


# Evaluating Relationships in an All Female-Aligned Mentoring Program

**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University**

**Riley Buckjune**

Committee Signatures:



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Sarah Michaels



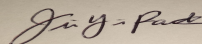
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Clara Mazzye



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Sarah Martin



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Jie Park

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## **Abstract**

This praxis project was conducted from September-December of 2021 at All Kinds Of Girls (AKOG), a youth mentoring program at Clark University organized and run by female-aligned students on campus. My goal was to evaluate relationships between mentors and their mentees, mentors and each other, and mentors with the program, and identify ways to improve the curriculum planning. Using surveys, interviews, and personal observations and reflections, I investigated how mentors describe their relationships, what evidence of growth-fostering relationships exists in the space, and the strengths and difficulties that the Younger Girls Curriculum (YGC) Coordinator team faced when planning themes and activities. As a result, I found that many factors that affect mentors' experiences, including preparation, stress, energy, and community, can be improved by changes to the AKOG curriculum. My findings can be useful for the future leadership in AKOG, specifically the YGC Coordinators and their planning process.

## **Acknowledgements**

After three long semesters of working on this research, there is an extensive list of people I am grateful to for helping me reach the end.

First, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all the members of the CYES community. There is literally no way I could have graduated as a CYES major without you. I can only hope that in the future I will have the chance to work with people as supportive, loving, and funny as all of you.

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I am also thankful to my best friend, roommate, and fellow Praxis survivor Sammy Eagen. Sammy encouraged me to join AKOG and the Curriculum team, and has heard every thought behind this entire project. She has also helped me escape the many stressors of school, redesign our living room every month, and watch 8 seasons of *Modern Family*. Once again, I'm not sure where I would be without her.

Thank you to my parents, who said "This is why we never went to college" when I told them I was in the midst of writing this 90 page paper. I'm so glad they pushed me to pursue this degree. Thanks also to Liv Thurston, who had to hear so much about this project every Wednesday in the car getting Dunkin. Lastly, a huge thank you to my readers for helping me wrap this all up.

## **Introduction and Research Questions: The Creation of This Project**

### **→ My Experiences as a Mentor**

When I first arrived at Clark University in 2018, I was desperate to find student clubs and organizations that would help me adjust and feel connected to my new life on campus. All Kinds of Girls (AKOG), a female-aligned and student-run mentoring program at Clark, was one of the hundreds of extracurricular options advertised. I first heard about AKOG at the annual club fair where members displayed photos, artwork, and an obvious pride in their involvement. It looked like something I wanted to be a part of, but I was nervous and intimidated that the difficult transition I was going through as a new college student would not qualify me to be a “good” mentor. I thought that a mentor should be an involved role model and resource, but I was still trying to figure out who I was at Clark. I decided not to apply to AKOG during my first semester, giving up my opportunity to join until they opened applications again the next year. What I failed to realize then was that while AKOG is a mentoring organization for youth, it can also serve as a supportive community for its college-aged members.

When I eventually did join AKOG during the fall of 2019, I did not suddenly know the full scope of what it meant to be a good youth worker - that you aren't just the teacher and knower, but are also growing alongside the youth you are working with. I started to think of the program as a space for mentees *and mentors* to grow together and feel supported by one another. Creating positive experiences for the mentors in AKOG is just as important as creating positive experiences for the mentees - especially considering how the mentors, and the energy they bring, impact the youth. In my own experience as a mentor, how I was able to connect with the mentees

and how valuable I felt in my role as a mentor was mostly determined by the day's curriculum materials. The curriculum at AKOG refers to the day's theme and accompanying activities.

The best memories I have from my time as a mentor are from days when the curriculum felt well planned and purposeful. For example, I remember "Passion Day" as one of my favorite days at AKOG because of how much I learned about new things and the girls. On this day in 2019, mentors involved in various clubs on campus shared their passions which included singing in acapella groups, making art zines, and campus safety serving as a Clark First Responder. These activities exposed mentors and mentees to new things and, most importantly, encouraged us to share about our own passions. I remember leaving AKOG that day feeling like I was on my way to making better connections with others in AKOG and feeling excited to come back another week.

However, in contrast to these upbeat and fun-filled memories, I also remember many times when I left AKOG wishing that it had gone better. Countless times after I joined AKOG, I heard complaints from my peers about not wanting to go. For some mentors, it was school stress that impacted their energy. For others, it was not feeling like their presence impacted the program. After leaving for the day, I often talked to other members about feeling disappointed with what we accomplished. Some of my worst days as a mentor in AKOG were ones when the theme for the day had no accompanying activities and we were given no direction on what to do with the girls. Many times, I spent AKOG feeling alone, not connecting with the mentees or other mentors, and like my presence in the program was not important.

With this research project, I began with the idea that the curriculum plans influence the ways that mentors are able to form relationships in and with the organization. Curriculum at

AKOG refers to the daily theme and accompanying activities that mentors and mentees participate in together. Above, I describe feeling more purposeful and successful as a mentor on days when the curriculum felt engaging and supported stimulating conversations with the mentees. After joining the Curriculum Coordinating team in the Spring of 2021, I became interested in paying attention to how our plans translated into the actual experiences that mentors have at AKOG.



Figure 1: AKOG 2019-2020 logo designed by Younger Girls' Mentor Tiffany DeOliveira '22



## → My Research Questions

In this research, I looked at mentors' relationships with mentees, with each other, and with the program as a whole. In particular, I was interested in how, if at all, the curriculum at AKOG helps support relationships for mentors in the program. I was also interested in recording the successes and struggles that the Curriculum Coordinating team experienced throughout the semester.

Throughout this project, the key questions guiding my research were:

1. How do the Younger Girls mentors describe their relationships in AKOG?
2. What evidence do AKOG members provide of growth-fostering relationships in AKOG?
3. What successes and difficulties do the Younger Girls Curriculum team have and how do they influence the mentors' experiences?

By asking these questions, I aimed to examine a connection between mentors' experiences and the influence of the curriculum. I hoped to find ways to improve curriculum planning so that participating in AKOG consistently feels fulfilling for everyone involved.

My project intentionally does not include the perspectives of the youth involved in the program. While there are methods of research that honor and respect youth voices, the mentees in AKOG do not attend the program to participate in research. As a Steering Committee, we have decided that research conducted in AKOG cannot involve the girls as a way of honoring their involvement in the program and protecting them from feeling like subjects of study. My project exclusively involves the mentors in the program, but is intended to still improve the experiences of mentees.

Ideally, my project could help the Younger Girls Curriculum Coordinators at AKOG with designing plans and activities that stimulate healthy relationships and a supportive community. My findings could be useful for changing leadership, specifically for new mentors taking on the Curriculum Coordinator role. In addition, organizations similar to AKOG could potentially benefit from learning about the mindsets their volunteers bring to their youth work spaces. Using practitioner inquiry and ethnographic methods, I hope to learn more about how curriculum planning can improve mentors' beliefs about themselves as mentors, the program, and their girls. My research took place during the fall semester (September-December) of 2021.

## **Background and Context**

### **→ AKOG's Goals, Leadership, and History**

Before diving into the research, it is necessary to explain more about what AKOG is, how it operates, who attends AKOG, and how it has changed over the years. As stated in AKOG's most recent Constitution and Bylaws available online on [the Clark Engage website](#), the organization's primary missions are to:

1. Help girls to recognize their own strength by providing them with a safe space to express and maintain their true voice.
2. Expose girls to different life options by building a bridge between girls from Worcester and women from the Clark University community and beyond.
3. Nurture the socio-emotional development of girls by supporting the self assurance that they naturally possess as preadolescents.
4. Foster understanding by bringing together girls and women from diverse class, ethnic and racial backgrounds.
5. Promote self-confidence, high self-esteem, and violence prevention methods through the inclusion of various activities, discussions and guest speakers.

While these goals are present in AKOG, in my experience, they are not often discussed or referred to explicitly by mentors or leaders. Leadership in AKOG exists in the form of a Steering Committee, divided into subcommittees that handle different administrative jobs. Figure 2 shows a chart that helps outline the leadership in the program.

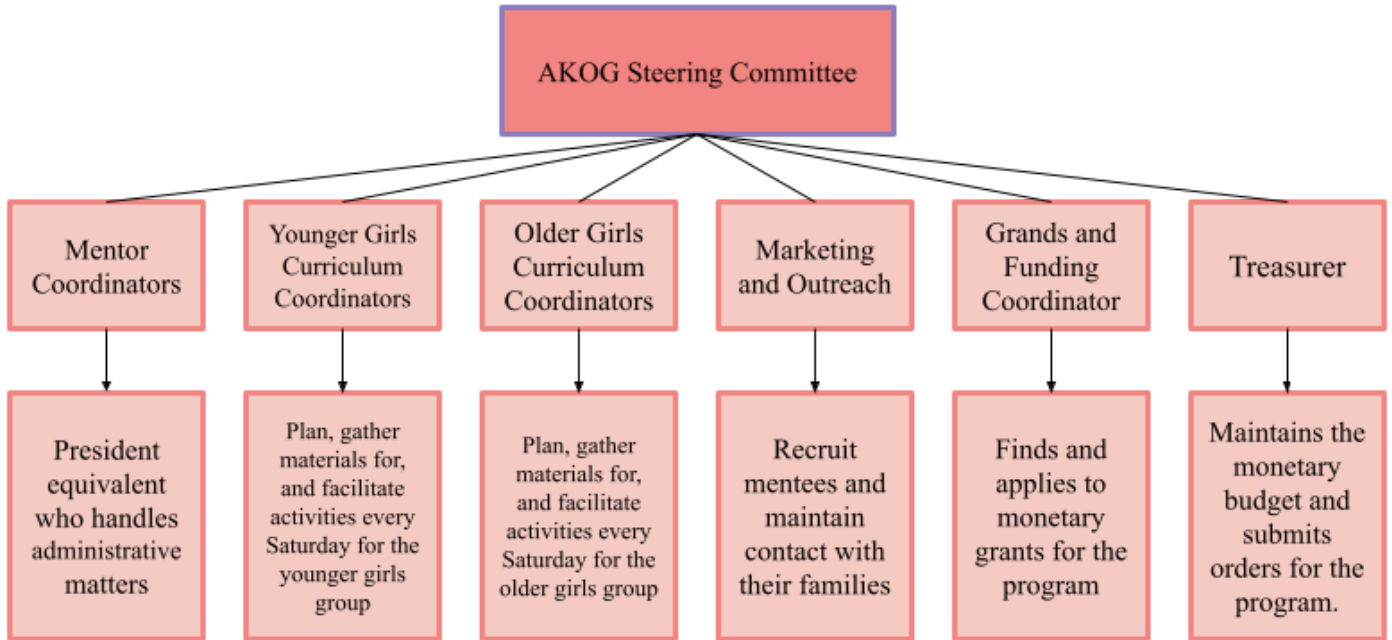


Figure 2: Leadership Roles in AKOG

It is important to note that AKOG was first created in 1998 by Clark’s Women’s and Gender Studies Department. As an organization that has existed for over 20 years, AKOG has undergone many years of changing leadership, goals, and routines. Looking back at the history of AKOG’s descriptions and bylaws available online, it appears that the current mission statement was developed in the 2015-2016 school year. Before that, no solid description of AKOG is available. This makes me wonder about how AKOG was managed prior to this, and what parts of the program have changed or stayed the same since its start. I think it is safe to assume that

AKOG today is much different than what it was years before, is currently changing, and will continue to change in the future. From my data collection, some ways that current mentors have described AKOG include “[A program] to spend time with young girls in the community to have fun and create a space for all ideas to be shared” and “A group that partakes in programming in order to support and uplift girls in the local Worcester community.” I would describe AKOG as a space for everyone to express themselves freely and have fun together in a safe and supportive community.

AKOG takes place at Clark University, a private liberal arts school with approximately 2,250 undergraduate students. Around 60% of undergraduate students at Clark are white, and around 90% of Clark faculty are white (College Factual, 2022). Clark is located in Worcester, Massachusetts, the second largest city in New England. Within Worcester, Clark resides in the Main South neighborhood, one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse areas of the city. Out of around 13,000 total residents. 38% are White, 36% are Hispanic, 12% are Asian, and 11% are African American (Niche.com Inc, 2022). The majority of Main South residents are non-white, which is a stark contrast to the demographics on Clark’s campus. Because the two communities come together at AKOG, it is important to recognize how the different backgrounds of mentors and mentees shape the program. My own whiteness and the whiteness that exists in the program can impact the assumptions that mentors have about their mentees and their purpose as mentors. Mentoring spaces, like AKOG, are typically built on the idea that there are things mentees are lacking and must gain from the mentors. As I try to create more feelings of fulfillment and purpose in AKOG, I want to reject the idea that AKOG mentors help mentees overcome hardships or are working *for* the girls rather than *with* the girls.

## → **Mentors in the Program**

As previously mentioned, I have been participating in AKOG since the fall of 2019. I started as a mentor in the nine-year old age group, then joined the Steering Committee in the spring of 2021 as a member of the Younger Girls Curriculum (YGC) Coordinators. I wanted to join the YGC Coordinators because I was really interested in being a part of the planning process at AKOG. I had held similar positions in the past, and felt like I had ideas and experience to share that could help mentees and mentors enjoy AKOG. In order to join the team, I had to fill out an online application and was interviewed by the current members about why I would be a good fit in the position.

Being a YGC Coordinator gives me the responsibility of planning and leading themes and activities on Saturdays with the two other Curriculum Coordinators in the group. At the time of my project, all three members of the YGC Coordinators were seniors who were not returning to AKOG after graduating. This is important to note because, as we scrambled to find mentors to replace us in the position, we were worried about the continuation of the program and how we would prepare new leaders to take over. My project focuses on the strengths and weaknesses of AKOG's curriculum with the hope that it can influence future members in my position and help them understand what they are taking on in the role.

