation in school events, improve communication with school, and/or improve relationships with teachers.
7. Do TAP's mentors apply an antiracist and social justice lens to mentoring based upon TAP's recruiting, training and supervision protocols?
8. What methods and frameworks do TAP mentors employ?

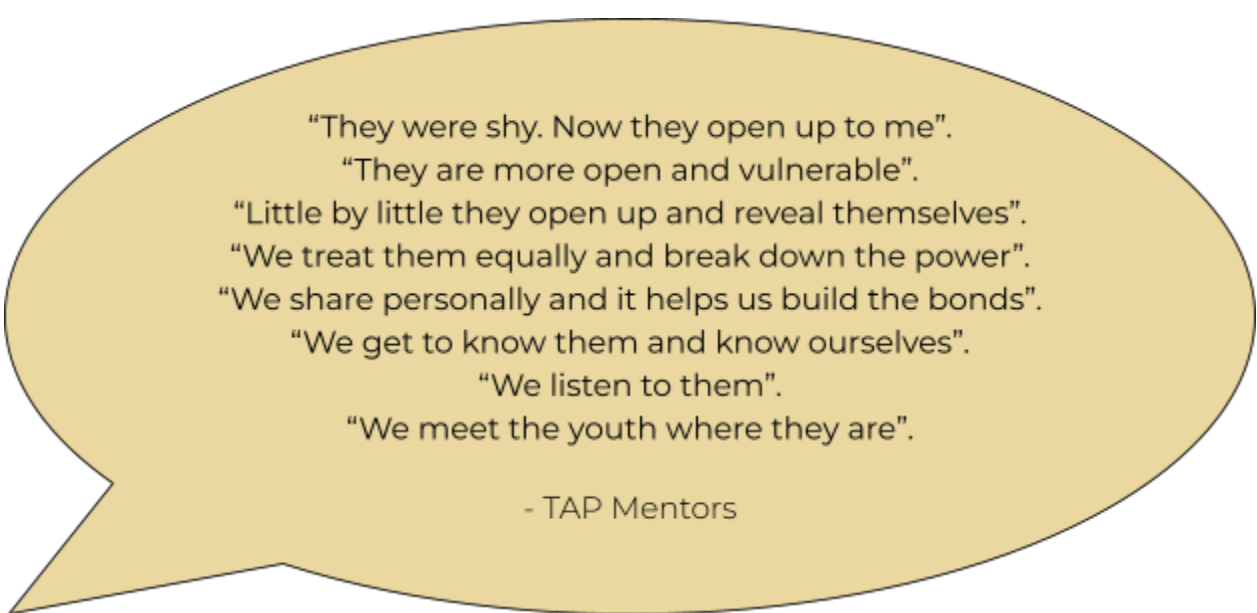
Chapter 3: Discussion of Findings by Evaluation Question

Do TAP interventions foster caring and trusting relationships?

This section of the report synthesizes findings across all four 2024–2025 surveys to directly answer TAP's core evaluation questions. The color key is as follows:

■ 6th–7th grade mentees (n=11) ■ 8th grade mentees (n=20) ■ Mentors (n=17) ■ Caregivers (n=9)

FINDINGS: TAP has overwhelmingly met this goal. Caring and trusting relationships are the foundation for developing a sense of mattering and successful mentoring relationships. Further, caring and trusting relationships unto themselves provide support for emotional growth and confidence and a healthier sense of self. Interviews, forum groups and surveys illustrate that TAP mentors and mentees share close, caring and trusting relationships. Survey results indicate statistically significant positive responses.



"They were shy. Now they open up to me".
"They are more open and vulnerable".
"Little by little they open up and reveal themselves".
"We treat them equally and break down the power".
"We share personally and it helps us build the bonds".
"We get to know them and know ourselves".
"We listen to them".
"We meet the youth where they are".

- TAP Mentors

Additionally, during mentor focus groups, strong themes emerged about the strong bonds and caring relationships that mentors developed with their mentees. Mentors reported that they used several methods to build trust, bonds and caring relationships with their mentees, including attunement to each individual mentee. Collective themes of empathy, patience, listening with using open ended questions, motivational interviewing, and reflection-based reframing helped them to interrupt traditional hierarchical relationships and build strong bonds with their mentees. As one mentor explained, “[we] get to know them, and they get to know us.”

Similarly, very strong themes emerged during mentee focus groups with mentees passionately talking about how much they care about their mentors and how safe they feel with them with one mentee exclaiming that “[m]y mentor is amazing.” Another explained that “[h]e listens to me.” All mentees enthusiastically agreed that they matter to their mentors.

During caregiver forum groups all caregivers agree that their children had strong bonds and caring relationships with their mentors. They are happy being in TAP with one exclaiming, “I am so grateful when I see the expression on his face when he is talking about his mentor.”

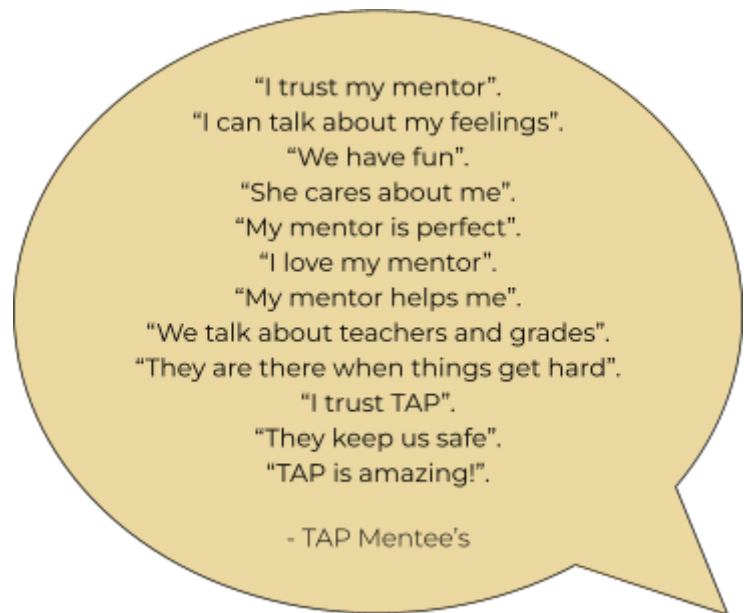
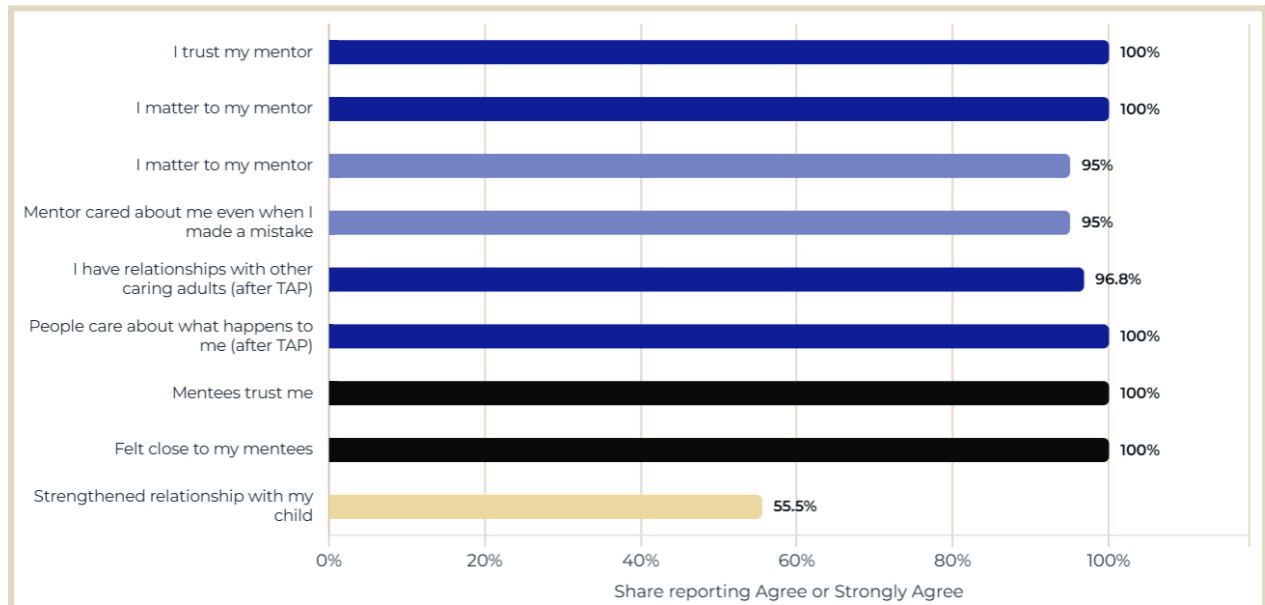


Figure 1. Share of respondents who agree or strongly agree with each relationship statement, by data source.



Do TAP interventions result in mental health improvements?