All the mentors in AKOG are female-aligned undergraduate Clark University students interested in youth work who have applied, interviewed, and been accepted to participate in the program. The application and interview process happens once a year in the fall. Prospective mentors meet as one large group and answer what they would do in certain scenarios at AKOG, such as if a mentee confided in you about an unsafe situation or if mentees were excluding other

girls at AKOG. Steering Committee members take notes about people's responses and discuss who they think would be a good fit. There are no specific requirements for mentors to join AKOG, although some common traits among mentors include enthusiasm, creativity, and positivity. Who is or isn't invited to join AKOG usually depends on people's past experience working with kids, their year in school, if they can speak Spanish (a language spoken by many of the mentees), and the amount of new members the organization can take on. Each year, the number of new mentors that AKOG welcomes changes based on how many senior mentors are graduating.

All mentors bring different identities, experiences, and strengths to AKOG that make the space unique. Because of this, I had expectations that mentors in my project would experience AKOG differently. It is not my intent to make generalizations about "mentors" in AKOG as if every mentor in AKOG is the same. Each person who participates in AKOG has their own identity factors (race, ethnicity, gender) that affects how they connect to and in the program. Throughout this project, I aimed to pay attention to how race, ethnicity, and gender showed up in the responses I collected. While my data did not end up leading me to make any claims about mentors' identities in AKOG, it is still important to recognize that all mentors are racialized beings with unique identities that impact their experiences in the program on an individual level.

Explaining the demographics of mentors in the program is complicated, as there are no records that keep track of mentors' racial identities. However, it is safe to say that in general, AKOG is currently made up of predominantly white or white presenting mentors. Only two mentors at the time of this project were native Spanish speakers, a language that many mentees speak at home, and neither of them are consenting mentors in my research. Of my 9 consenting

research participants, 6 identify as white, 1 identifies as Asian American, 1 identifies as Black and Latina, and 1 identifies as Black. However, these demographics do not accurately represent the ratio of white mentors to mentors of color in AKOG as a whole. Historically, AKOG has been a predominately white space in terms of mentors because Clark is a predominately white institution. Clark leadership has discussed how people of color may not feel invited into predominantly white spaces like AKOG. This is significant to mention because the majority of mentees at AKOG are people of color.

My project focused solely on the mentors and Steering committee members that participate in the Younger Girls age group. Of the 31 mentors in the Younger Girls group, 9 members consented to be participants in my research.

#### → **AKOG over time**

As I will continue to explain below, AKOG has changed drastically each year that I have been involved. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the program went from a thriving in-person community to a struggling remote program. It is now fighting to build itself back into some aspects of what it once was. Some facts that have remained the same, however, are the age groups, meeting time, and cost. There are two age groups in AKOG, younger girls (ages 9-12) and older girls (ages 13-16), who are divided into separate programs to better assess the girls' needs and interests. AKOG has continued to meet once a week on Saturdays during Clark's academic year, although the length of these meetings has fluctuated. Additionally, AKOG is free of cost for mentees. Below, I will briefly describe how the pandemic has impacted AKOG's operations:

2019-2020 Academic Year:

This year operated on a “regular” AKOG schedule. AKOG took place in person on Clark’s campus in Atwood Hall’s “Blue Room,” pictured below. Age groups sat together on the floor, spread out in all 4 corners of the room. AKOG ran from 10:30am-3:30pm for mentors and 11:00am-3:00pm for mentees, with lunch from 12:00pm-12:45pm. Lunch was prepared for all the members of the program by the mentors in AKOG, of which there were approximately 40 in the younger girls group. Attendance among the mentees fluctuated, but there was consistently somewhere between 20 and 35 younger girls coming to AKOG weekly.



Figure 3: Atwood Hall’s Blue Room (Clark University)

2020-2021 Academic Year:

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, AKOG operated on a fully remote schedule. AKOG ran virtually through Zoom on Saturday from 10-00am-12:00pm for mentors and 10:30am-12:00pm



for mentees. Mentors were divided into two groups (A and B) that met on opposite weeks in order to reduce the size of the meeting and try to control Zoom fatigue. With about 30 total mentors in the younger girls group, each meeting had approximately 15 mentors logged on. Materials for themed days and non-perishable food were delivered to mentees' houses at the start of the semester. Attendance from the mentees dropped significantly from the previous years, with a typical day having 1-3 mentees logged on.



Figure 4: AKOG 2020-2021 logo depicting an AKOG Zoom meeting designed by Younger Girls' Mentor Tiffany DeOliveira '22

#### 2021-2022 Academic Year:

This year, AKOG is operating in-person, although with Covid restrictions put in place, it is still very different from the “normal” operations two years ago. In the period that my research

occurred, all Younger Girls mentors and mentees were required to meet outside, wear masks, and be screened for Covid every Saturday. Materials were brought down from our storage in Atwood Hall and set up outside in the entranceway of the building pictured in Figure 5. Mentors and mentees sat on blankets on the ground by age group. No food was not allowed to be prepared by mentors or eaten on campus, so non-perishable food was sent home with mentees. Without lunch time, AKOG ran from 10:30-1:30 for mentors and 11:00-1:00 for mentees. There were 25 Younger Girls mentors participating in the program, and 31 people in the Younger Girls age group including Steering Committee members. After a difficult semester of recruiting new girls, a total of 7 mentees were registered for the program, although not every girl attended each week.



Figure 5: Front entrance of Atwood Hall where AKOG occurred outside (Zirkel)

## **Who I Am in this Space**

During my research project, I was in my third year being involved at AKOG. Because undergraduate students can only participate in AKOG for a maximum of four years, I would consider myself a long-term member of the organization. Mentoring has been a large part of my college experience and I have made strong relationships with both mentors and mentees in the program. Additionally, as a member of the Steering Committee, I have an inside understanding of how AKOG is organized and led. Therefore, when it came time to choose my praxis site, I felt comfortable conducting research as an insider to the AKOG community. This semester, in addition to being a researcher, I acted as a leader and regular participant in AKOG.

In relation to the mentors in AKOG, I feel that I am both an insider and outsider. There are some mentors that I know well, and in and outside of AKOG, and there are also some mentors I have not gotten the chance to build relationships with at all. This is a result of many factors, but I think I can mostly tie it back to AKOG being virtual last year. Because we divided the mentors in half and met on alternating days, there are some mentors I never had an AKOG meeting with. It was generally difficult for anyone to connect with people remotely that they did not already know in-person, so my closest relationships in the program are with the older, long-term mentors. Additionally, some of the older mentors have shared classes with me, have become close friends of mine, and/or work with me on the Steering Committee. This dynamic is important to point out because the mentors I have not known well may not have felt as comfortable working with me or participating in my project this semester. Also, the newest mentors have only seen me in a leadership role as Curriculum Coordinator, which may be intimidating or off putting considering the perceived power I have in the program.

As the newest member of the Younger Girls Curriculum (YGC) Coordinators at the time that this research started, I was in an insider position to make changes on the topic I chose. I had an insider perspective about how the curriculum is designed in AKOG and of my group's goals and motivations. However, I still felt new to my role in the group and had not been involved as long as the others I work with. Our group dynamic has constantly fluctuated as we continue to work with each other. In general, I would describe my role in the group as the one who keeps us organized in terms of time, materials, and scheduling. I bring my organizational skills and past planning work to the space, while the others I work with bring their own unique skills and individual experiences as well.

Some other aspects of my identity and lived experiences are also important to note. As someone who has been involved in different types of youth work over the course of many years, I bring valuable and unique knowledge about community, leadership, and relationship building. My past experiences struggling and succeeding with building relationships with youth have brought me to ask how other mentors in AKOG feel in their roles. However, I must recognize that pieces of my identity (including but not limited to being cis-gender, white, a monolingual English speaker, and from a middle income household) affect my relationships with others and are not shared by every mentor in AKOG. Other mentors in AKOG may have different experiences in the program as a result of their identities (race, gender, etc.). While I try to remain aware of this, my identity and experiences limit me in my understanding of others. As much as I aim to think critically about identity, I am only able to truly understand my own experiences. Throughout my research, I have kept this in mind to avoid making assumptions that overlook or minimize others who are different from me. One way I have practiced this is by inviting

members of my research cohort and other members of AKOG to read and comment on my work throughout the entire process. By including others in the process, I hope that their perspectives have helped me see the full picture of the research.



Figure 6: AKOG 2021-2022 logo designed by Younger Girls' Mentor Tiffany DeOliveira '22

**Conceptual Framework: Who and What I Am Thinking With?**

As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in the meaning that individuals create for themselves and from their interactions with others. I draw on traditions that assume knowledge

and meaning making is deeply affected by context and the lived experiences that people bring as they interact with others. By focusing on the different ideas and experiences that mentors bring to and have during AKOG, I acknowledge that there is not one true reality for all mentors in the program. Reflecting on the traditional epistemological stances related to qualitative research, I most closely align with interpretivism / constructivism (terms used interchangeably by many). Sharan B. Merriam (2007) describes this approach as assuming that "... reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality," and rather, "there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (p. 8). Merriam writes, "Researchers do not 'find' knowledge, they construct it" (p. 9). I gravitate toward this approach to qualitative research because I think that all people experience the same situations and environments in different ways, especially when considering how identity and background influence their perspectives.

AKOG is an environment collaboratively constructed by the mentors, mentees, and leadership interacting to shape the reality of the program. I do not expect to find one common "truth" among AKOG mentors, and instead want to gather information on how their interactions with others influence what they think about AKOG, its curriculum, and themselves as mentors. I also acknowledge that my own interpretations of data do not and cannot paint a full picture of every mentor's reality. Despite aiming to make meaning with others, I am still interpreting data through the lenses of my own positionality and identity.

In order to ground myself and outsiders in my research, it is critical for me to define key assumptions, concepts, and lenses with which I have approached this project. The foundational ideas behind my project include:

1. Mentors in AKOG are the driving force behind the program;

2. The planned activities and themes (curricula) in AKOG have the biggest influence on mentors' experiences with the program; and
3. Strengthening their experiences in AKOG will improve the program as a whole.

In essence, the relationship that AKOG mentors have with the program and the mentees in the program defines what the program is and to what degree the program is satisfactory for all involved. I am focusing my project on the mentors' relationship with the curriculum activities and themes in AKOG as well as the relationships (between mentors and mentees, mentors and each other, mentors and the organization) that these activities and themes foster. To guide my understanding of relationships, I am choosing to think with Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT). I first came across RCT while reading about other research on mentoring that used this theory to guide their understanding of relationships. After reading about the history of RCT and how it has been used in the past, I decided that it could help me define relationships in AKOG.

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) was developed in the 1970s by a group of women psychologists working at the Stone Center at Wellesley College, including Jean Baker Miller, Judith V. Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Irene Stiver. It was initially developed as a feminist addition to the already existing Relational Theory to better understand women's psychological experiences. RCT is traditionally associated with therapy, guiding counselors to focus on the cultures and contexts that affect their patients' relationships. Today, RCT is used to better understand all human experiences while paying attention to differences of power and privilege, and has many applications beyond therapy including understanding diversity and marginalization, education, girls empowerment, and mentoring (Jordan, 2018).

A central tenet of RCT is that “people develop through and toward relationship, which occurs within and is influenced by a cultural context. Above all, RCT asserts that people need to be in connection in order to change, to open up, to shift, to transform, to heal, and to grow” (Jordan & Hartling, 2002, p. 9).

RCT introduces the idea of “growth-fostering relationships,” or relationships where growth occurs through mutual empowerment and mutual empathy. Growth-fostering relationships can exist in AKOG as the relationship between mentors and the Curriculum Coordinators / Steering Committee and the relationships between mentors and mentees. Forming healthy and empowering connections is a foundational part of AKOG and what it means to be a mentor. RCT describes “five good things” that characterize a growth-fostering relationship:

**1) Increased zest (vitality)** - In AKOG, this would be measured by my observations of energy and participation during activities, as well as what was said about enthusiasm and engagement during the debrief and in survey responses.

**2) Increased ability to take action (empowerment)** - In AKOG, this would be measured by people’s attendance in AKOG, people’s motivation to take on more roles in AKOG, and the amount of opinions or suggestions people share that show they are invested in the program’s betterment.

**3) Increased clarity (a clearer picture of one’s self, the other, and the relationship)** - In AKOG, this would be measured by people’s responses to questions about what AKOG is, why they joined, what their role as a mentor is, and how prepared they are to participate in AKOG.



**4) Increased sense of worth** - In AKOG, this would be measured by mentors' responses to questions such as “am I a valuable contributor to AKOG?” and “is my presence in AKOG valued?”

**5) A desire for more connection** - In AKOG, this would be measured by the retention rate for returning mentors and asking what factors encourage mentors to return and discourage mentors from returning to the program

Before discovering RCT, I was defining projects in terms of activities and themes that are both “supportive” and “fulfilling” for mentors. Originally, I wrote,

“...fulfilling curriculum leads mentors to feel like their time at AKOG is well spent. With fulfilling curricula, mentors will be excited to return to AKOG on a weekly basis.

Mentors will feel like valuable contributors to AKOG and that their presence in the program is purposeful and recognized. Supportive curriculum helps mentors with establishing meaningful relationships in AKOG. Supportive curriculum improves both opportunities and ease for mentors to make connections with the mentees in their group.

It also helps them feel valued as a member of their program by both mentees and peers.”