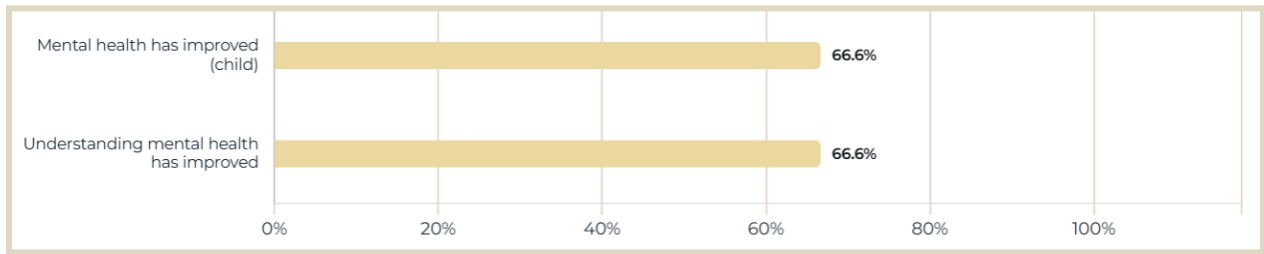


We are experiencing a community-wide mental health crisis, exacerbated by the stressors of the COVID pandemic, disruptions to learning, and ongoing social unrest. TAP mentors are trained in healing-centered engagement that is an alternative to trauma informed care. Mentors explore topics significant to the youth's personal, interpersonal, cognitive and social emotional domains. In recognizing the current mental health crisis, especially among youth of color and those in under-resourced communities (Pataky, et al., 2019). Two years ago TAP added pre- and post-mental health screenings for all their mentees, adapted from several validated instruments in order to assess their mentees' mental health and TAP's program impact. As discussed previously, social workers have a unique skill set to address mental health

concerns and an obligation to do so, especially when working with populations who have been historically denied access to appropriate mental health services and screening tools. “They are trained professionals who help individuals, families, and communities to cope with and solve problems related to mental health, substance abuse, poverty, and other social issues. They provide a wide range of services, including counseling, advocacy, and support to people who are struggling with mental health problems” (Social Worker License, 2023). In signaling to the mentees that topics such as anxiety and depression are not off-limits, they can safely process their feelings and that, as caring professionals, adults in their lives, TAP mentors can hold and handle their challenges.

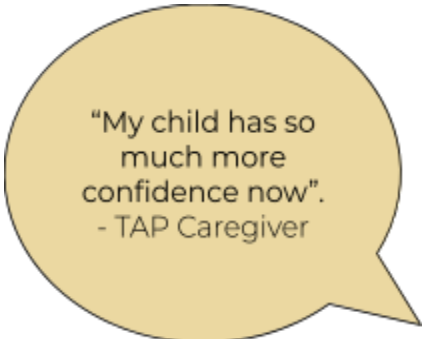
FINDINGS: Youth mental health assessments indicate that a majority of TAP youth have experienced violence and a significant number report feelings of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. Socioemotional wellness and mental health act as insulators and are correlated with overall health, healing, academic and personal achievement and wellbeing. The p-value for the survey data from the paired t-test is 0.0003, which indicates a high level of valid statistical significance indicating that TAP has met this goal. Of the 26 domains, 22 improved after TAP. Four questions indicated increases after TAP. However, social desirability can bias mental health assessment, especially for youth (Rickwood & Rose, 2023). Moreover, the mental health assessments are administered early in the program before strong bonds and trust have been formed for some participants which can increase pre-test biases.

Figure 2a. Caregiver-reported mental-health improvement.



Do TAP interventions result in socioemotional growth?

FINDINGS: TAP has overwhelmingly met this goal. Socioemotional survey domains include confidence, grit, perseverance, self-advocacy, self-help, and mattering. In all domains, youth reported significant, statistically increases after being in TAP. Youth qualitative themes also indicate that youth felt a greater sense of mattering, trust as a precursor to mattering, and greater confidence after participating in TAP. Mentors and caregivers reported that youths' perseverance and confidence grew during their time.



"My child has so much more confidence now".
- TAP Caregiver

Noncognitive goals include explorations of personal, interpersonal, and social emotional needs and desires. Developing a sense of mattering focuses on the power of relationships in a youth's life (Harris, et al., 2018) built on sustained trust, support, and attentiveness to youth's unique needs and desires. Individual sessions also focus on "relationship-brokering," healing and liberation, and developing help seeking skills. Research indicates that many students who would benefit from help are the least likely to ask for assistance.



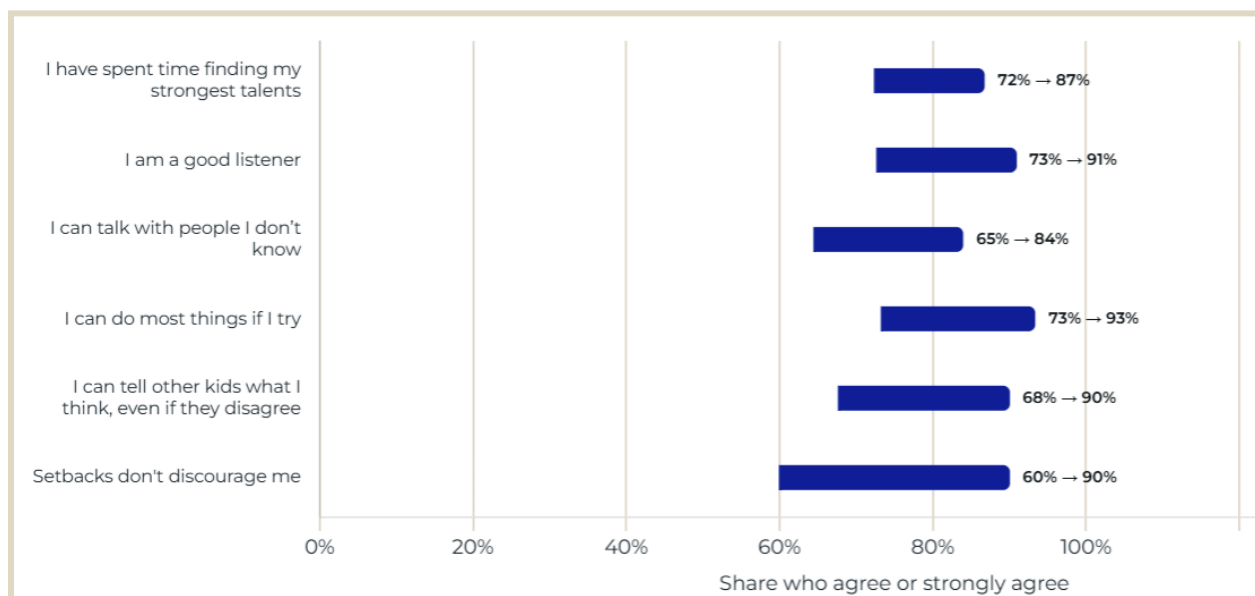
"My mentees can handle strong feelings now. They can articulate their emotions. They have tools and language".
- Mentor

Often, these students are avoiding unsolicited inquiry into their academic or social challenges. Providing support for help-seeking and network skills, particularly in academic settings, can insulate students and provide protective factors (Parnes, et. al., 2020). Seeking to increase self-efficacy in enlisting social capital and help-seeking behaviors, TAP mentors support mentees in developing networks and encouraging them to seek academic and social support.

The TAP mentors provide deep support consistent with therapeutic mentoring that explores interpersonal, cognitive and emotional skills. These types of skills are also consistent with building cultural capital that includes resiliency, communication skills, cultural knowledge, coping and developing

networks of people who offer emotional support (Yosso, 2005). Researchers, additionally, determined that social and emotional skills, in turn, improve relationships, decrease emotional stress and increase academic engagement. Importantly, the research illustrated that these skills, developed early, are sustainable across all races, genders, ethnicities and incomes (Greenberg, 2023).

Figure 3. Retrospective before/after ratings, mentees who share this exact item across both 6th and 7th grade bands. The bar spans from "before TAP" to "after TAP."

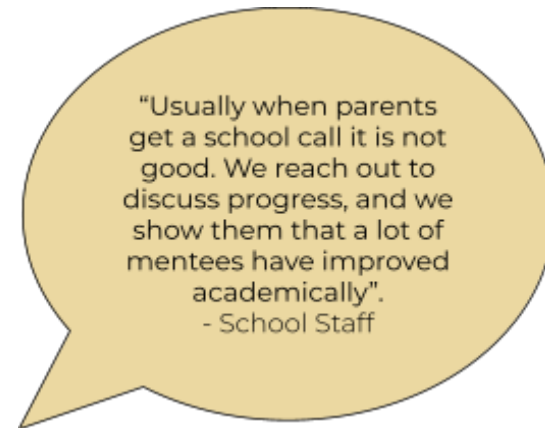


**Do TAP interventions result in increased academic engagement?
(as defined by social processes that foster a sense of mattering,
relationship building and student investment)**

FINDINGS: Many youth who face intergenerational poverty, racism, oppression, a lack of resources, and trauma also face academic challenges. They are more likely to be pushed out or drop out of school and become justice involved. The Arthur Project is designed and implemented to increase academic engagement through several evidence-based indicators including students' increased sense of mattering, self-efficacy and advocacy,

relationship building, and a fostering of civic engagement and community that have the potential to increase the students' social capital. Nakkula and Tashalis (2012) define engagement in learning as the student's investment in each activity—a motivational and social process that culminates in a person's choice to apply effort, persist through struggle, self-determine, complete a task and resolve difficult experiences.

For middle school youth, a sense of belonging and the extent that a student feels supported at school can also increase academic engagement (Peterman, 2024). School-based mentoring can further enhance academic engagement (Bayer, et., al, 2013). Evidence illustrates that engagement is a “robust” predictor of academic achievement, behavior, grades, test scores, attendance, graduation and pushout/dropout. Importantly, if support and opportunities continue, engagement generally builds overtime. (Nakkula & Tashalis, 2012). The researchers further report that relationships, getting to know students, being curious about them and their interests and experiences is the best path to nurturing the students' “inner fire.” Aligned TAP noncognitive domains include self-direction, collaboration, authenticity, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and relational connection. These domains represent several of TAP's socioemotional goals that concurrently support academic engagement.



Based upon focus group thematic analysis and surveys, TAP has met this goal. The difference between pre/post-TAP answers was found to be overall significant upon a paired t-test. During forums several themes emerged with all the mentees agreeing that they worked on goals with their mentors, including turning in work on time and coming to school every day. Mentees also agreed that their mentors help find their strengths. However, many mentors agreed that they did not refer to their objectives as goals because their mentees engaged more often if they simply asked them if they would like to work on or change anything. Other mentors responded that they keep these objectives incremental, so they are not overwhelming. These

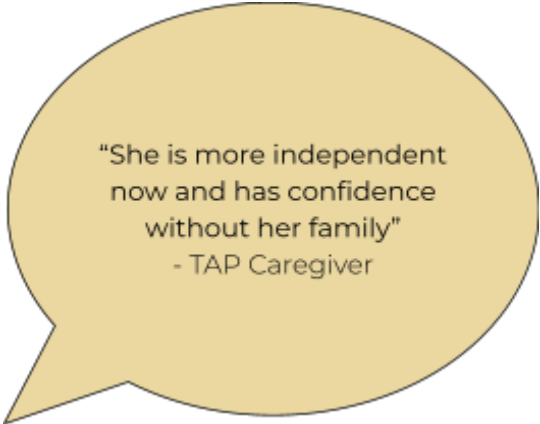


"We help them find their strengths and remind them of how awesome they are".
- Mentor

mentee-centered "ambitions" ranged from going to bed earlier, asking a question in class, to talking less when their teachers were talking. One mentee was coming late to school and missing school. **"We decreased absences little by little."**

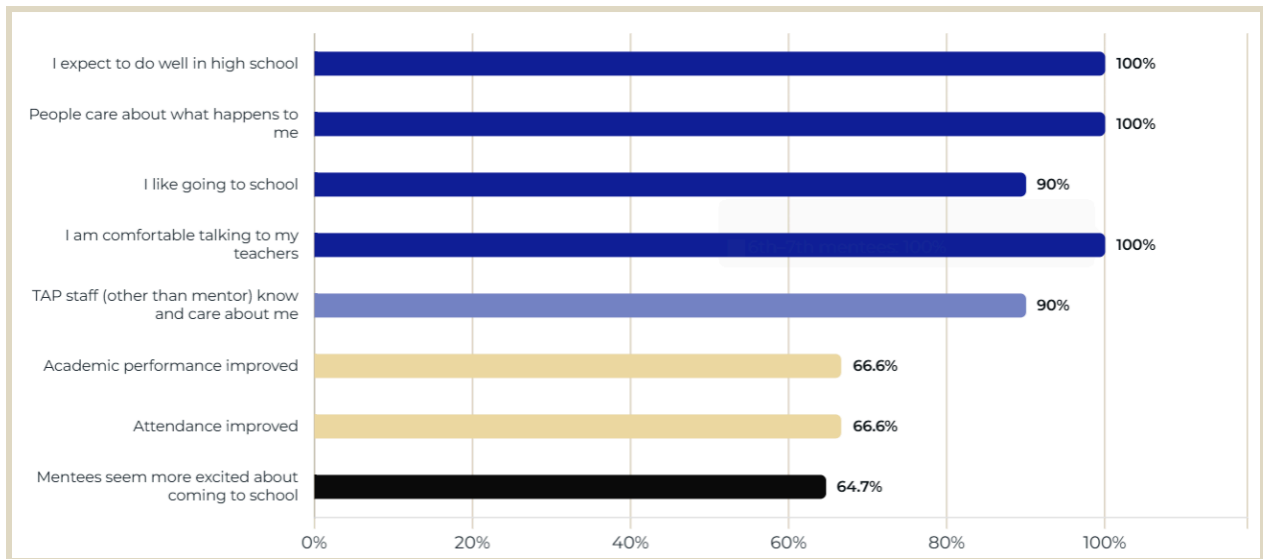
While 20-44% of caregivers reported that TAP resulted in improvements in several domains, during qualitative forums, several parents explained that they already had a good relationship with their youths' teachers, that their youth didn't have any issues with peers, or their child attended regularly. Not all caregivers were looking for the types of support included in the survey. Moreover, given the inconsistencies between the parents' qualitative forums and the survey results, TAP is going to revise the caregiver survey based upon caregiver goals as elicited by TAP questionnaires and informal solicitation. In addition, TAP will further investigate the inconsistencies to assure they are meeting the needs of TAP caregivers as it relates to programming.

Caregiver interviews revealed several themes regarding academic engagement. The more a child feels that they matter, the more likely they are to be engaged. Similarly, confidence and strong relationships are connected to academic engagement. Parents reported that their children were more connected with peers and that TAP had helped them communicate with school staff and prepare for high school. Further, discussions about careers and strengths can foster academic engagement. While mentors reported that they helped mentees find their strengths, mentees reported that they discussed careers with their mentors **"We talk about what I want to be."**



"She is more independent now and has confidence without her family"
- TAP Caregiver

Figure 4. Mentee investment in school (direct-report and before/after items), plus caregiver and mentor corroboration.



Do TAP interventions result in cognitive growth including goal attainment, communication, essential life skills, and problem-solving?

FINDINGS: Socioemotional and cognitive skills often converge with one enhancing the other. Empowering youth to build on their strengths and assets and find their voices while learning to problem-solve and achieve their goals is correlated with greater academic and personal achievement. Mentoring programs that focus on relationships, socioemotional skills and particular cognitive skills have stronger outcomes for youth.

Based upon youth and mentor survey data and qualitative forum themes, TAP has met this goal. One hundred percent of mentors reported that their mentees' communication skills improved during the year and that they helped their mentees find their strengths, while 100% report



solving problems with their mentees.¹² Qualitative themes include increased communication, goal achievement and problem-solving.

Figure 5. Share of mentees who say their mentor actively helped them set goals and solve problems, by grade band.

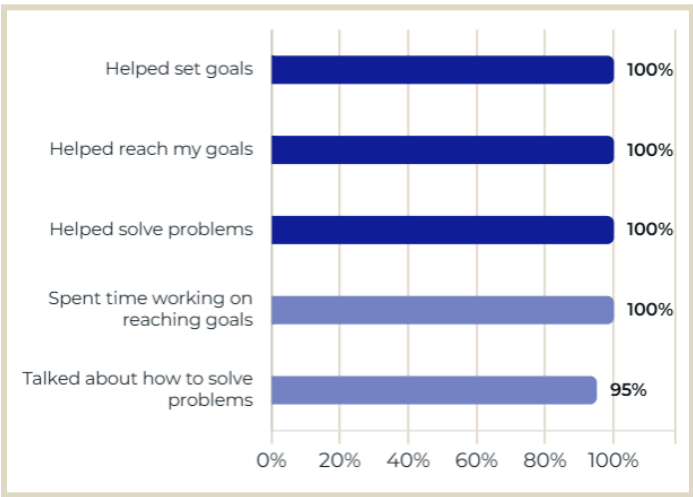
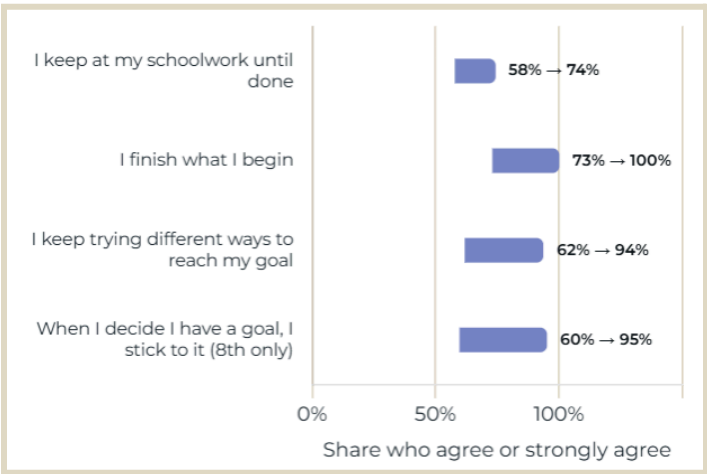


Figure 6. Mentee before → after ratings on goal-setting and follow-through, combined across grade bands unless marked otherwise.

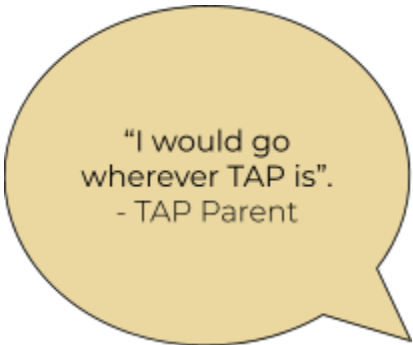


¹² Mentor forums also revealed that many youths were demotivated by SMART goal inflexibility, and TAP, consistent with its participatory action research frame, is restructuring its training around goal setting and achievement.