Many of the ideas I explained here (energy, purposeful presence, connections) are included in defining growth-fostering relationships. I will be using the “five good things” as the key concepts in my project in order to look at mentors relationships in and with AKOG, to measure if growth-fostering relationships exist in AKOG, and to think about the influence of the Curriculum Coordinators in helping build growth-fostering relationships.

Lastly, it is important for me to define what mentoring means in the context of AKOG. In my literature review section, I will talk about the lack of a clear definition of mentoring that

makes it difficult to distinguish relevant work on the topic. Using the framework of Phillip Dawson (2014), I will be outlining the key design elements that define mentoring in AKOG in the table below:

<b>Design Element</b>	<b>How it Exists in AKOG</b>
<p>1. Objectives: The Aims or Intentions of the Mentoring Model</p>	<p>The goals as outlined in the most recent version of the Constitution and Bylaws:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Help girls to recognize their own strength by providing them with a safe space to express and maintain their true voice.</li> <li>2. Expose girls to different life options by building a bridge between girls from Worcester and women from the Clark University community and beyond.</li> <li>3. Nurture the socio-emotional development of girls by supporting the self assurance that they naturally possess as preadolescents.</li> <li>4. Foster understanding by bringing together girls and women from diverse class, ethnic and racial backgrounds.</li> <li>5. Promote self-confidence, high self-esteem, and violence prevention methods through the inclusion of various activities, discussions and guest speakers.</li> </ol>
<p>2. Roles: A Statement of Who is Involved and Their Function</p>	<p>AKOG is made up of college-aged mentors, mentees ages 9-17, and leaders on the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee is made up of 6 different roles: Mentor Coordinators who serve as the president equivalent for the organization and handle administrative matters; Younger Girls Curriculum Coordinators who plan and facilitate the activities in the younger girls group every Saturday; Older Girls Curriculum Coordinators who plan and facilitate the activities in the older girls group every Saturday; Treasurer who maintains the monetary budget; Grants and Funding Coordinator who finds and applies to monetary grants for the program; and Marketing and Outreach who recruit mentees and maintain contact with their families.</p>
<p>3. Cardinality: The Number of Each Sort of Role Involved in a Mentoring Relationship</p>	<p>Mentoring relationships occur in four small age groups. There are 5-7 mentors per group. In the past, there has been an almost equal number of mentees in each group. This year, two age groups had 0 mentees in their group, while the other two groups had 2-6 mentees.</p>

Design Element	How it Exists in AKOG
4. Tie Strength: The Intended Closeness of the Mentoring Relationship	Relationships between mentees and mentors in AKOG are intended to be close, personal, and relaxed.
5. Relative Seniority: The Comparative Experience, Expertise, or Status of Participants	Mentors are all college students, and have “seniority” over the mentees in terms of having different school and life experiences.
6. Time: The Length of a Mentoring Relationship, Regularly of Contact, and Quantity of Contact	AKOG mentors and mentees are expected to see each other once a week during the Saturday meetings from 11:00am-1:00pm. They are not expected to spend time together outside of these two hours a week, although it is possible that they can run into each other in the community outside of the program hours. Mentoring relationships last no longer than four years, as mentors are only able to be a part of AKOG during their undergraduate years at Clark University.
7. Selection: How Mentors and Mentees Are Chosen	Mentees are recruited by the Steering Committee’s Marketing and Outreach members. They give presentations in local schools and put up fliers in the local community. Any girl <sup>1</sup> in the area from the age of 9-17 is invited to come to AKOG as a mentee. Mentors are recruited from Clark University’s campus. They must send in a written application and undergo group interviews, which are evaluated by the Steering Committee. Mentors typically have past experiences working with kids, have positive energy and attitudes, and possess other admirable qualities that make them a good fit for the program.
8. Matching: How Mentoring Relationships are Composed	Mentors and mentees are matched simply by their age and age preferences. Mentors specify which age group they would prefer to work with, and they are divided into groups in the most even way possible.
9. Activities: Actions That Mentors and Mentees Can Perform During Their Relationship	Activities at AKOG are designed by the Younger Girls Curriculum Coordinators, as discussed throughout this paper. Activities at AKOG range from a variety of different things, including crafts, games, discussions, and personal reflections. The activities at AKOG generally aim to help mentors and mentees build positive relationships with each other and their own selves.

<sup>1</sup> Gender identity in AKOG is a topic that leaders and mentors are currently discussing, and language in AKOG is changing to be more inclusive. While the program uses the word “girl” in its name and description, AKOG aims to welcome female, trans-femme, nonbinary, and gender queer people to the space.

Design Element	How it Exists in AKOG
10. Resources and Tools: Technological or Other Artifacts Available to Assist Mentors and Mentees	Resources at AKOG include mostly arts and crafts materials, such as paper, markers, and paints. AKOG has two storage spaces, one in Atwood Hall and one in Johnson Sanford Hall, where all the materials are stored. Mentors and mentees can use any available resources in these spaces, although typically the Younger Girls Curriculum Coordinators will designate what materials they should be using each week.
11. Role of Technology: The Relative Importance of Technology to the Relationship	Technology at AKOG is mostly used for communication outside of meeting times. The Marketing and Outreach team sends out text messages and posts on social media to remind mentees about the upcoming programming. During in person AKOG meetings, using technology including personal phones and laptops is discouraged. Mentees and mentors are expected to be present and spending time together free of devices. Still, the Steering Committee may use technology to play music or watch a movie occasionally. During remote AKOG, technology took on a much bigger role than usual as all meetings occurred virtually.
12. Training: How Necessary Understandings and Skills for Mentoring Will Be Developed in Participants	Training for mentors occurs once a year at the beginning of the first semester. In this training, mentors learn about mandated reporting and discuss common biases and stereotypes they may hold about the mentees. Mentors generally learn about interacting with the mentees through experience at Saturday meetings.
13. Rewards: What Participants Will Receive to Compensate for their Efforts	Rewards at AKOG are mostly intrinsic. Mentors and mentees sign up to learn more about each other and themselves. Mentors do not get paid or receive any type of academic credit for participating.
14. Policy: A Set and Rules and Guidelines on Issues Such as Privacy or the Use of Technology	Mentors and mentees are not allowed to contact each other through social media or other means of personal communication. Another policy that exists is the Rule of Three, which encourages mentors to never be left alone with one mentee and to travel in groups of three if leaving the main meeting space.

Design Element	How it Exists in AKOG
15. Monitoring: What Oversight Will Be Performed, What Actions Will Be Taken Under What Circumstances, and by Whom	If a mentor takes notice of any signs of an unsafe environment for the mentees, they are required to report it to a member of the Steering Committee who is then required to report it to the organization's faculty advisor. The faculty advisor then works with the university and local school district to determine if or what further actions are necessary.
16. Termination: How Relationships are Ended	Typically, relationships in AKOG are terminated when mentors graduate and move on from the program. Mentors and mentees also have the option to stop returning to AKOG at their own discretion and if their involvement in the program is not working out for them personally.

Table 1: Defining Mentoring in AKOG using Dawson's Framework

This table can be used as a reference for readers to understand what mentoring means at AKOG. Mentoring at AKOG certainly looks different than mentoring in other programs, so it is important to provide the context to understand how my research can relate to others' research on the topic.

### **Literature Review: What Has Already Been Said**

My praxis project evaluates mentors' experiences in AKOG related to the work of the Younger Girls Curriculum (YGC) Coordinators in order to find how the two can best align. The themes and activities of each Saturday have a large influence on mentors' relationships with their mentees, each other, and the program as a whole. Therefore, the role of the YGC Coordinators has a large impact on mentors' experiences in the program. For my literature review, I explore work related to mentoring programs like AKOG. First, I discuss the work of others who talk about defining mentoring, and what the term mentoring means in the literature. Then, I look at

examples of programs similar to my site and of similar program evaluations, and talk about the gaps in what we know.

Across the literature, the definition of mentoring is inconsistent and covers many different types of relationships that are not necessarily apparent in AKOG. Maryann Jacobi (1991) addresses this in her review of undergraduate mentoring literature when she says, “The literature offers numerous definitions, some of which conflict, so that empirical research about mentoring subsumes several distinct kinds of interpersonal relationships” (p. 505). In her work, she finds that mentoring means different things to people in different fields, including psychology, business, and academic settings. Jacobi recognizes that mentoring programs are so diverse that they may not share much in common at all other than a common goal of helping others succeed. In doing this, she expresses concern that a lack of a common definition of mentoring makes research on the subject impossible. Still, she points out that research including the term “mentor” as a keyword in the ERIC database increased from 10 references in 1978 to 95 references in 1998 (Jacobi, 1991). Today, when I did a quick search in the library database, almost 320,000 results came up in just a few seconds. At the time she wrote, Jacobi was correct in saying that definitions of mentoring were inconsistent and plentiful. Today, with the inclusion of so many more researchers, definitions of mentoring are only more diverse.

In a more recent article, *Beyond a Definition: Toward a Framework for Designing and Specifying Mentoring Models*, Phillip Dawson (2014) also comments on the lack of a unifying definition of mentoring over the past three decades of research. Dawson points out that Jacobi counted 15 definitions of mentoring in 1991 and by 2007 there were more than 50. He argues that in addition to the lack of a common definition of mentoring, research rarely includes

operational definitions that help differentiate what mentoring means in practice. Because of this, it is difficult for research on mentoring to be useful to anyone if it is not specific on what mentoring is in context. Instead of adding more definitions to find the similarities across mentoring, Dawson lays out a 16 step framework for specifying the differences in mentoring models. The 16 design elements, or variables, represent an opportunity for choice in the design of a mentoring model. They include: objectives, roles, cardinality, tie strength, relative seniority, time, selection, matching, activities, resources and tools, role of technology, training, rewards, policy, monitoring, and termination. Dawson's framework is useful in helping me define what AKOG is and how I am defining mentoring throughout my research.

Susan Gershenfeld's research on undergraduate mentoring programs (2014) also refers to Jacobi's foundational work and subscribes to the idea that a single definition or guiding theory of mentoring is inappropriate considering the range of program goals and outcomes. Her review considers undergraduate students as mentors or mentees. She uses multiple databases and the keywords "mentoring AND university and college" to compare studies published about mentoring programs since January 2008. Much of her findings and discussions relate to what previous researchers, including Jacobi and Dawson, have said about the function of mentoring differing across programs. Similar to Dawson, she agrees that future research on mentoring must specify key operational features of the program. Her research, however, introduces a new idea to the literature on mentoring that social validity, whereby the value of a program is determined by participant perceptions, should be valued more. She cites Jacobi (1991) who says that including perceptions of mentees and mentors is a methodological limitation in research. Gershenfeld (2014) disagrees, and says that subjective participant views are not a methodological flaw, but

instead help outsiders understand “the relevance of the mentoring process on those who matter most” (p. 387). She argues for social validity to be integrated with other measures in order to improve research on mentoring and get a fuller picture of mentoring in practice.

I agree with Gershenfeld’s stance, and think the perspectives of mentors in AKOG are one of the most important pieces to defining the program. As AKOG is an undergraduate mentoring program, mentors in the organization cycle in and out every year. In contrast, our constitutional bylaws and mission statements have stayed the same over the course of many years. They are often not referred to explicitly, and in my opinion, experiences in AKOG change each year with new mentors and leaders in the program. What the program goals are and how we work to accomplish them is hugely impacted by the mentors involved in the program. This is why I will be including and focusing on mentors’ experiences and how they work to define the program. It is also important to note that the non-specific range of definitions of mentoring that exist across the literature makes it difficult for me to find many examples similar to AKOG and relevant to my research project. Below, I discuss some examples of research similar to mine and what I got out of reading this work.

One example of previous research that relates to my project is the *Evaluation of the YMI Cornerstone Mentoring Program: Strengthening the Mentoring Experience* (MacFarlane & Turner, 2018). This evaluation specifically focuses on mentor experiences, based on conducting surveys and interviews just like I have done. The main idea behind this evaluation is that mentoring programs should strengthen mentor engagement so that they in turn can maximize their support for youth. They write, “mentors are the driving force of the program and of the program's capacity to ultimately influence the intended youth outcomes” (p.2). This is exactly



the same mindset I have behind my project, so this resource has been extremely helpful in guiding my thinking. The mentoring program in question, the Young Men's Initiative Cornerstone Mentoring Program, is also a group mentoring program and centers on a variety of activities like AKOG. In looking at mentor experiences, the researchers ask questions like Why do mentors participate?; Why do they stay or leave?; How engaged are they with the program?; and What additional support do they need? All of these questions are very similar to mine and reveal valuable insights into what I might find in AKOG. MacFarlane & Turner found that mentors in the YMI Cornerstone Mentoring program struggle with clarifying their role as a mentor, striking a balance between program structure and freedom, and having strong resources to help them connect with their mentees. Reading this evaluation influenced me to ask if similar patterns exist in AKOG so that I can make targeted recommendations moving forward.

Another example of a program evaluation that focuses on the mentors' experiences is *A Qualitative Investigation of Mentor Experiences in a Service Learning Course* by Kira Hudson Banks (2010). Banks argues that because mentoring has benefits specific to mentors, "the mentors are worthy of investigation in their own right" (p. 77). The mentoring program in the study is a one-on-one initiative focused on encouraging middle-school girls to participate in math and science. Although the function of this program is very different from AKOG, some key similarities include being all female-identifying programs and having a majority of white mentors with a diverse makeup of mentees. This study analyzed interviews and reflections from mentors centered on assessment of their strategies for communicating with their mentees, their success and challenges, and program feedback. Banks found several themes among responses that are relevant to my research as well. First, despite being asked to reflect on how the group's

differences in racial identities and cultures might affect intergroup interactions, most White mentors avoided answering this question. This finding suggests that the White mentors were naive about racial issues and cultural dynamics that influenced their relationships in the program. Similar patterns might be found in AKOG, and I aimed to look into how mentors talk about racial and cultural differences as a factor in their relationships. Additionally, many mentors in the program Banks studied discussed the importance of the all-girl experience. They felt more comfortable and free to be themselves with their mentees, which in turn helped them feel more confident being a part of the program. This finding made me wonder what the mentors in AKOG think the value of our program being an all-girls experience is and how it affects their relationships in the program.