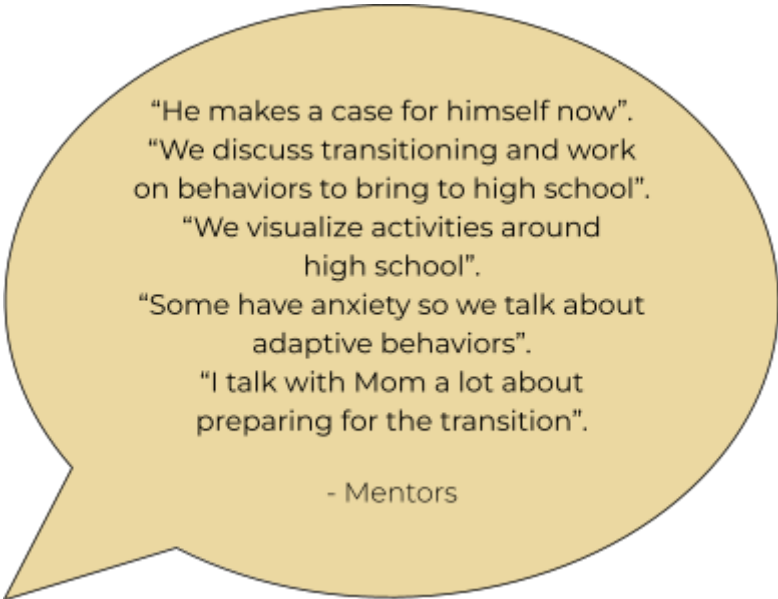
Do TAP interventions provide the skills to successfully transition to high school?

FINDINGS: Based upon youth, caregivers, and mentor survey data and qualitative forums, TAP has successfully met this goal. Survey data indicate that youth have increased confidence, self-advocacy, leadership, persistence, problem-solving, goal attainment, communication skills, and academic engagement, all correlated with academic achievement. Mentor qualitative themes, likewise, include an increase in self-help behaviors, such as asking questions and talking to teachers. Specifically, 100% of 8th graders reported that their

mentors supported them in obtaining their goals, while 90% described that they talked with their mentors about how to solve a problem. Over 95% of mentors indicated that they helped their mentees with problem-solving and 55% reported that they helped their 8th mentees prepare for high school. Additionally, TAP's Education Advocate collaborates with families to support high school preparation and application completion. During caregiver forums a theme emerged about the ways that TAP helped with high school application completion and selection. High school preparation converges with socioemotional and cognitive skill growth, as well, further illustrating the likelihood that TAP mentees will be more successful in high school. Based upon qualitative and quantitative data, TAP has met this goal.



"I would go
wherever TAP is".
- TAP Parent



"He makes a case for himself now".
"We discuss transitioning and work
on behaviors to bring to high school".
"We visualize activities around
high school".
"Some have anxiety so we talk about
adaptive behaviors".
"I talk with Mom a lot about
preparing for the transition".

- Mentors

Do TAP interventions result in whole family academic engagement operationalized to increase participation in school events, improve communication with school, and/or improve relationships with teachers?

The Arthur Project recognizes that true impact can only be made when a child's family is also supported. Generally, students that have parents or guardians who are engaged with their schools and their learning attend school more regularly, have higher grades and graduation rates and are more academically engaged overall (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Further, positive mentoring relationships are more likely when the mentees' parents are acquainted, their expectations are aligned (Meissen & Lounsbury, 1981, as cited in Heller & Spencer, 2018), and there is clear and consistent communication and mutual respect (Jones, et. al., 2025).

This aspect of programming was developed in response to TAP families expressing their desire for TAP to support their youths' high school readiness, including high school application preparation. Positioning youth to actively explore different high schools and choose those that align with their interests and academic needs has the potential to increase academic engagement and center youth voices in their choices (Vaughn & Witko, 2013). Further high school application processes can be unfamiliar to TAP parents and guardians leaving youth to attend their default high school that may not be in the youths' best interests.

Approximately 33% of caregivers revealed that TAP helped them feel empowered in their child's education and build relationships with their child's teachers.

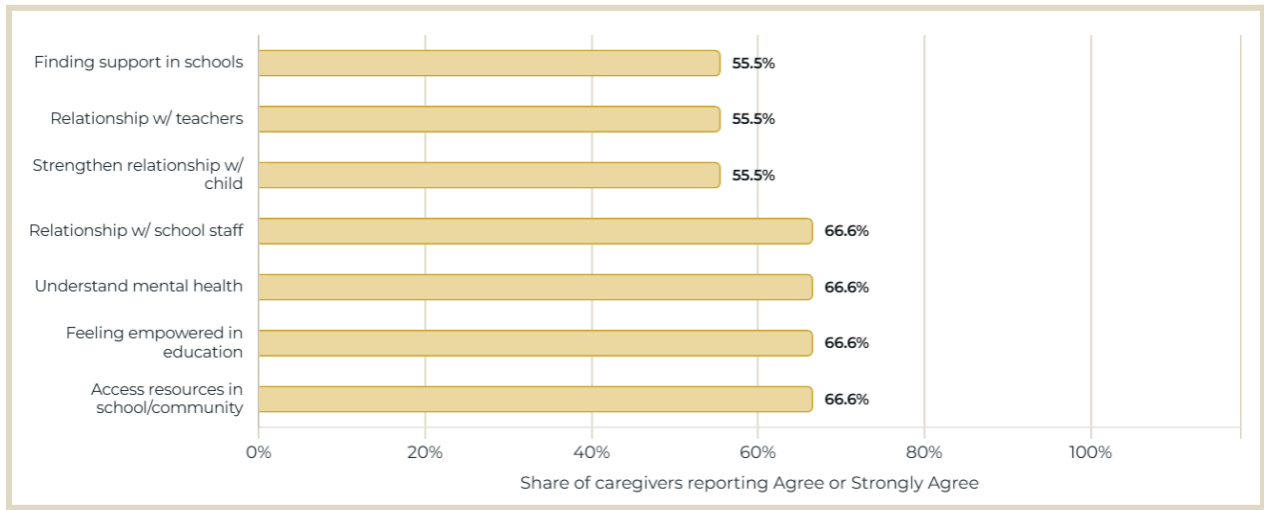
Although families are vital to youth health and well-being, many families are unprepared to support their youth's academic journey or face structural racism or oppressive systems. The Education Advocacy Program offers whole family engagement and liaises with school staff and teachers with them and on their behalf. Events are for the whole family and parents report that their kids are engaged and "off their phones!". Up to 200 attendees join for these evenings that include a variety of topics chosen

by stakeholders, such as Mental Health Awareness, Understanding High School Admissions, Building Confidence Through Conversation, Financial Literacy, Movie and Lego night.

FINDINGS: During forum groups, caregivers revealed that TAP helped them find academic support in schools. “TAP helps with school staff” (Caregiver), and a strong theme emerged around TAP’s help with high school selection. Surveys indicated that 44% of caregivers believed that TAP helped their relationships with their child’s teacher and helped them find support in schools. Approximately 33% of caregivers revealed that TAP helped them feel empowered in their child’s education and build relationships with their child’s teachers.¹³

While TAP has seen tremendous growth in their whole family events, there are mixed results with survey data indicating that less than half of the respondents agreed that TAP helped them with school relationships and communication. However, qualitative forums revealed that most caregivers agreed that TAP helps with school relationships and communication and event participation has increased significantly over the years.

Figure 7. Caregiver-reported family engagement with school, sorted from lowest to highest.

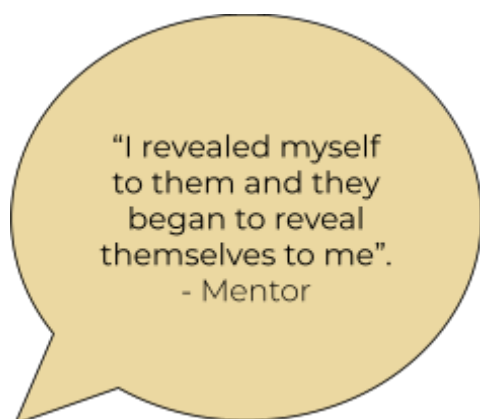


¹³ Caregiver response numbers are still low for both surveys (N=9) and forums (N=6). Accordingly, TAP plans to use new strategies for outreach and data collection next year.

Do TAP's mentors apply an antiracist and social justice lens to mentoring based upon TAP's recruiting, training and supervision protocols?