An example that specifically looks into a female-aligned mentoring program comes from Spencer and Liang's "*She Gives Me a Break from the World*": *Formal Youth Mentoring Relationships Between Adolescent Girls and Adult Women* (2009). This study is focused on examining what relational processes exist in adolescent girls' relationships with female mentors from the perspective of the participants. Additionally, because this is a female-aligned program, the study looks into how gender shapes the youth mentoring experience. While I did not intend to explicitly focus on gender in my research, being a female-aligned program makes it a factor I considered in analyzing the relationships at AKOG. The findings from Spencer and Liang's study suggest that girls may be more likely to explicitly ask for emotional support in mentoring relationships, and that their relationships should focus more on fostering connectedness than developing autonomy. Emotional connectedness is interrelated to collaboration (during the development of new skills) and companionship (while engaging in fun social activities). The

participants identify these three factors as the reason their relationships are beneficial and growth-fostering for them. This study, however, focuses on a one-on-one approach to mentoring, and I wonder if these same factors exist in a group mentoring setting. My research can help us better understand the important factors for girls building relationships in group settings.

Reading this related research on mentoring has helped me design my project around what is already known and what is missing in the literature. One key takeaway, for me, includes the importance of defining what mentoring means in the context of specific programs. I have learned that the style of mentoring in AKOG is seemingly pretty unique and hard to compare to other programs. This review has also helped me learn what previous researchers have discovered about mentors' experiences related to gender and race. While these factors are not the main focus of my research, I was interested in paying attention to how they showed up in my data.

### **Methodology and Data Collection Methods**

#### **→ Methodology**

In this project, I used ethnographic and practitioner inquiry methods. Ethnography has traditionally been used in the field of anthropology to study the culture, beliefs, and behavior of people. It presents “a sociocultural interpretation of the data” and “is not defined by how data is collected, but rather by the lens through which the data are interpreted” (Merriam, 2002, p. 9). I have used ethnography and ethnographic methods of data collection such as observations and interviews to build a clearer idea of the beliefs of AKOG's mentors and the culture of the organization. Practitioner inquiry involves investigating a question through personal lenses as a practitioner or researcher. Sharon M. Ravitch (2014) explains why a researcher may use practitioner inquiry in the following quote:

Practitioner research is undertaken by practitioners who seek to improve our own practice, and perhaps that of our colleagues, through the purposeful and critical examination of and reflection on aspects of our work, of the experiences of our colleagues and constituencies, and of institutional cultures, policies, and practices that shape these realities (6).

Reading this, I am struck by the connection between how I feel about my research in AKOG and how Ravitch describes it. As I conducted my research, I was constantly redesigning my processes and my thinking about AKOG, my own role in the club, and the experiences of the mentors. With this research, I hoped to use my evaluative and reflective techniques to create impactful change for myself, others in the organization, and the future leaders. I used reflective practices throughout my project for me and the mentors to develop a wider sense of knowledge about AKOG. Mentors regularly shared reflections with me, and I reflected on the responses in the process of data collection. Practitioner inquiry and ethnography both guided the methods I used to collect data, and how I worked with and interpreted my data.

→ **Data Collection Methods**

I collected data through surveys, interviews, and written observations. Participants were able to choose which data collection methods, if any, they consented to and were able to participate as much or as little as they wanted. Therefore, some data collection methods gathered more participants and data than others, especially as time progressed. Below I will explain my procedures and reasoning for each method.

**Surveys:** I conducted surveys at the start and end of the semester to observe change in mentors' responses. This initial survey gathered demographic information on mentors as well as

their general thoughts about being involved as an AKOG mentor. Responses at the beginning and end of the semester were compared to see if mentors' relationships in and with AKOG changed significantly over the semester. I also surveyed mentors briefly every week at the end of AKOG to gauge responses to that day's specific curriculum. These surveys were anonymous. I used these survey responses to determine specific highlights or struggles that mentors faced while implementing curriculum, as well as to record trends in their energy levels, preparation, and experience building stronger relationships each week.

**Interviews:** I conducted two interviews at the end of the semester and asked for expanded responses to questions like the ones included in the initial survey. One younger girls' mentor and one Younger Girls Curriculum (YGC) Coordinator were interviewed. Interviews are an important method of data collection that allows participants to provide longer and more thoughtful answers about their experiences. I audiotaped these interviews, transcribed them, and coded them for patterns, which is further explained in my Data Analysis Approach.

**Written observations / Field notes:** I wrote up notes during and after AKOG each Saturday about mentors' participation and my own experiences with the curriculum. I also recorded observations and personal reflections about the weekly Curriculum Coordinator meetings to document how we planned for AKOG over the semester. These observations captured what I noticed surrounding energy and engagement, and have helped determine what activities were the most successful in AKOG. Written observations capture what is left out in other data collection methods, most notably my own perspective on the curriculum and the YGC planning meetings.

Table 2 summarizes each method of data collection I used:

Data Collection	Description	Rationale	Challenges/Limitations
Surveys	A longer survey was sent out at the start and end of the semester and a brief survey was sent out weekly after AKOG.	Surveys are a quick and accessible way for mentors to respond about the day. The surveys gathered data on how mentors react to the activities and themes of the day and provided me with information that I did not observe.	Not all of the participants who consented to surveys filled them out each week. As time progressed, I collected less and less responses. Taking surveys at the end of AKOG can be difficult for mentors who want to leave and not spend additional time in the space.
Interviews	Interviews occurred with one mentor and one member of the YGC Coordinator Team at the end of the semester.	Interviews allow for more in depth responses about personal experiences and stories.	Finding time to conduct interviews was a challenge for both me and my participants. Some people who I asked to interview never got back to me about scheduling a time. Additionally, transcribing and coding interviews took me a lot more time than other data collection methods.
Written Observations and Field Notes	Field notes were taken during and after AKOG and YGC planning meetings.	Field notes helped me capture what I saw and experienced this semester. They helped me bring in data from my own perspective.	It was much more difficult than I anticipated to record notes at the time that I am involved and participating in AKOG. I usually recorded notes directly after each meeting, but it is likely that I forgot or missed things after observing them.

Table 2: Data Collection Rationale and Challenges

As the table explains, there were different reasons I chose each method of data collection and different challenges I faced with each. It is important to point out the limitations I faced

because they were difficult to anticipate and impacted what I was able to gather. Still, I managed to collect a lot of data over the course of the semester that needed to be sifted and sorted through. Next, I will explain the process of organizing my data in order to make sense of it all.

### → **Data Analysis Approach**

Throughout and after the completion of my data collection process, I worked to organize and make sense of what I had. With a semester's worth of data, it's important to understand why some data made it into my analysis, and why some did not. In order to reduce my data into the usable pieces included in this project, I sorted through the surveys and reflections each week and my interviews after transcribing them for moments related to the key ideas of my research questions. For my first research question, I looked for what mentors say about their purpose, motivation, and role in the program. I looked at what they said about feeling valued and what being a part of AKOG means to them. For my second question, I looked for evidence of growth-fostering relationships as outlined in my conceptual framework. For my last question, I looked for trends in how the Curriculum Coordinators felt, trends in mentors' experiences in AKOG, and things that we can focus on improving. Any moments that stood out to me as being related to my questions I would highlight and comment on with short phrases about what I thought it related to. For example, the comments left on my first personal reflection are pictured in Figure 7. Repeated comments, or codes, started to appear, such as being related to energy, uncertainty, Covid, and organization.

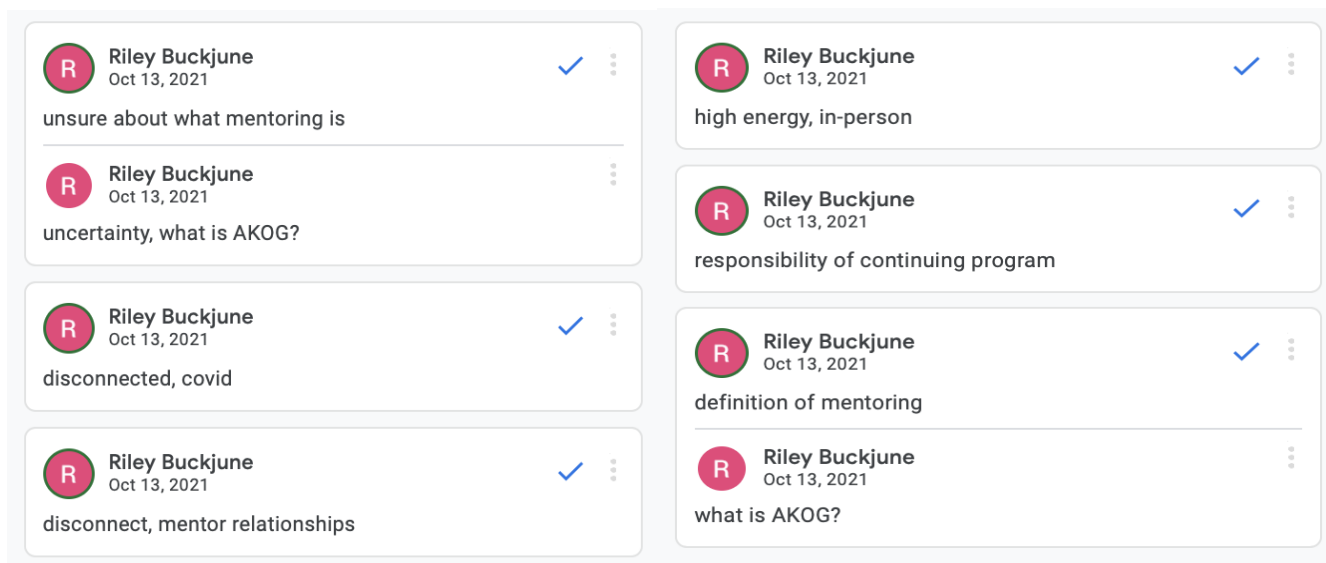


Figure 7: Comments on my personal reflection from 9/8/21

Those specific moments that felt valuable to my research were then revisited after the data collection was completed. All of the highlighted moments and my codes about them were sorted into a data inventory table that made it easier for me to see all the data together and how they related. Themes started to emerge based on the story my codes were telling. Table 3 outlines some of the repeated codes I used and what themes they eventually helped me explain in my data analysis.










CODES		THEMES
<b>Covid Pandemic Mentee to mentor ratio Zoom AKOG Disconnected</b>		<b>Relationships and the Pandemic</b>
<b>Bubbles Closeness Relationships</b>		<b>Relationship Barriers</b>
<b>Energy Stress Clarity More connection Attendance Preparation</b>		<b>5 Good Things of Relational Cultural Theory</b>
<b>Stress Burnout Energy Responsibility Time Motivation</b>		<b>Stress and Burnout</b>
<b>Organization Preparation Winging it Not planning ahead Not designating roles</b>		<b>Disorganization</b>
<b>Working together Communication Attendance</b>		<b>Lack of Teamwork</b>
<b>Teamwork Balance Structure Free time</b>		<b>Successes of the YGC Team</b>

Table 3: Codes and Their Related Themes

This table shows how repeated codes were grouped together to write up my findings. I grouped codes together based on how I thought they told an organized story, but anyone could have grouped them differently. For example, codes about stress and burnout definitely do relate to feeling disorganized or how the pandemic affected our relationships, but I felt it was important to write up this section separately in order to fully explain my data.

→ **My Participants**

As I have previously mentioned, only 9 out of 31 eligible mentors involved with the younger girls group consented to participate in my project. I spoke to the whole group about my project twice, gave everyone a printed copy of my consent forms, and sent out two emails inviting them to join. I am not entirely sure why I struggled to recruit more mentors, but I respect everyone's individual decision to choose to be involved or not. Two other research projects were also being conducted with the mentors at AKOG during this semester, so that could have had an effect on how many people felt that they could participate.

Regardless, I want to be clear that the small number of mentors I collected data from cannot possibly represent all the mentors in the younger girls group at AKOG. All the claims I will make from my data are based off of the data I was able to collect and may not accurately represent the people who did not consent to my research. It is also important to note that not every mentor who gave me consent participated in my project outside of the observations and field notes I conducted. My data analysis aims to interpret the whole picture of mentoring in AKOG as best as I could based only on the mentors who chose to participate. Still, mentors at AKOG are unique individuals whose race, ethnicity, gender, and other identity factors may influence their experiences in the program on an individual level. Additionally, the data collected

represents one single semester participating in AKOG. As I have already described, this particular semester in AKOG represented a difficult transition back to in person programming. I encourage my readers to interpret my findings through these parameters.

**Findings: What I Learned From My Data**

My data analysis section will be divided by each research question I asked and its supporting data. First, I will talk about how mentors describe their relationships and experiences in AKOG. Then, I will evaluate the five good things related to Relational Cultural Theory and their presence in the organization. Finally, I will make connections between relationships and the curriculum in AKOG, talking about the successes and difficulties the YGC team faced and what activities made relationship building successful or difficult for us.

Before diving into my interpretations of the data, I will provide more background into the schedule and activities that occurred throughout AKOG this semester. Table 4 displays each theme and the accompanying activities that the YGC team organized and facilitated. If more explanation is needed about a particular activity (and how it was done), the hyperlinks will bring you to the references we used when planning. This table can be used as a reference throughout this data section and to see what activities in AKOG we participated in over time.

Date	Theme	Activities We Did
10/16/21	Welcome to AKOG Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Create name tags and decorate our journals</li> <li>● Brainstorm “Community Guidelines”</li> <li>● <a href="#">“This or That” debate game (pick a side and defend it)</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Dancing in a circle game</a></li> <li>● Chalk, hula hoops, and bubbles</li> </ul>

10/23/21	Let Your Creativity Shine Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Friendship bracelet making</li> <li>● Watercolor self-portraits</li> <li>● <a href="#">DIY stickers</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Rock Paper Scissors race</a></li> </ul>
10/30/21	Meeting canceled for younger girls group	N/A
11/6/21	Game Day (changed last minute from Fall Day)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Board games</li> <li>● <a href="#">Scattergories</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Fill in the blank game</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Telestrations drawing game</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Medusa eye contact circle game</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Wink detective circle game</a></li> </ul>
11/13/21	STEM Day	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Paper chain contest</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Egg drop</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Baking soda volcanoes</a></li> </ul>
11/20/21	Shero Day (changed last minute into a craft day)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Card making</li> <li>● <a href="#">Fleece hat making</a></li> </ul>
12/4/21	Winter Fest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Paper snowflakes</li> <li>● <a href="#">Fake snow</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Marshmallow Igloos</a></li> </ul>

Table 4: Overview of AKOG Themes and Activities

→ **QUESTION 1:** How do the Younger Girls mentors describe their relationships in AKOG?

→ **Relationships and the Pandemic: “After Covid, it was difficult to get the relationship that we had back”**

My first research question asks how mentors describe their relationships in AKOG.

Originally, I expected that investigating this question would result in data related to how the mentors feel about the mentees, other mentors, and the organization in general. I was hoping responses would reveal more about the strength of relationships in AKOG and what controllable

factors (i.e. curriculum themes and activities) influence them. However, as I somehow failed to anticipate, an overwhelming amount of the data I collected described relationships in AKOG in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. While this is not what I originally expected, this data still reveals a lot of interesting information about what mentors are missing in their relationships at AKOG post-pandemic. The changes that the pandemic has made on the program are inseparable from the experiences mentors have in the program.

For some mentors, remote programming is all that they knew of before this semester. When asked at the start of the semester how their time with AKOG could be improved, one mentor writes, “I haven't experienced much in person and kinda blocked out last year.” This language of “blocking out” is interesting to me because it suggests that one can skip over and forget all that happened in AKOG during the remote year. My findings, however, suggest that the opposite is true. Remote programming harmed the program and the relationships that existed in it before the pandemic, and mentors are still struggling to recover. That is not to say, however, that mentors may not wish to block out or forget their time doing remote programming. As one mentor describes it, “During the pandemic. I think I mostly left feeling burnt out and feeling like it was an obligation...I did appreciate the chatting but like I didn't get a lot out of it.”

When asked if they had considered not returning to AKOG this year, one YGC Coordinator stated in an interview “I've considered it briefly... I just don't know if I would have been able to handle another year of remote programming. It felt so much less rewarding and I felt so much less connected to the girls and the mentors.” Remote programming during Fall of 2020 and Spring 2021 is a factor no one could have changed or controlled. Still, it has had lasting

impacts on the program in terms of attendance, structure, and community that mentors reference constantly throughout my data.

In every weekly reflection survey sent out this semester, there was always at least one response talking about how the lack of mentees negatively impacted their ability to build relationships. Responses included statements like “We just didn't have any girls :( which is why there was no success building relationships,” “The lack of mentees was difficult for me,” and “It was hard to build relationships with the girls where there were so many mentors and so few girls.” The lack of mentees in attendance directly correlates to the changes in the program and the world as a whole since the last time AKOG occurred in person.

While we could not control the pandemic's effects on the program, the changes that it has brought is one of the greatest factors hurting the mentors' involvement in the program. When asked how they feel after a typical day in AKOG, one mentor replied with “Can I answer in three parts?.” From this response alone, there is a clear division in experiences between AKOG before the pandemic, during the pandemic, and after the pandemic. It appears that AKOG has kept moving over the past three years while the mentors and mentees that make up the community feel stagnant in their relationships. For example, one mentor describes in an interview

“After Covid, it was difficult to get the relationship that we had back...I know these girls from being with them in the 10 year olds, but since Covid I didn't really get to transition with them from 10 to 12. They just kind of went from being younger girls in the 10 year olds to now being the oldest in the younger girls. And I'm not really sure if that has shaped they're...I don't know. I don't want to say they're not as engaged and not as interested but they're a little more closed off.”

Time continued to pass while mentors and mentees in AKOG continued to feel more and more separated from one another. This mentor describes missing out on the time when her mentees

transitioned into being the oldest girls in the younger girls program. Now that they are older, this time feels lost and it has been difficult to reconnect with them as if it wasn't.

From my surveys and interviews, it appears that mentors are eager to talk about the disconnect that the pandemic has caused them to feel in the program. All the responses that I collected about the pandemic's influence were unprompted and unanticipated. Mentors feel that their relationships in the program are suffering the most as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, remote programming, and its effects.

**Claim:** Mentors relationships with the mentees, each other, and the club have been most negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic

→ **Relationship Barriers: "They're kind of in their little bubble"**

Despite all the negative effects of the pandemic, there was still some evidence that mentors feel the community at AKOG can be strong and supportive. For example, one mentor shares that a highlight of the semester was "the fact that mentors were all there to support one another and still always show up even for girls outside of our age group because it's ultimately about them and showing them that we are there for them!." Even when they had no mentees to support or participate in activities with, mentors still attended AKOG and helped one another feel included in the space. One way they did this was by combining age groups and working as one or two large groups when there were not many mentees. Another mentor writes, "The big group activities were super fun and allowed me to see all the mentors and interact with everyone." Working as one large group seems to have helped build relationships amongst mentors.

When asked about how separating the different age groups in AKOG affects relationship building, one mentor says “It's nice to have a small group to really build closer relationships to. And I've gotten close relationships with mentors that I didn't know from previous years. But then, it is kind of isolating when I don't really know a lot of the mentors in the other age groups because we don't really ever have time to interact with each other.” This response suggests that this mentor might benefit from having more whole group interactions and chances to build relationships with participants outside her age group. She appreciates having a small group to get close with, but may feel alone when those people aren't present. This same mentor describes small social circles in AKOG, saying that new mentees coming to AKOG are usually friends of long term mentees and “they're kind of in their little bubble,” which makes it difficult to get to know them. She also describes feeling like it can be difficult “kind of forcing [her]self into that bubble” when other mentors already have stronger relationships with the mentees than she does.

This mentor goes on to say, “I do feel like I've kind of stuck to the people I met in the beginning [of AKOG] and interact the most with them.” While this shows evidence of strong, long-term relationships, it also suggests that mentors in AKOG have a hard time branching out and getting to know new people. This is also apparent in my observations of AKOG, where even when mentors are encouraged to work with other age groups, most people tend to sit, pair up, and talk to the same people each week.

**Claim:** Social circles in AKOG are small, and participating in AKOG as one large group could help break down relationship barriers.



→ **QUESTION 2:** What evidence do AKOG members provide of growth-fostering relationships in AKOG?

This question aims to evaluate the presence of growth-fostering relationships in AKOG, which if you refer back to my conceptual framework, is outlined by Relational Cultural Theory. Growth-fostering relationships show mutual growth, empowerment, and empathy for all people involved. The core ideas are that relationships should support people to change as well as support them through change. I think it is important to consider the presence of growth-fostering relationships in AKOG because what defines them aligns with the primary missions of the organization. In this section, I will evaluate the five characteristics of growth-fostering relationships and their presence in AKOG this semester.

→ **Increased Zest**

Zest at AKOG was measured by my observations of energy as well as mentors' responses to the weekly debriefing survey describing their energy levels. Below are the graphs of mentors' responses to ranking their energy at AKOG each week:

On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning "my energy level was extremely low" and 4 meaning "my energy level was extremely high") rate how much energy you had during AKOG today.

5 responses

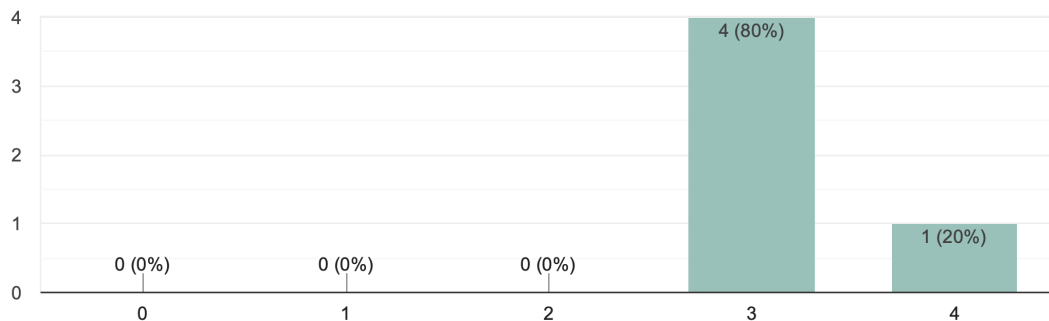


Figure 8: Responses From Week Two 10/23

On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning "my energy level was extremely low" and 4 meaning "my energy level was extremely high") rate how much energy you had during AKOG today.

6 responses

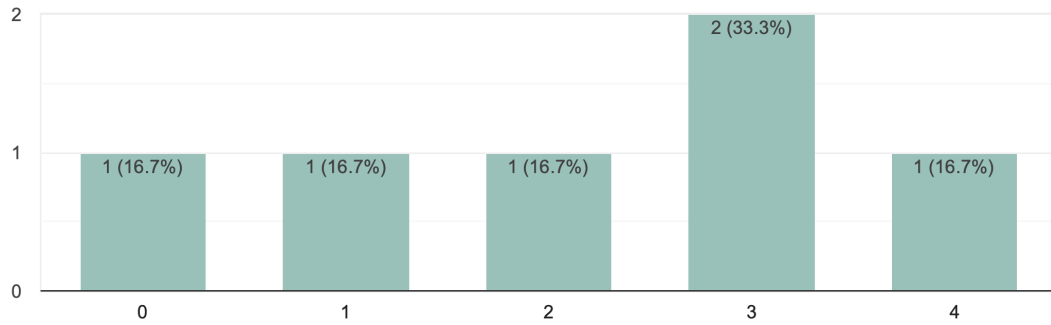


Figure 9: Responses From Week Four 11/6

On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning "my energy level was extremely low" and 4 meaning "my energy level was extremely high") rate how much energy you had during AKOG today.

4 responses

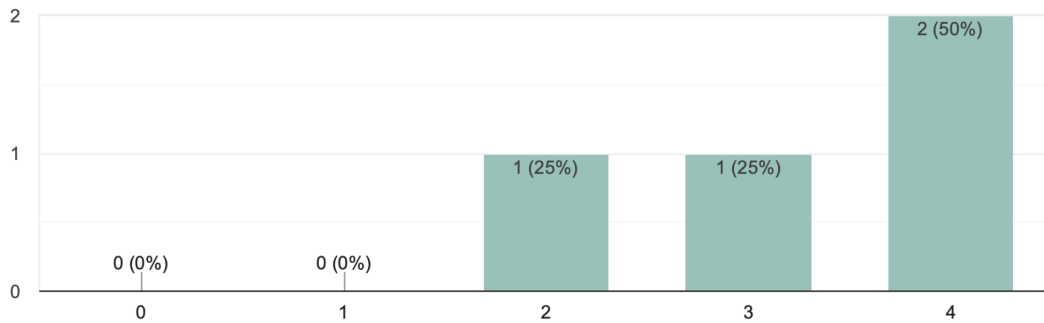


Figure 10: Responses From Week Five 11/13

On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning "my energy level was extremely low" and 4 meaning "my energy level was extremely high") rate how much energy you had during AKOG today.

4 responses

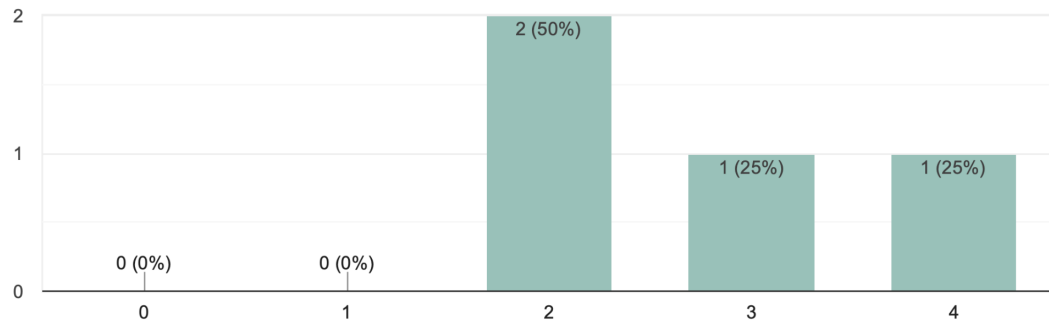


Figure 11: Responses From Week Six 11/20

On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning "my energy level was extremely low" and 4 meaning "my energy level was extremely high") rate how much energy you had during AKOG today.