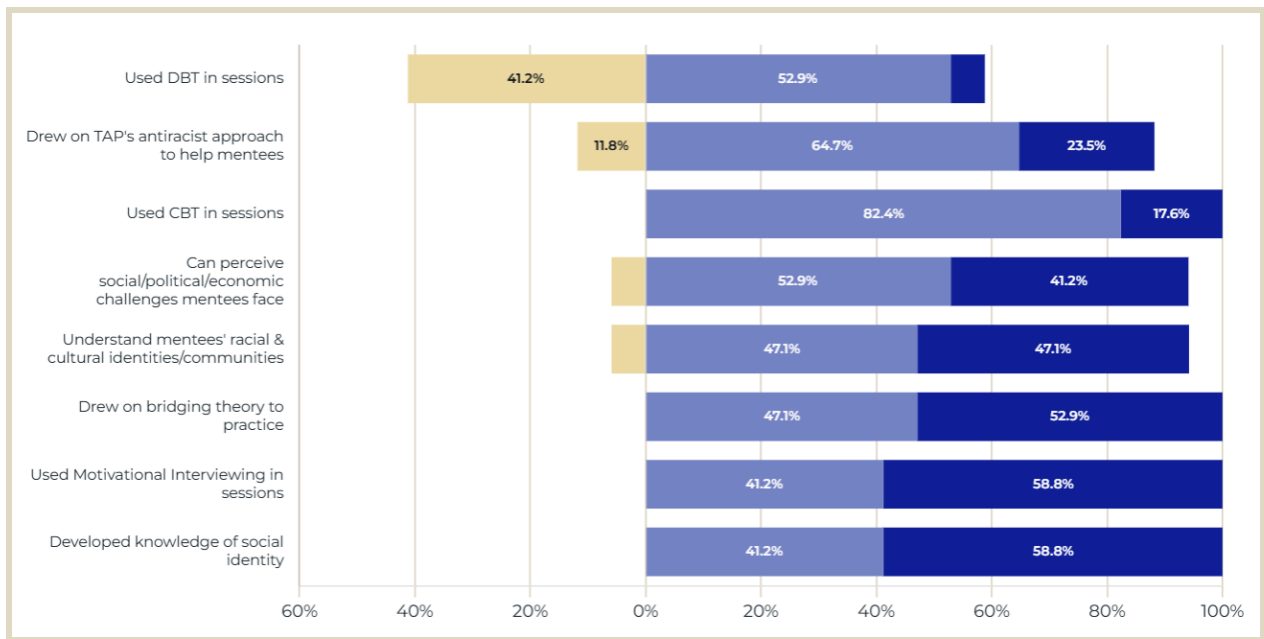
FINDINGS: TAP has met this goal. TAP believes that we all have a responsibility to dismantle oppressive systems. Using a social justice lens of equity, healing, and liberation, TAP seeks to raise awareness and empower our youth leading to social change. Based upon mentor surveys and qualitative forums, TAP has met this goal. Antiracism and social justice require equitable, reciprocal relationships that are not hierarchical. Preference is given for mentors who share lived experiences with TAP mentees. Additionally, mentors receive social justice, anti-oppression, antiracist and restorative justice training.

During qualitative forums, mentors reported building trust and empowerment by not judging, listening, and providing safe space for expression, further building their equitable relationships. Mentors also explained that they utilized anti racist training and provided space for youth to talk about race and unjust systems, including those in their own schools. Mentor surveys revealed that 100% had knowledge about their own personal



social identity, including race, 95% were able to perceive social identity, political and economic challenges for their mentees and 95% understood their mentees' racial and cultural identities and communities. Qualitative forums indicated that mentees felt they could talk to their mentors about anything and that the relationships were reciprocal. As one mentee explained, "**they trust you and you trust them,**" further indicating a theme of reciprocal relationships that are not hierarchical.

Figure 8. Mentor-reported clinical practice and DEI/antiracist competency, sorted from lowest to highest favorability.



Encourage culturally responsive community and civic engagement: Youth Leadership Institute

TAP students can spend their 8th-grade spring and summer participating in a series of workshops and activities designed to strengthen their connection to one another, to the program and to their wider community. This year’s participation included 25 students in each location. Additionally, these activities will frame the possibilities for the future and forecast leadership and community opportunities as they move into high school and beyond. It also provides for additional individual growth and opportunities for alumni engagement as peer mentors. It includes specific focus on high school articulation, including preparing for and selecting an appropriate high school, in addition to personal development, relationships, social and interpersonal skills, finances, conflict resolution, civic engagement, and social justice.

Throughout the program, youth leaders identify and address issues in their local and wider community - engaging in power mapping and other assessments - and based upon their interests. Because research indicates that middle school is a crucial time for school engagement and ninth-grade status is the single-best predictor of whether a student will graduate (Allensworth & Easton, 2005), TAP seeks to support the crucial transition from middle to high school.

During a focus group, YLI participants shared that they have learned a lot and that they share ideas with one another. “I have learned about mental health and where to find resources.” Others commented that they have learned about their bodies and how to take care of themselves. Some talked about visiting community colleges and learning about college options. When asked what they would change, responses included “nothing, TAP is great,” while others asked that the program be longer. Almost all (90%) agreed that YLI helped them feel ready for high school.

Further supporting community and civic engagement, mentors and mentees participate in community-based events that are chosen collectively and facilitated by TAP staff. Mentees engage in a curated selection that 1) support students in making progress toward their individualized goals, 2) provide access to opportunities that would not otherwise be available to mentees because of financial or time constraints and experience a greater sense of belonging and community, 3) increase social bonding toward frameworks of community, culture, family, friends and relationships, 4) build essential life skills and practice prosocial behaviors with support of mentors, and 5) fun and recreation toward framework of community, culture, health and wellness. Mentors facilitate conversation both during and after the activities. Event examples include the Botanical Gardens, Black Comic Book Exposition, Museum of Natural History, cooking classes and ice skating.

FINDINGS: Civic engagement can increase feelings of empowerment, reduce harm from trauma and increase civic pride and social engagement. TAP lives its values of mattering and accountability and fosters community engagement that creates opportunities for healing and self-actualization. This summer TAP offered graduating mentees additional programming and community service projects. Fifty youth participated in the Youth Leadership Institute (YLI). Service projects included writing letters to children in shelters and seniors in nursing homes, serving lunch to seniors in nursing homes,

cleaning parks, serving meals at shelters, and reading to younger children. Importantly, TAP also cultivates community engagement through Saturday activities that include trips to museums, parks, and local attractions. Future prospects include youth advocacy that is further discussed in program recommendations.

What methods and frameworks do TAP mentors employ?

While these findings are vital to determine if TAP is meeting its predetermined goals, perhaps just as important is understanding *how* TAP is meeting their objectives. In addition to TAP goals, the evaluation sought to

Socioemotional survey domains include confidence, grit, perseverance, self-advocacy, self-help, and mattering. In all domains, youth reported significant, statistically increases after being in TAP.

determine the extent to which TAP's extensive training and supervision prepared mentors to center their therapeutic mentoring practices in support of TAP youth as catalyst for healing, opportunity, justice and growth through the science of relationship-based learning.¹⁴ Further, as recommended by mentoring scholars, mentors were asked a series of questions to illuminate individual session methods. While all mentors agreed that all sessions "are tailored to each mentee," several patterns emerged as mentors responded to surveys and forum group questions.

DISCUSSION: The youth with whom TAP work face multiple risks and needs as identified in this report and the literature. Without TAP interventions, research indicates that these unmet needs can result in dropping out, mental and behavioral health difficulties, economic strains, relationship inequalities, and justice involvement. Through whole child therapeutic mentoring, TAP meets youth's unmet needs through dynamic and multifaceted programming during the three years of middle school. As a research-in-action organization who values participants' insights and feedback, TAP collects rigorous data every year and conducts a full program

¹⁴ Pursuant to their participatory research model, TAP revised and intensified their training based upon feedback from the prior program evaluation when several mentors reported that they did not feel fully prepared to navigate their mentees' complex and, sometimes, intensive needs.

evaluation every two years. This report includes a detailed programming narrative, unmet needs faced by TAP participants, the evidence upon which TAP programming is based, and the results of the 2024-2025 evaluation. Based upon data collected, TAP has met or exceeded all its program goals.

Chapter 4: Limitations, Recommendations and Conclusions

Limitations

This evaluation has several limitations. First, while the evaluator has the advantage of working closely with TAP over the last several years and developing TAP's theory of change, she has recognized biases. Second, although this evaluator has made great efforts at collecting several types of valid evidence, this evaluation does not have a control group. As a result, this evaluation tells a logical counterfactual based upon data and prior research that reflects larger regional, state, and national comparisons. Further, this year's survey sample size was limited due to communication errors, and, despite TAP efforts, no teachers or caregivers responded to surveys.

Recommendations

While accessing school data is very difficult, it would enhance TAP's findings to compare several indicators before and after youth are in TAP, including grades and attendance. Although both are addressed through surveys and qualitative fora, Department of Education data would triangulate the validity. However, it is important to note that these indicators, while important, cannot reflect TAP's holistic impacts.

Survey responses were low this year.¹⁵ For two groups, teachers and caregivers, there were no survey responses. To increase sample sizes, TAP should work with staff and stakeholders to explain the importance of data collection for continuous improvement and to determine the extent to which TAP meets its program goals. Working with school administration could enhance teacher responses while explaining the importance of survey and forum participation at family events could help support greater participation.

Moreover, longitudinal data would further enhance TAP findings. To that end, TAP distributed surveys to all TAP graduates, the first of whom graduated recently. Unfortunately, no surveys were returned indicating a different approach is necessary to collect long-term data. Further, longitudinal data would further validate these findings. To that end, TAP

¹⁵ This is the first year that sample sizes have been so low indicating, perhaps, an anomaly.

designed and distributed two additional surveys for TAP graduates and TAP mentors. However, TAP received no responses.