2 responses

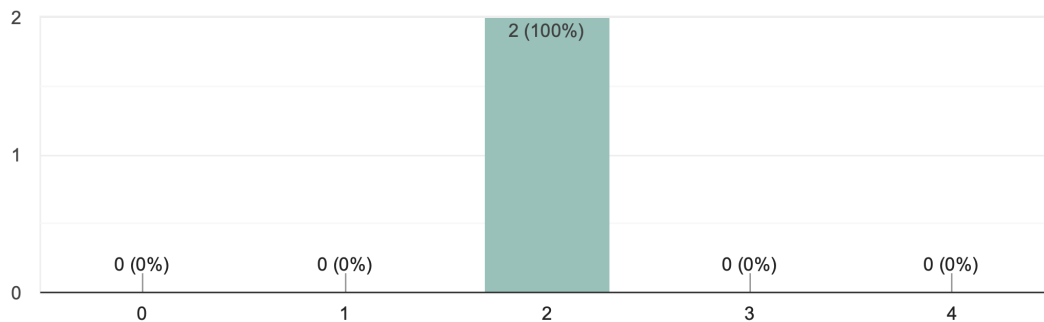


Figure 12: Responses From Week Seven 12/4

These graphs show a visual of energy levels at AKOG over time. During week two, mentors generally ranked their energy high, choosing only 3 and 4 to represent their energy. In

my reflections from this week I wrote, “Everyone answered with either a 3 or 4 for their energy level at AKOG. The activities were very laid back, so I was sort of surprised by these answers. I thought that more people would have had low energy because we weren’t moving around or doing fast paced things.” At this point, I started to wonder in what ways energy manifests in ways that are not physical. Since we don’t often do a lot of active activities in AKOG, energy may not be observable in the way that I originally thought. One person’s high energy may look the same as another person’s low energy to an observer. From these responses, I wonder what else high energy can correlate to if not physical movement.

Only one meeting after these rankings, mentors' responses about their energy are distributed across the whole graph from 0-4. This made me wonder what large differences there were between these two weeks. First, I asked myself if the difference in activities has an effect. Week two we had rotating stations of creative activities, while week four we had rotating stations of different games. Since the activities were structured very similarly, and since rotating groups is a structure we use often in AKOG, I don’t think that I can link people’s low energy to that. The content of the activities (crafts versus games) could have had an effect on people's energy levels, but I would not expect it to be that different. While I cannot draw any specific conclusions about how the activities affected energy this week, one other noticing stood out to me.

From my observations, I wrote, “I noticed that the same respondent who said they did not feel prepared whatsoever also ranked a 0 for their energy level. I really relate to this and wonder if a pattern between preparation and energy might exist.” I will talk about preparation from my own perspective later in this section, but this one connection stood out to me as a possible explanation for when mentors' energy is low. Although most responses rank their energy

at a 3 or 4 over the course of the semester, the last four surveys have at least one mentor who ranks their energy at a neutral 2. The neutral rankings stand out to me because they show that, for some mentors, energy levels at AKOG were neither high nor low. This makes me wonder if the same mentors that ranked their energy at a 2 one week did so again the next, or if different mentors all felt neutral energy levels at different times. The survey graphs do not show evidence of energy at AKOG increasing over time.

The graphs also serve to show the change over time in my research participants' involvement. Over the course of the semester, engagement in my project declined significantly as less people responded to the weekly surveys. A total of 9 people signed consent forms, 7 filled out the initial survey, then 5, 6, 4, and 2 people filled the weekly surveys out after AKOG. 4 people filled out the end of semester survey after multiple reminders to do so. While I cannot be sure as to why some participants stopped responding each week, I wonder if the drop in participation can be linked to energy at AKOG. I wonder, if people had high energy at AKOG, would they feel more compelled to talk about it in the survey? Or similarly, if people had low energy at AKOG, would they have enough energy at the end of the day to fill out a survey? I do not know why participation in my project decreased over time, but I believe that a connection could be drawn between lower energy at AKOG and a decreasing desire to participate in my project. Regardless of if people's energy was or was not connected to participation in my research, this noticing does not show evidence of energy at AKOG increasing over time.

**Claim:** I did not find evidence of increased zest or energy at AKOG over time.

Aside from the stories that the graphs tell, mentors also shared their thoughts about energy at AKOG in interviews. In my interview with one of the Younger Girls Curriculum

(YGC) Coordinators, she reveals intense feelings of burnout after being in the role for several semesters, saying “it's honestly like really hard to keep going and like keep putting in the exact same level of energy when you're not getting that same level of energy back from the program.” I will continue to talk more about the experiences of the YGC Coordinators later in this section, but for now, it is important to note that she expresses feeling less energy as her relationship with the program continues. She explains that a lot of her feelings can be tied back to the changes that the program faced as a result of the pandemic. She also explains, “ I think having so few people on curriculum has definitely created a lot of burnout... I definitely feel like there's been a lot of burnout for myself and some other people who have been on curriculum for, like, several years.” From my understanding, the weight she feels being in this leadership position has become increasingly more stressful and tiring as her role in the program continues. She now feels that the amount of energy she can contribute to the program is declining.

The YGC Coordinator talks about energy as a force that powers her work in the program, while one younger girl's mentor talks about energy as the opposite of tiredness, using words like “tired,” “exhausted,” and “wiped” to describe how AKOG has felt in the past. She explains that, this year, with the shortened AKOG schedule, she feels less tired than she had in past years. In the past, she explains, “I kind of feel like it's a little exhausting to be there the entire day, and all I can think about is like the work that I should have been doing and I'm in one room for the entire day. I like getting out earlier.”

AKOG is a large time commitment, and the shortened schedule may help mentors feel more energized and present on Saturdays. In the interview, I go on to agree that, “If I'm worried about what I should be doing after AKOG, and what homework I should be doing, and all of

that, it's a lot more difficult to have fun at AKOG.” From these conversations, I can conclude that the time that mentors commit to AKOG can be stressful when juggling other commitments. Over time, mentors may feel strained by how much they are contributing to the program. The large time commitment to AKOG can negatively impact their energy in the program.

**Claim:** High amounts of stress and time committed to the program may negatively impact mentors’ energy and zest

→ **Increased Ability to Take Action (Empowerment)**

An increased ability to take action, to me, would look like mentors committing themselves to the regular expectations in AKOG and beyond. This would be measured by people’s attendance in AKOG, people’s motivation to take on more roles in AKOG, and the amount of opinions or suggestions people share that show they are invested in the program’s betterment. Figure 13 shows a graph of attendance in AKOG from the younger girl’s mentors this semester.

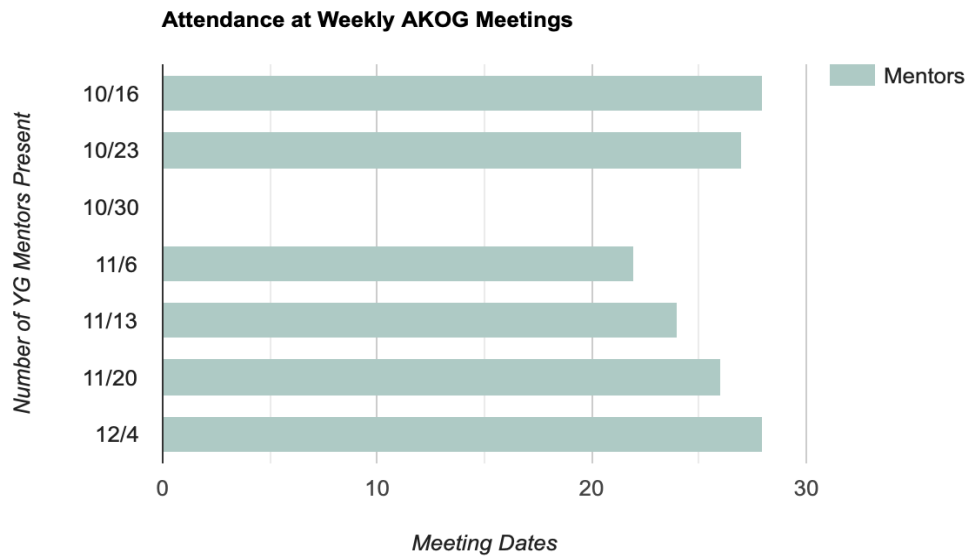


Figure 13: Mentor Attendance at AKOG

The graph shows a dip in attendance during the middle of the semester, but a rise once again at the end of the semester. The graph suggests that the middle of the semester may have been a more difficult period for mentors to attend AKOG, but I am not sure what the reason for this was. After this dip, there is a steady increase of mentors attending the program, which may suggest an increase in their commitment. However, there are a lot of reasons for AKOG attendance to be fluctuating aside from mentors simply not wanting to come. From this graph, it's difficult to know if mentors' attendance has any connection to an increased ability to take action in the program. I do think it is important, however, that most mentors attended AKOG every week even when we were struggling to recruit mentees. While I cannot conclude anything about an increase in their commitment from their attendance, mentors do show a large commitment to the regular expectations program by mostly all being there every week.

In addition to attendance, I was interested in how mentors felt about participating in AKOG beyond just their regular roles on Saturdays. In my initial survey, 7/7 respondents said they are “extremely comfortable” sharing opinions about AKOG with the Younger Girls Curriculum (YGC) Coordinator team or other members of the Steering Committee. This is the only question where all 7 mentors rated their experiences the same, which is notable because I can assume that this is likely a shared experience in the program. At the end of the semester too, 4/4 respondents responded the same way to the same question. However, in the weekly surveys and my observations, there were very few times when mentors offered suggestions throughout the semester and rarely any opportunities when their opinions were asked. From this finding, I think the Steering Committee at AKOG could improve at asking mentors for their opinions and ideas when they could be included.



In my experience this semester, mentors were very eager to help with small tasks in AKOG like carrying materials downstairs or bringing their own blankets to sit on outside. When it comes to taking on higher roles in AKOG though, only 2 out of a total of 25 eligible mentors expressed interest in joining the YGC Coordinator team. In my interview with one YGC Coordinator, we discussed how the responsibilities of the role can be much bigger than we anticipated and have changed a lot over time. For example, we had to plan an entire semester of the curriculum in advance in order to send materials home for mentees and mentors on Zoom, which was a really big shift from what we were used to. We also talked about how the process for choosing new people to take on the role has changed too. When I was interviewed for the role of Curriculum Coordinator, I was the only person who expressed interest in joining and still went through what I would describe as an intense interview and application process. This semester, however, the people who expressed interest joined the team without any formal interviews or applications for the role. They simply expressed interest and were soon after thrown into sharing the responsibilities of the role. The YGC Coordinator suggested that this process needs to be better established and include “a more formal conversation about the commitments that you're making to the organization.” I continue by saying:

**R:** But at the same time thinking about that, like I'm thinking about last semester when we were trying to find new people to take on [curriculum]

**P1:** (taking over) - And nobody wants to do it!!

**R:** Nobody wants to do it!

We agree that finding people to take on new roles can be difficult. It seems to both of us that most mentors aren't interested in joining the YGC Coordinators or Steering Committee as a

whole. When asked in the end of semester survey why they have not considered joining the Steering Committee, two mentors shared “I love AKOG but I don't want it to be a bigger commitment than it currently is for me!” and “I enjoy the position of being a mentor, I think it would be valuable to have the learning experience of steering committee but I think I like just being in age groups.” Their responses reveal that these mentors view joining the Steering Committee as a completely different commitment than just being a mentor. They say that joining the Steering Committee is a bigger time commitment and may take them away from the relationships they have built with the girls in AKOG.

When asked at the start of the semester if they had ever thought about not returning to AKOG, 2/7 returning mentors answered yes. Both respondents were members of the Steering Committee, and their reasonings both centered around AKOG being a large commitment to manage for them. This makes me wonder a lot about the difference in experiences for mentors who are in a position of leadership and mentors who are not. If being in a position of leadership is too stressful for some mentors, it makes sense that not many people would be interested in taking it on. If most mentors are comfortable sharing their opinions with the leadership but most do not want to take action in a leadership role, I am led to wonder what can be changed in the organization of the Steering Committee for mentors to feel it is a manageable role.

From these responses, I am led to believe that mentors at AKOG and Steering Committee members could benefit from sharing more experiences together. Mentors may become more interested in taking on higher roles in the organization if it doesn't feel like too big of a change from their current roles. Additionally, Steering Committee members may not feel as burnt out as they have described if their responsibilities shifted. The responsibilities of mentors and Steering

Committee members could be changed in order to merge the two more and create less distinction between the roles.

One suggestion I have for how this could happen is to bring the younger girls mentors into the planning process and to have the YGC Coordinators roles focus more on facilitation of activities. This is how it currently works in the older girls group, where all the mentors are involved in the weekly planning and the Curriculum Coordinators are responsible for gathering materials, facilitating activities, and representing the older girls mentors at the weekly Steering Committee meetings. Historically, the younger girls group has had more mentors than the older girls so it has been too difficult to schedule a time where all mentors can plan together. Now that the pandemic has changed the size of the organization, it may be possible for the younger girls' mentors to take on some of the responsibility of planning weekly themes and activities. This may alleviate some of the stress of the YGC Coordinators, would allow mentors to take on a bigger role in the club without changing their position as mentors, and would likely result in many new ideas for themes and activities.

Merging the responsibilities of the roles is not the only way to alleviate the stress of YGC Coordinators or to empower mentors to take on more responsibility in the program. At the very least, the two groups (mentors and Steering Committee) could benefit from being more involved with each other. Because mentors are willing and comfortable to share their opinions with the Steering Committee, the Steering Committee should provide more opportunities for them to do so. If given the chance to participate in things like helping plan the curriculum, suggesting ideas for activities, and showcasing their personal passions, mentors may also get a better sense of what a Steering Committee role requires and feel more capable of joining. Essentially, merging

the two roles and creating more shared responsibility in the program could help alleviate the time commitment for the Steering Committee and could lead to a more natural progression from mentor to Steering Committee member. This could lead to all members of AKOG feeling an increased ability to take action.