A small pattern emerged during qualitative fora with mentors regarding mentor/mentee ratios. Several mentors explained that they had more mentees than most and that their numbers were too high, feedback that has already been incorporated into the model by lowering the caseload numbers. Several other themes emerged regarding training specificities, such as including more active learning. However, most of these were very specific to training modules and have already been shared with staff and addressed.

TAP's mental health assessments indicated statistically significant, positive results. However, four of the 26 indicators increased in the post-program assessment. While pre-test biases, as explained earlier, may impact these assessments, TAP should investigate further.

Conclusions

Minority youth from historically oppressed communities face intersecting and overlapping sources of toxic stress that including violence, discrimination, unequal access to financial, educational, and health-related resources (Krieger et al., 2008; Nadal et al., 2011, as cited in Stark, et al., 2021), resulting in negative life outcomes for many. Research indicates that carefully designed and implemented mentoring programs can increase these youths' social emotion and cognitive skills while decreasing historical, personal and familial trauma and honoring youths' lived experiences and voices. As previously discussed, programs that combine both trusting relationships with specific skill development often provide the most benefits for youth. School-based, therapeutic mentoring programs that provide intensive (up to 500 hours a year) programming with highly skilled and trained social work interns have even greater promise. Assuring that any child who needs more intensive mental health treatment can access it through TAP, means that the resource is much more likely to be effective.

Providing both in-session therapeutic support and out-of-session support further enhances outcomes, while including families and peers' results in wrap-around programming based on each child's needs. This evaluation illustrates how TAP meets its goals with detailed program description as well as the philosophies and frames that drive TAP

decision-making. This evaluation provides impact data that TAP, its communities and stakeholders can utilize to verify TAP's methods.

Chapter 5: Report Organization and Summary of Evaluation Design

To evaluate TAP's complex programming, the evaluation had to necessarily be complex in its focus, data collection and analytical methods; this final evaluation report has multiple sections and subsections. The report begins with a synopsis about the need for TAP, the TAP program narrative and the alignment between the two.

Understanding the evaluation design and methodology is incredibly important for the reader to fully grasp the evaluation validity. Accordingly, each type of data and their analytical methods are described in detail. The next section details the evaluation findings by the 10 TAP program goals. Foundational rationales and research are provided for each goal followed by findings in support organized by data type, including qualitative forum themes, youth, caregivers, and mentor surveys. Finally, the report turns to recommendations and conclusions. Appendices guide the reader to more detail, including all survey questions and domains, TAP's theory of change, graphic representations, and outcome measures.

Summary of Evaluation Design

It is important that TAP's goals serve as the guide for data collection and evaluation (Wilson-Ahlstrom, et. al., 2014). For each TAP program goal there are associated measurement tools that include surveys, mental health assessments and focus groups. As the National Mentoring Resource Center explains, however, it can be challenging for programs to conduct research and evidence-based evaluations that capture all the programs' benefits and strengths. Noncognitive skills, in particular, require carefully developed and aligned assessments. In order to meet this challenge, this evaluation relied on several validated questionnaires and surveys customized to reflect its unique programming and goals from multiple professional organizations, research councils, and universities, including, the National Mentoring Resource Center, Columbia's Teachers College, and the Institute for Education that provide aggregated lists of validated instruments for noncognitive assessments, including mentor and mentee relationship quality.

Current outcome measures are aligned with TAP activities and events and include qualitative forums, interviews, mental health assessments, and

surveys. Program retention is another important indicator, and the data illustrates that program retention is 95%. Mentor surveys are administered to provide ongoing relationship quality oversight aligned with TAP's therapeutic mentoring and focus on the power of relationships in a youth's life (Harris, et. al., 2018). Mentee surveys that measure the quality of the relationship are also administered. These are both based upon validated instruments (Harris, et. al., 2018). A survey that measures the youths' sense of mattering is administered at the end of the year as a primary tool aligned with TAP's mission and vision and based upon evidence and literature regarding youth mattering and valid measures (Elliott, G.C., Et. Al., 2004; Judd, 2016). Family and caregiver surveys seek to measure quality of the mentor and mentee relationships, influences of that relationship, school engagement and advocacy.¹⁶

While assessments that measure cognitive outcomes based upon actions, knowledge and understanding are less likely to conflate domains, noncognitive assessments often capture more than one domain at a time, and it is important to triangulate overlapping domains. For instance, persistence and self-efficacy can intersect just as grit and self-advocacy can overlap with the ability to express oneself or communicate when faced with challenges. Here, social emotional outcomes are measured using a proprietary survey including perceptions of mattering, life satisfaction and self-worth, as well as youth and family qualitative forums, and mentor surveys and forums. Outcomes related to mental health were measured through a proprietary assessment tool developed from validated tools measuring symptoms of anxiety, depression and PTSD. The youth's sense of mattering can also impact other TAP ambitions such as an increase in help-seeking behaviors, confidence, self-advocacy and liberation. Additionally, an assessment that measures additional noncognitive outcomes aligned with TAP's activities and events was administered.

Through TAP's strengths-based approach, the program promotes competencies that include self-regulation, self-efficacy, and the ability to interact positively in healthy relationships (Benson, 1997). These noncognitive or social emotional skills often combine personal traits, attitudes, and

¹⁶ In pursuit of long-term data, TAP distributed two additional surveys. A mentee alumni survey was sent to prior mentees, and a mentor alumni survey was distributed via email to prior mentors. At the writing of this evaluation, no responses had been received.

motivations that can be learned and developed through a lifetime and are often correlated with academic and personal success (Zhou, 2016). However, as the 2014 Economic Policy Institute's report explains, it can be a challenging endeavor to identify, classify, measure and quantify noncognitive skills (Garcia, 2014). There is no single noncognitive strength that predicts long-term outcomes. "Rather, key skills are interrelated and need to be developed in combination with each other" (Gutman & Schoon, 2013, p.2). Accordingly, TAP seeks to foster and measure several domains, such as self-awareness, goal attainment, self-efficacy, self-advocacy, communication, and a sense of belonging and connectivity. These youth surveys, that seek to capture noncognitive changes based upon program interventions, were administered with retrospective pre- then post-tests.

Retrospective Pre- than Post-Tests: Addressing Response Shift Bias

Many mentoring programs utilize pre- and post-tests to measure youths' changes brought about by the program interventions (Drennan & Hyde, 2008). However, if survey respondents overestimate their abilities or do not have prior experiences that influence the relative accuracy of their responses, response bias can increase. If participants seek to be perceived as desirable or choose the most "positive" answer, regardless of the question's content or the anonymity, the fairness and validity of the survey can be compromised. As the program moves forward, however, the participants' internal frame of reference can change due to the "influence of the educational programme" (Rosenman, et. al., 2011; Drennan & Hyde, 2008). This can be problematic if the youth's frame of reference changes based upon the program interventions themselves. These original biased responses can compromise program assessments and pose a serious threat to evaluation validity. Response bias can be particularly pronounced in adolescents and those with lower educational attainment, leading to a "destruction of the psychometric properties of the questionnaires" (Kreitchmann, et. al., 2019). One means to overcome response bias is qualitative focus groups that capture program results through individual, lived experiences. These types of focus groups can also capture participants' increase in trust that can lead to a decrease in the desire to "look good" (Rosenman, et. al., 2011).

Another means of addressing participants' desire to present positively is a retrospective pre- then post-test, administered at the end of the program, that measures participants' perceived changes in behaviors, attitudes, and

knowledge before and after the program, at the same time (Young & Kallemeyn, 2019). These types of surveys help overcome response shift bias at the end of the program. As Cantrell (2003) explains, “[a]t the heart of these issues [response shift bias] is the challenge of accomplishing measurement of change that yields the potential to make appropriate inferences about the extent of the participants’ growth as a result of program participation.” In this way, if participants’ frame of reference has changed because of the program’s interventions, the measurement tools will more accurately reflect that change. As a result, TAP administered retrospective pre- then post-tests at the end of its evaluation period.¹⁷

Survey Administration

How the surveys are administered can be just as important as the questions themselves. For instance, to minimize the potential for “response distortion” based upon the participants’ desire to “do well,” TAP staff administered the surveys and discussed the purpose of the assessments, that there are no right or wrong answers, and the absolute anonymous and confidential nature of the surveys. Also, aligned with several studies conducted with youth participants, TAP did not utilize negatively worded questions. Instead TAP engaged in other strategies to reduce set bias such as separating domain questions. Regarding the intensity of Likert scales for youth, research is split. For this age group, the number is usually limited to four or five. Providing a neutral choice is also a matter of debate. However, a midpoint answer can increase response bias, as the respondents may minimize cognitive effort during intensive survey efforts (Moril, et. al., 2017). As a result, for the next evaluation, the evaluator is recommending TAP remove the neutral option.

¹⁷ Youth survey data is complicated by several factors. First, 7th and 8th grade responses are likely building on prior years in TAP. The pre- then post-retrospective questions reduce bias but can make it difficult to disentangle cumulative program outcomes that assemble over the three years of programming. Second, both noncognitive and cognitive domains overlap further complicating data analysis. Last, for ease of consumption, the evaluator usually combines the top two survey fields “strongly agree” and “agree” unless there are strong disparities. While she understands the distinction is important, transparently combining them also provides important data indicators.

Qualitative Forums

This evaluation includes both Inductive and deductive theory development as the evaluator used reflexivity and centralized the participants' voices that revealed new knowledge not previously clarified by the vast mentoring literature. Beyond merely summarizing the data, the evaluator used her knowledge about TAP and mentoring expertise to develop new lines of inquiry and use probing questions to further explore areas previously obscured, such as the necessity and utility of intensive and reflective mentor training and supervision, staff cruciality, extraneous on-campus interventions, individual session modalities and clinical approaches, and youth and family academic engagement efforts, such as report card review, clinical mental health support, and attunement. The combination of these emerging practices are also investigated as "whole child" therapeutic mentoring.

Building the Counterfactual

In the end, this evaluation is trying to ascertain the "but for" question of whether the TAP interventions "resulted" in the measured outcomes that are, in turn, aligned with the inputs and activities included in the programming. This is difficult in the social sciences (Hind, 2010) and many programs like TAP do not utilize a control group for previously explained reasons. However, the evaluator took great care to triangulate responses with several types of data to assure that the results can be reasonably attributed to the programmatic interventions.

As Brooks, et al., (2019), explained when discussing evaluation design, "[i]deally, evaluation would be used to help improve interventions, grounded in an internally developed, multi-year and proportionate roadmap for evidence generation to optimize delivery and impact." That is precisely the practice in which TAP is engaged. Moreover, another important purpose of evaluations is to engage in critical thinking about program interventions. However, as Axford, et al. (2022) have emphasized, critical thinking is also fostered through developing a theory of change as a foundation for evaluation. For TAP, their dynamic and evidence-based theory of change explains in detail why they do what they do, what precisely they do, and how the research supports their interventions. In turn, their evaluation is an extension of, aligned with and an examination of their interventions.

While it is not feasible to use a randomized control group for this evaluation given the age of the participants, TAP's size and budget, parental consents, school cooperation, and the feasibility of data acquisition, comparing similarly situated youth regionally, state-wide and nationally to those youth in TAP can provide an illustration of TAP's potential power to change young people's lives with a logically constructed counterfactual. "[E]xperiments are not always appropriate or feasible..." for all evaluations (Brooks, et al, 2019). Further, in the social sciences, researchers agree that it is difficult to attribute causality through evaluations (Hind, 2010). Instead, Brooks, et al. (2019) argue that evaluations that are useful for practitioners' focus, not on a particular evaluation method, but on the decisions that the organization needs to make based upon the data collected.

For TAP, this evaluation had several important purposes, among them determining the extent to which the youth were suffering from anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress, whether the parents, teachers, staff, youth and mentors perceived social emotional and cognitive skills growth, and whether caregivers and school data indicated greater academic engagement. Consequently, for organizations like TAP, utilizing theoretical propositions and well-established research in support in addition to emerging theoretical frameworks and comparing their evaluation results with national and state data is enough to illustrate TAP's immediate outcomes. Domains include race, income level, school quality, attendance, and individual characteristics such as trauma and whether the youth have an IEP or emotional or behavioral diagnoses or classification. Local, state and federal level outcomes include high school graduation, income potential, illegal drug use and justice system involvement. Important to remember, these outcomes intersect and can be difficult to fully untangle with a linear, causal analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

The Arthur Project: Goals and Measures		
Project Goals	Measures	Method + Frequency
Cultivate youth's sense of mattering through therapeutic mentoring.	• Youth surveys • Youth qualitative forums • Family surveys • Family qualitative forums • Mentor surveys • Mentor qualitative forums • Staff surveys • Staff qualitative forums	All surveys and forums conducted yearly
Increase academic engagement and self-actualization	• Youth surveys • Youth qualitative forums • Teacher surveys • Teach qualitative forums • Family surveys • Family qualitative forums • Frequency data: School attendance and grades	All surveys and forums conducted yearly Frequency data accrued continuously and analyzed yearly

Foster family engagement through the Family Advocacy Program	• Family surveys • Family qualitative forums • Frequency data: Family attendance of school-based events; Family participation in mentoring relationship	All surveys and forums conducted yearly Frequency data accrued continuously and analyzed yearly
Provide the skills to successfully transition to high school and beyond	• Youth surveys • Youth qualitative forums • Staff surveys • Staff qualitative forums • Teacher surveys • Teacher qualitative forums	All surveys and forums conducted yearly
Provide youth with knowledge, self-advocacy, leadership, and communication skills to reach their full potential	• Youth surveys • Youth qualitative forums • Mentor surveys • Mentor qualitative forums • Mentor quarterly reports (Growth Plans)	All surveys and forums conducted yearly Mentor reports (Growth Plans) conducted quarterly.
Increase youth mental health	• Youth Mental Health Assessment	Pre and post-Mental Health Assessments administered 2x/year (at beginning and end of program year)

Cultivate social and racial justice	• Youth surveys • Youth qualitative forums • Mentor surveys • Mentor qualitative forums • Staff surveys • Staff qualitative forums • Mentor reports	All surveys and forums conducted yearly Mentor reports (session notes) accrued continuously and analyzed yearly
Encourage culturally responsive community and civic engagement	• Young surveys • Youth qualitative forums • Frequency data: Event and project outcomes	All surveys and forums conducted yearly Frequency data accrued continuously and analyzed yearly
Foster reciprocal mentor benefits including workforce development, social justice advocacy, and civic engagement	• Mentor surveys • Mentor qualitative forums • Mentor alumni surveys • Frequency data: Mentor participation and outcomes related to social justice advocacy and civic engagement activities	All surveys and forums conducted yearly Frequency data accrued continuously and analyzed yearly

Methods

Qualitative Forum Groups

During the evaluation design phase, the evaluator devoted attention to measuring the appropriate set of outcomes that would capture the full spectrum of TAP's impacts as comprehensively as possible. It was determined that a mixed method approach would be best to capture these outcomes and provide increased validity by using a variety of data collection approaches. The purpose of the qualitative data analysis is to provide greater depth and explanation to the quantitative findings through individual experiences. Focus groups are often used to gather additional information from select program participants that elucidates quantitative data and provides subjective, in-depth responses from program participants and key stakeholders in an autonomous and confidential setting (CDC, 2018). Focus groups can also produce greater insights because interactions encourage reflection as multiple viewpoints are shared and participants “piggy-back” on the responses of others (Leung & Ratnapalan, 2009; Rennekamp & Nall, nd). The evaluator observed this phenomenon in every focus group where established relationships encouraged the participants to interact with and encourage each other to deeper and more meaningful responses. Often, the evaluator simply listened while the participants responded to one another in an interactive exchange.

Forum Group Processes, Data Collection and Analysis

To expose meanings behind the survey data, the evaluator used an interpretive phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences and individual perspectives of the participants embracing and honoring their thoughts and reflections as primary sources of data. Focus groups are particularly appropriate as they provide the opportunity for interactive responses that are often more candid as the data resembles an informal discussion about a particular research question (Leung & Rathnapalan, 2009). Although the interviewer based her interview guide on the evaluation questions, in prioritizing and respecting the lived experiences of the participants, she also pursued related but unanticipated topics (Adler, et al., 2019). While focus groups are well suited for youth, she took special care with the youth realizing that they have unique needs and abilities (Vogl, et. at., 2023). In accordance with best practices, she restyled her questions to reflect

short and clear inquiries best suited for 10-13-year-olds. She sought to build initial trust by honoring all their responses while seeking to make the time both safe and fun. Building off one another, they often followed-up in agreement or disagreement with spontaneity and enthusiasm

Evaluator held two mentor focus groups with a total of approximately 20 participants, three mentee focus groups with approximately 16 participants, two parent/caregiver focus groups with a total of six participants, a staff forum with six participants, one teacher/school partner interview with one participant and one principal interview. The forums and interviews lasted about an hour each conducted over Zoom. At the start, the evaluator explained the purpose of the sessions, that they were voluntary, the participants could choose not to answer any question or stop at any time. She also explained that the focus group was anonymous, not recorded, and no names were documented or used in the analysis.

The evaluator took notes throughout the forums but did not record the sessions to build trust and encourage candid responses. The question guides were based on the program goals, rationales and evaluation questions similar to the survey but were more open ended to explore the participants' lived experiences. Additional comments and insights were also pursued in conformance with reflexivity and inductive theory extension and development. Some prompts were general and some more specific. For instance, mentors were asked about the strength of their relationships, if and how they built trust and what, if any, changes they observed in their mentees that they believed could be attributed to their time in TAP? Mentors were also asked about their methods and specific topics they discussed. Importantly, mentors were also asked to discuss challenges pursuant to TAP's participatory research and continuous improvement models. This resulted in broad and free flowing discussions.

Additionally, the evaluator asked questions from the mentor survey. Often, mentors discussed what the program and their mentees meant to them. In accordance with focus group recommendations, the evaluator remained flexible, followed up on responses and probed for deeper levels of meaning (Marczak & Sewell, nd). As a result, she let conversations evolve naturally while maintaining the focus on the program experiences. At the end of each session, the evaluator made herself available for any additional thoughts with several mentors sending her emails after the end of the

sessions. These thoughtful and specific messages were unexpected but added depth and additional meaning.