**Claim:** Steering Committee could benefit from asking mentors for more help while mentors could benefit from interacting more with the responsibilities of Steering Committee.

→ **Increased Clarity (A Clearer Picture of One’s Self, the Other, and the Relationship)**

Another aspect of growth fostering relationships that I investigated this semester was increased clarity. I measured this by people’s responses to questions about what AKOG is, why they joined, what their role as a mentor is, and how prepared they are to participate in AKOG. To me, these factors all lead to a clearer picture of one’s role in the program.

Before diving into the data, I want to paint a picture of the September 2021 club fair. AKOG Steering Committee members took shifts sitting at a table and advertising the program to prospective mentors. Aside from one Steering Committee meeting a few days before, this event was the first in person activity AKOG participated in since going remote. My reflections from this day read:

“We all struggled to talk about what AKOG is and specific examples of what we do there considering many mentors have not experienced AKOG in person before. These events made me think a lot about the disconnect we have all experienced from the program over the last year with everything being online. The mentors don’t recognize each other with masks on, half of the mentors may not know each other because they went to AKOG on alternate days, and I don’t really have any relationships with the mentors who joined last year.”

My tone in this reflection emits uncertainty and confusion. I use words like “disconnect,” “struggled,” and “don’t know” that paint a picture of a difficult transition after being online. My memory of this day is the opposite of clarity. Even as an experienced mentor, I suddenly felt I did not know anything about my role in AKOG or what the program’s goals were. At this point, we still did not know if AKOG would be held in person and I felt extremely unclear about how AKOG would progress moving forward. This starting point is important to keep in mind when talking about how clarity increased this semester.

Mentors at the start of the semester shared a lot of the same thoughts about what AKOG is, why they joined, and what their role as mentors is. In answering “How would you describe your role as a mentor in AKOG?” mentors repeated two key ideas about having fun and keeping everyone safe. Mentors wrote that their job is to “make sure everyone is safe and doing ok” and “facilitate a safe and empowering space,” and “mostly to have fun with the girls” and “be a fun friendly figure.” At the end of the semester, even though fewer participants responded, mentors shared similar answers, like to “support the girls,” “hang out and connect,” and “keep the girls engaged.” Mentors seem to have a very clear picture and shared sense of their role in the program already. Answers to this question didn’t change in any noticeable way over time.

On a scale of 0-4 (0 being "not at all clear" and 4 being "extremely clear") how clear are the expectations set for you as a mentor in AKOG?

7 responses

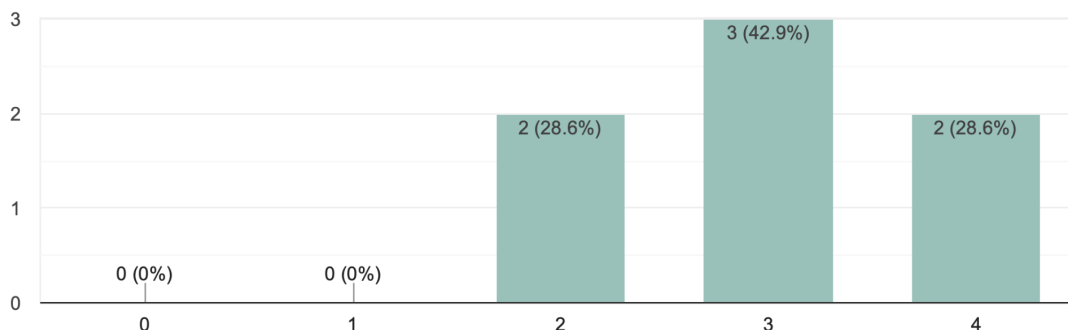


Figure 14: Initial Survey Question on Expectations

On a scale of 0-4 (0 being "not at all clear" and 4 being "extremely clear") how clear are the expectations set for you as a mentor in AKOG?

4 responses

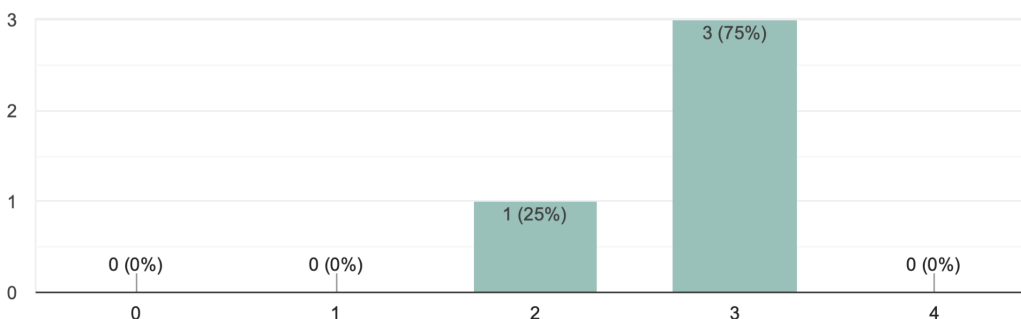


Figure 15: End of Semester Survey Question on Expectations

Mentors also responded to the question "On a scale of 0-4 (0 being "not at all clear" and 4 being "extremely clear") how clear are the expectations set for you as a mentor in AKOG?". The different number of respondents at the beginning and end of the semester makes it difficult to compare how mentors' feelings regarding expectations changed. However, since no mentors

ranked the expectations at a 1 or 0, we can conclude that they have at least some sense of the expectations. However, the fact that there are mentors ranking a neutral 2 at the beginning and end of the semester and no mentors ranking 4 at the end of the semester makes me wonder if setting clear expectations may be one area in which the Steering Committee could improve.

Mentors in AKOG reported feeling increasingly prepared to participate in AKOG. In response to the question “On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning "I did not feel prepared whatsoever" and 4 meaning "I felt extremely prepared") rate how prepared you felt to engage in activities during AKOG today,” the first two surveys included responses of 0, 1, and 2. The last two surveys only had responses of 3 and 4. Although fewer participants responded to the surveys at the end, the responses I have show that people felt increasingly prepared for AKOG as they spent more time in the group.

Throughout the semester, I received two responses about preparation in AKOG. The first reads “This day didn’t require any preparation so it was fine to come today not knowing what to expect! Some activities would be nice if we know in advance but it all works out!.” In general, mentors only receive a short 2-4 sentence “blurb” describing the theme of the day before arriving at AKOG. They are then told about the planned activities in the morning when they arrive on Saturdays, typically 15-30 minutes before mentees. This is how it has always been done in my time in AKOG. Since the YGC Coordinators are typically planning and replanning the activities the entire week leading up to AKOG, it is difficult to prepare mentors any sooner. To me, it seems that the YGC Coordinators are expected to be prepared, and the mentors are just supposed to follow what instructions we give.

The second comment about preparation reads, “It would be helpful if mentors knew how to do the activities before we started, making the snow was fun but we all did it incorrectly since we didn’t know how to do it but we figured it out and it was fun.” This person is referencing the fake snow activity during the last week of AKOG. Because the YGC Coordinators didn’t test out the activity beforehand, mentors and mentees experimented to get their fake snow to come together. More communication in advance by the YGC Coordinators could result in mentors feeling more prepared, even for activities that seemingly require no prior preparation. YGC could also improve mentors' feelings of preparation by testing out the activities beforehand, sharing their experiences with the other mentors, and being more aware of what could go wrong in advance.

Looking at this evidence of clarity in AKOG, I think it is lacking in creating a true picture of mentors’ experiential knowledge. Thinking back to our group dynamic at the club fair, I am confident that mentors would all be much more comfortable now describing AKOG, our goals, and the types of things we do together. By participating in AKOG, they have gained an increased sense of clarity. This knowledge plus the evidence of mentors’ own descriptions of their role, feelings of preparation, and sense of expectations helps me conclude that there was an increased sense of clarity among mentors this semester.

**Claim:** I found evidence of increased clarity at AKOG over time.

→ **Increased Sense of Worth**

An increased sense of worth, to me, would be measured by mentors' responses to questions such as “am I a valuable contributor to AKOG?” and “is my presence in AKOG valued?” This section is one of the ones that I collected the least amount of data on. I feel like, to



truly gauge feelings of worth in AKOG, you would need to conduct a separate research project exclusively paying attention to this. When it came to designing my project, this section suffered because I prioritized other areas of my research and ended up not diving deep enough into this question. Still, I will provide what I discovered about sense worth in AKOG this semester.

Below are two graphs comparing questions from the start and end of the semester surveys. Note that the graphs cut off part of the question, and the full question read “On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning you feel ‘not at all valued or valuable in AKOG’ and 4 meaning you feel ‘extremely valued and valuable in AKOG’) how would you rate the way you feel about your involvement in the organization?”

On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning you feel “not at all valued or valuable in AKOG” and 4 meaning you feel “extremely valued and valuable in AKOG”) how ...eel about your involvement in the organization?  
7 responses

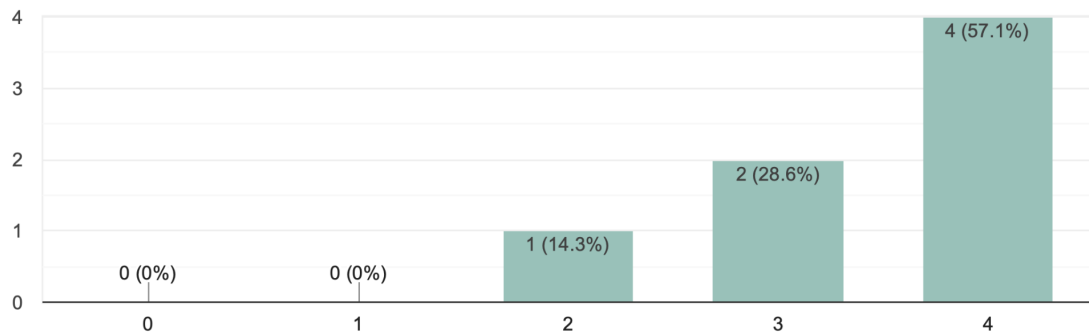


Figure 16: Responses From Initial Survey

On a scale of 0-4 (0 meaning you feel “not at all valued or valuable in AKOG” and 4 meaning you feel “extremely valued and valuable in AKOG”) how ...eel about your involvement in the organization?

4 responses

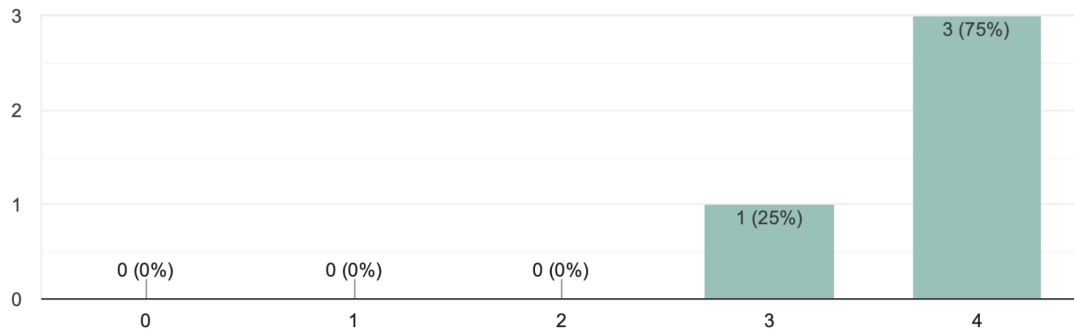


Figure 17: Responses From Final Survey

From the graphs, I notice that no mentors respond with any ratings of 0 or 1. Additionally, one more mentor responded with a rating of 4 at the end of the semester. Once again, because of the low number of respondents in the second survey, it is hard to draw conclusions about how sense of worth changed over time. However, it seems to me that mentors do feel valued and valuable in AKOG from the lack of 0s and 1s and the increase in high responses at the end of the semester..

When asked what specific activities they have participated in that have been most helpful in feeling like a valuable member of AKOG, multiple responses mentioned the check in and debrief portions of Saturday. One mentor writes, “I think that the check-ins at the beginning and end show that we are all valuable pieces of this program and the expectation that we will show up even if there might not be as many girls shows the value of our consistent presence.” Checking in with mentors and giving them the opportunity to share about their experiences after every meeting is helpful for “just making sure everyone is heard and space for reflection,” as

another mentor puts it. This suggests that debriefs and check-ins are one thing that should continue in AKOG because they give mentors space to feel they have value and agency in the program.

Another common response to this question had to do with mentor bonding. Mentors said bonding outside of AKOG helped them feel valued because they “had a good time and made connections with other mentors” and “mentor bonding was so fun I couldn't go to training which I wish I had to meet all the mentors prior to the first day.” Another comment that I think is related to what these mentors are saying reads “I think building relationships with other mentors and sc members would be nice.” While the word “nice” does not exactly explain all the complex reasons that having closer relationships with other people in the program can be valuable, I think these mentors would agree that connecting with each other more helps them feel like a closer community. Having opportunities for mentors to get to know each other outside of the mentoring space can help them feel greater connected to one another and the program.

One interesting section of my interview with a younger girls' mentor is copied below.

She says,

I think this semester it's been a little more difficult to feel like I am essential at AKOG, just because there's so many more mentors and mentees. And my mentees have kind of clung to other mentors who they already knew who aren't me so at times I do feel like if I wasn't there it wouldn't really have an impact at AKOG. But it is nice that I know all the mentors and mentees i'm working with, so I do feel, even if i'm not really like necessary i'm still like being useful in my time there. I think in previous years, when the mentor to mentee ratio was a little better, I felt more useful there - not useful but I felt more valuable as a mentor at AKOG.