Building Trust

Trustworthiness is vital to qualitative data analysis; it is important to note that the evaluator also developed the TAP theory of change and worked with the staff and Executive Director team for almost five years. As Nowell, et. al. (2017) explains, during qualitative data analysis, the researcher becomes the instrument for that analysis. Creativity and judgements are integrated into qualitative interpretation. Accordingly, it is important that the evaluator explain her prior knowledge and understanding of the depth and breadth of the content. This is especially important if the data were collected through iterative and interactive processes, as Nowell, et. al., (2017) explain. As a result, the evaluator came to the qualitative data analysis with insights and reflections about the data through immersion in the program that further provided informed judgements during the thematic analysis.

Data Interpretation

While focus group methods are an important and valid evaluation tool, researchers do not always explain how the data was collected and analyzed. However, for the data to be accepted as valid, it is essential to explain how the responses were facilitated, collected, categorized, interpreted, and ultimately presented. As Doody et. al., (2013) explained, focus group analysis is not linear but involves a number of highly interconnected and iterative steps.

The evaluator took detailed notes of the participant's responses. Immediately after the focus groups, the evaluator reviewed her notes and added additional observations and reflections. As it is important that focus group data is analyzed appropriately, noting the strength of themes and the intensity of the emotions expressed (Northwest Center for Public Health Practice), she immediately added notes regarding emphasis, emotion, and other descriptive observations. Moving between her predetermined categories or domains, the evaluator became immersed in her data as she shifted between her discussion notes, observations, predetermined categories, evaluation domains and evaluation questions identifying words and short statements that appeared with varying frequency combined with iterative references to the literature and theoretical frameworks.

Embracing her reflexive subjectivity as a resource for the evaluation, the evaluator included her field expertise and knowledge and understanding of TAP's frameworks, programming, values and protocols in this work (see Varpio et al.; Braun & Clarke, 2023). During this time, the evaluator considered all ideas and concepts that arose from the discussions. Thereafter, similar ideas were linked together to represent similar viewpoints. All the while, she practiced “data reduction” by collapsing similar ideas into themes (Doody, et. al., 2013).

As Braun and Clarke (2022) explain, thematic analysis is a family of methods and not a singular analytical procedure. However, the researchers also encouraged evaluators to identify the type of thematic analysis and the supporting rationale. For the purposes of this evaluation, a theme “is considered a thread of underlying meaning implicitly discovered at the interpretative level and elements of subjective understandings of participants” (Vaismoradi, et. al., 2016, p.101). Themes are further categorized by the frequency of repetitive views. (Vaismoradi, et. al., 2016) and presented in the findings. As many qualitative researchers recognize and this evaluator embraces, themes should tell stories.

For a program like TAP, each theme combines to tell a story of under-served middle-school youth discovering and building upon their strengths to develop socioemotional and cognitive skills that will successfully support their transition to high school. These youth are supported by social-work students fulfilling their field experiences, supervised and guided by licensed social workers—therapeutic mentors—and attend up to 500 hours of individual and group programming a year. As the theory of change explains, these youth face challenges, including behavioral and mental health, trauma, intergenerational poverty and academic disengagement. Their three-year TAP journey is illustrated through their responses, lived experiences and the mentors’ observations with the strongest of all themes being youths’ developed sense of mattering.

It is important to remember that the socioemotional domains or skills often combine person traits, attitudes and motivations (Zhou, 2016), and that these capabilities are often interrelated and overlapping (Gutman & Schoon, 2013). “[K]ey [noncognitive] skills are interrelated and need to be developed in combination with each other” (Gutman & Schoon, 2013, p.2). As a result, in areas where the focus group participants’ responses intersected with one or

more domains, the evaluator did not seek to artificially separate the domains but, instead, combined them holistically for a more authentic analysis. For instance, there are instances where strengths identification overlaps with goal achievement and problem-solving. In other reflections, mentees discuss building trust, being heard, and reaching goals. These skills, in turn, can be related to confidence and persistence.

More specifically, the evaluator found support for several evidence-based theoretical propositions while recognizing inductive support for unique combinations and components of TAP's model. For instance, mentor forums revealed that the evidence supports therapeutic mentoring theory extension with enhanced support scope while additional revelations give rise to new hypotheses that support TAPs unique training institute, dosages, and programming combinations, including intensive mentor learning and supervision, family advocacy, social work staff integration, school-based secondary interventions, and a combination of therapeutic mentoring, life skills development, academic attunement, school integration, cultural exposure and wraparound services based upon stakeholders' expertise and feedback. The latter has resulted in programming around mentor pods, high school selection process and whole family events.

Surveys

The evaluation included several surveys that sought to measure TAPs program impacts, the strength of the mentor-mentee relationship, and particular methods used during 1:1 session. TAP has historically had difficulty increasing caregiver and teacher evaluation participation and continues to conduct outreach on multiple levels. While the evaluator did have a qualitative forum with several caregivers, no teachers responded to this year's survey.

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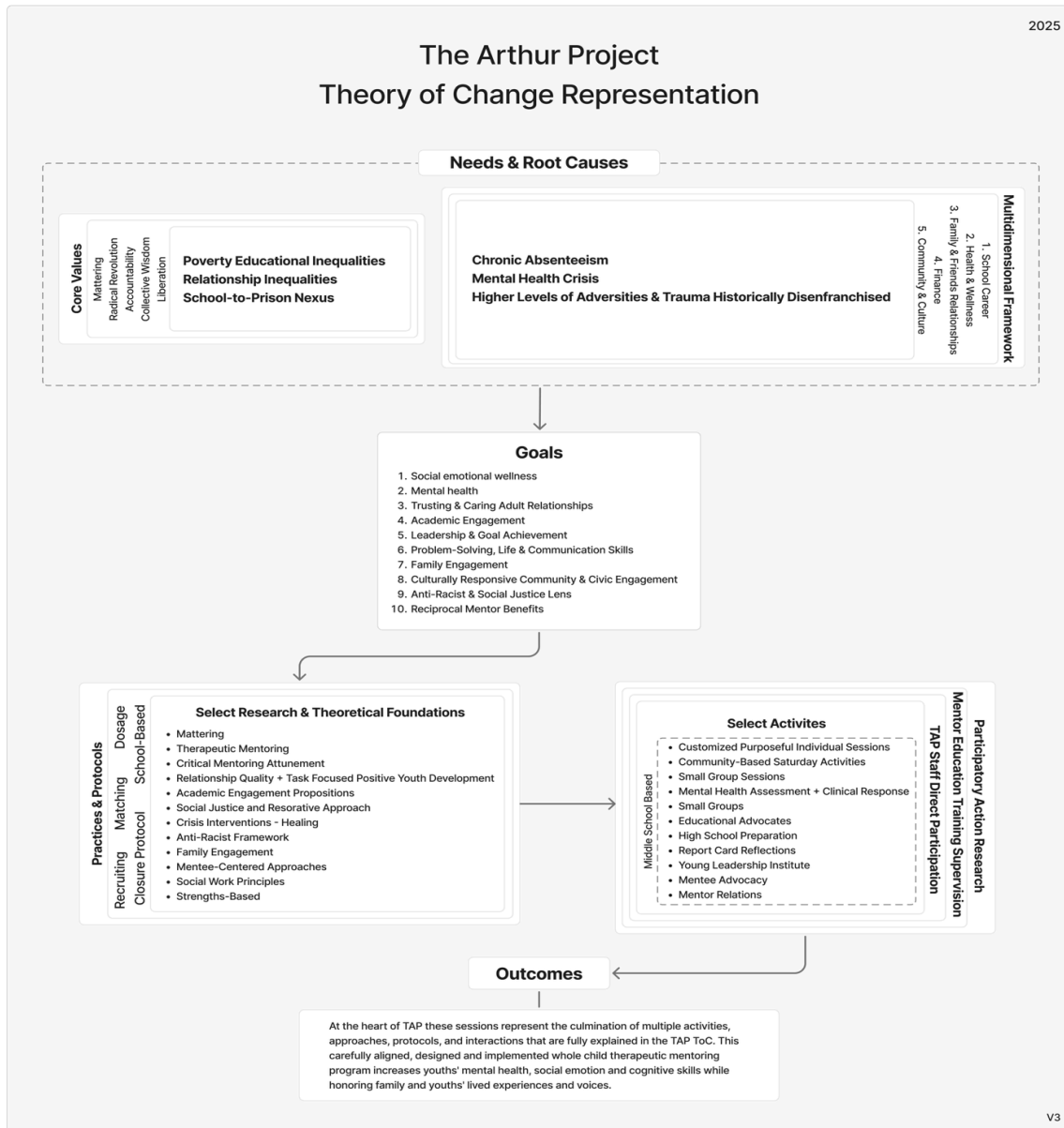
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Appendices

Appendix A: TAP Theory of Change Graphic Representation¹⁸



¹⁸ TAP's 2025 Theory of Change acts as an examination and guide for this evaluation. It provides more detailed theoretical foundations and alignment for all of TAP's goals and measurements and is available upon request.

Appendix B: TAP Evaluation-At-A-Glance