There are a couple things to unpack in what she shares that helps us understand how mentors feel valued in the program. First, the current mentor to mentee ratio is cited as the main reason she feels less “essential” at AKOG. This makes sense due to the pandemic, but may still be useful for

AKOG leaders to consider moving forward. During this period of trying to recruit more mentees and reconstruct the program, it may be important to consider in what ways the mentor to mentee ratio can remain at a good level. Accepting fewer mentors into the program may be one way to ensure that mentors do not outnumber mentees too drastically. Additionally, this mentor talks about feeling like AKOG is a useful way to spend her time because she knows the mentors and mentees she does get to work with. Not only does she feel valued, but she values being a part of AKOG despite the challenges in recruiting mentees. This once again ties back to the idea that providing mentors with opportunities to bond in and outside of AKOG could help them feel valued in the program even when mentees are not present.

**Claim:** Sense of worth can continue to increase in AKOG with an improved mentor to mentee ratio and continued opportunities for mentors to feel heard and connected.

→ **A Desire for More Connection**

A desire for more connection is the final aspect of growth fostering relationships that I evaluated this semester. In AKOG, this would be measured by the retention rate for returning mentors and asking what factors encourage and discourage mentors as they think about returning. This section was another that I did not gather as much data on as others. I think this is because I didn't think of many different ways to measure it and a lot of reasons mentors have for returning or not were already explained by other responses. For example, some mentors may not return because they feel AKOG or its Steering Committee is too big of a commitment or they may have felt unimportant as mentors due to the low number of mentees. Conversely, mentors may wish to stay a part of AKOG because they feel they connected well with other mentors and their mentees and feel like a valuable member of the program. The factors that encourage and

discourage mentors in returning to AKOG have been and will continue to be explained throughout this paper.

The most important piece of data I have to report on in this section is the actual number of mentors who decided to stay with or leave AKOG after this semester. During the semester my research was conducted, a total of 25 mentors who were not a part of the Steering Committee participated in the younger girls group. After returning again in the Spring of 2022, 15 mentors chose to continue with the program, and 10 decided to leave. This is a really significant drop in numbers compared to previous years. From the past attendance data that I have access to, I can see that from the Fall of 2019 to the Spring of 2020, 2 out of 19 younger girls mentors chose to stop attending AKOG. From the Fall of 2020 to the Spring of 2021, 3 out of 25 younger girls mentors did not return to the program. Losing 10 mentors is a drastic change and shows that the desire to continue with the program dropped significantly this year.

On a scale of 0-4 (0 being "I did not enjoy it at all" and 4 being "I enjoyed it a lot") how much did you enjoy being a part of AKOG this semester?

4 responses

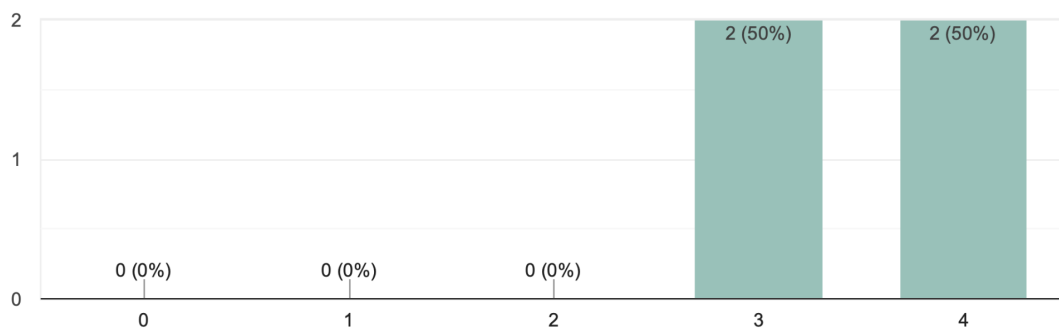


Figure 18 : Responses About Enjoying AKOG

While the desire for greater connection was not present for all mentors, the mentors that chose to stay with the program, especially through such a difficult semester of rebuilding, showed that their desire to continue was strong. For the 4 respondents in my end of semester survey, their experience in AKOG this semester was ranked high (see Figure 18). While there may not have been a strong desire for more connection among all of the younger girls mentors, the fact that many mentors got through such a difficult semester for the program hanging onto their positivity and connections with one another gives me hope about the future. Despite Covid restrictions, a significant lack of mentees, and struggling to make the program feel “the same” as it did before the pandemic, some of the younger girls’ mentors still felt energetic, empowered, clear about their role, and had a strong sense of worth. Moving forward, future leaders of AKOG can create a greater desire for more connection by paying attention to how the five features of growth-fostering relationships are present in the program and using what I learned through this semester of reconstructing the program to ground their work.

**Claim:** Not every younger girls’ mentor showed a desire for more connection in AKOG, but the ones who have stayed show a promising desire to continue with the program

→ **QUESTION 3:** What successes and difficulties do the Younger Girls Curriculum (YGC) team have and how do they influence the mentors' experiences?

→ **Difficulties of the YGC Team: Internal Problems**

I asked myself this question at the creation of my project as a way to keep track of the intentions and goals of the YGC Coordinators and compare them with the experiences of the mentors. In reality, however, the connections I can draw between what we planned and how mentors experienced AKOG are pretty minimal because of how difficult this semester proved to

be for the YGC team. This question served as a way for me to personally reflect on my experiences as a YGC Coordinator, and so I will often talk about how I felt or quote my own reflections (field notes or analytic memos) in this section. I want to be clear that I cannot speak for the experiences of the two other YGC Coordinators on my team, and that they have more experience in this role than I ever will. I tried to include their perspectives as much as possible, but was only able to schedule an interview with one of them to include their direct voice. First, I will dive into the difficulties we faced this semester including stress, disorganization, and struggling to rely on one another.

→ **Stress and Burnout: “If we aren't willing to step in when other people can't, then the program just literally doesn't happen.”**

Stress and burnout in the YGC Coordinator role has already been addressed under Question 2 with respect to energy and zest. For example, I explained how feelings of burnout affected a YGC Coordinator's energy after being in the role for several years and how feeling too much responsibility as a Steering Committee member led her to think about not returning to the program. Feeling “burnt out” in the role is something I also quickly experienced this semester.

By week four, I wrote,

I'm starting to dread going to AKOG and how fast the week goes by... I enjoy being there, but being on curriculum feels isolating and I feel like I can't keep up with the role and all my other responsibilities.

Balancing the responsibilities of the curriculum with only three people was a big challenge, especially when not all three of us were regularly present or working together. The other YGC Coordinator agrees that “Having so few people on curriculum has definitely created a lot of

burnout” and expressed multiple times throughout the semester that adding more people to the team would relieve some of our stress.

The same person also equated being a YGC Coordinator to the weight of another class in their schedule because of the workload. They expressed feeling a lot of weight and responsibility on their shoulders, saying

I think that there's a weird thing with accountability and holding each other accountable because there's boundaries. But also like if we aren't willing to step in when other people can't, then the program just literally doesn't happen.

They feel responsible for the program happening each week, which proved to be true during the third week of AKOG when our meeting was canceled. In addition to light rain, the YGC Coordinators did not have an organized plan for what we would be doing and what materials were needed. I wrote in my field notes, ”I was really anxious about having people show up with no curriculum plan and I wanted to cancel because I didn’t want people to show up to do nothing.” The decision to cancel was left to me because neither of the other two YGC Coordinators were awake before AKOG was scheduled to start. I remember feeling really stressed having the weight of the decision put on my shoulders. Feeling alone on the team, as well feeling disorganized, were both factors in my burnout that I will continue to explain. It is important to note here, though, that burnout was a shared experience of the YGC Coordinators this semester.

**Claim:** Feeling stressed and burnt out was a shared difficulty of the YGC Coordinators this semester.



→ **Disorganization: “Pretty much every week we come [to AKOG] and there's something that goes wrong.”**

Related to my personal feelings of stress and burnout this semester were intense feelings of disorganization. “Organizational problems,” “not designating responsibilities,” and “winging it” were codes I used often when reading through my own observations and reflections. One of the biggest initial problems at the start of the semester was that the YGC Team had no idea what supplies AKOG already owned that we were able to use. Each year, we order supplies that may or may not get used in its entirety. If there are extra supplies, they either get stored in Atwood Hall where the program occurs each Saturday, or get put into AKOG’s storage closet across campus in the Johnson Stanford Center (JSC). AKOG’s storage closet, see Figure 19, is shared by multiple other campus groups, requires a key to get into, and is, for a lack of better word, a mess. Below is my reflection from my first time entering the closet in September of 2021:

The Curriculum Coordinators for younger and older girls both took a trip to the AKOG storage closet in JSC. The amount of stuff AKOG owns is overwhelming, especially considering how disorganized it is. Most of our stuff is spread out and hidden in boxes, and we have no running inventory of what curriculum can use for planning. Before we go out and buy a bunch of new stuff, I would love to spend more time organizing what we have so that it is more accessible to use. I’m not sure that this really relates to my project, but maybe developing a more long lasting organization system can contribute to the transition of roles in the steering committee. But also this is just another thing to do for AKOG and it can be so difficult to ask people to commit their time.



Figure 20: AKOG's Storage Closet in April 2022 (After One Day of Organizing)

Years of piled up materials were scattered everywhere. With only 30 minutes of scheduled planning time and our first AKOG meeting right around the corner, the YGC Coordinators looked through what we could and decided to tackle this project another time. Since this day in September, the task of organizing the storage closet has still not been fully accomplished. Not only is it difficult for people to commit their time, as I wrote, but it is difficult to have any time to commit. Not dealing with the organizational problems that come with the storage closet makes the task of planning AKOG more difficult, leads us to spend money on things we already own, and wastes materials we have and could share with the mentees. Dealing with this organizational

problem, however, requires a greater commitment to the role than the YGC Coordinators may be able to or want to commit.

As I prepare to leave my position in AKOG after graduation, I am passing on the mess of the storage closet to new YGC members. My advice to the new leaders would be to develop a system of organizing AKOG's materials and an inventory that can be passed along to the leaders that come after you. Nothing works well in the long run if we don't document and share our methods when transitions of power occur. Finding a new system of organizing AKOG's materials and transitioning the system may alleviate stress for future YGC Coordinators in the role.

Because the YGC Coordinators did not deal with the JSC closet during the semester of my research, we faced many difficulties related to accessing materials we needed. When we needed specific materials that we did not have, we had to purchase them from an approved campus vendor. This proved to be very limiting for what we could do because, unless we wanted to wait for shipping that could take the whole semester, the only place we could obtain materials immediately was the grocery store. As one YGC Coordinator put it, "I feel like our program would be so much better if we just had better access to obtaining materials for the programs, because we have great ideas." When it was necessary for us to go to the store, or similar tasks like going to look through the JSC closet for materials, the YGC Coordinators also struggled with delegating tasks.

The week that canceling AKOG fell mostly on my shoulders, I took the following notes from the YGC planning meeting:

- Talked about reaching out to other Clark clubs but did not designate who would do it or when

- Talked about the possibility of rain on Saturday, did not want to plan a virtual backup day, will use the tent if it rains
- Talked about asking for a PO but did not designate who would do it so it likely will not get done

Because we did not decide who would do what tasks, the necessary tasks did not get done and we were not prepared to have AKOG. As the semester continued, I often felt like the responsibility of gathering materials, setting them up, and recovering when our plans did not go as expected fell onto my shoulders. I will continue to talk more about feeling alone on the team in the next section of my paper. In terms of disorganization, though, not preparing the materials we planned to have was a constant difficulty for the YGC Coordinators. In my interview with the YGC Coordinator, we agreed to the idea that feeling prepared is a big factor in having a successful day at AKOG. The transcript reads:

**R:** Some days we come to AKOG or like pretty much every week we come and there's [something that goes wrong

**P1:** [something that goes wrong

**R:** ...yeah and then we have to like to be on our toes and like I totally get that that's a part of planning and being in a leadership position, but when it happens every week...I leave sometimes, just like you said, relieved it's over. It's tiring.

Feeling unprepared and disorganized were big difficulties I faced on the YGC team this semester that contributed to how tired and stressed I felt in the role. On the first day of AKOG, I arrived alone two hours early to go through what had been left in Atwood from the last time AKOG occurred in person and to set up what we needed for the day. As AKOG continued over the course of the semester, I felt that I did not have the energy or desire to commit an extra two hours of my time even when it felt necessary to. Instead of putting in my full effort every time I

felt unprepared, I adopted a much looser policy of “winging it.” Pretty much every week it felt like something went wrong (the materials we ordered online didn’t come in on time, no one went to the store to buy materials in time, or the other YGC Coordinators did not show up to help).

From the second to last week of AKOG I wrote,

This day was extremely chaotic and messy and I was the only member of YGC there for most of the time...I felt really sad that things didn’t work out how we were planning, and felt like we were letting people down by promising fun things and having to fall back on a back up plan yet again.

While it may not have always affected the experiences of the mentors participating in the program, being disorganized and unprepared felt like a large problem to me. It made my job feel much more difficult, stressful, and overwhelming. My personal experience as a YGC Coordinator and my ability to create a more positive experience for mentors and mentees would have been improved with better organization.

**Claim:** Being disorganized caused a lot of extra problems and stress for the YGC team.

→ **Lack of Teamwork:** “We as a curriculum team haven't probably talked about very much or like really acknowledged how much we rely on each other”

When I think about the difficulties I faced on the YGC team this semester, feeling alone on my team was probably the biggest thing I struggled with. It is also one of the hardest things to admit because I care about the other YGC members, know that they have their own limits to how much of themselves they can commit to AKOG, and want to acknowledge their hard work too. However, it would be inauthentic for me to leave out my personal reflections on our lack of teamwork and ability to rely on each other this semester.

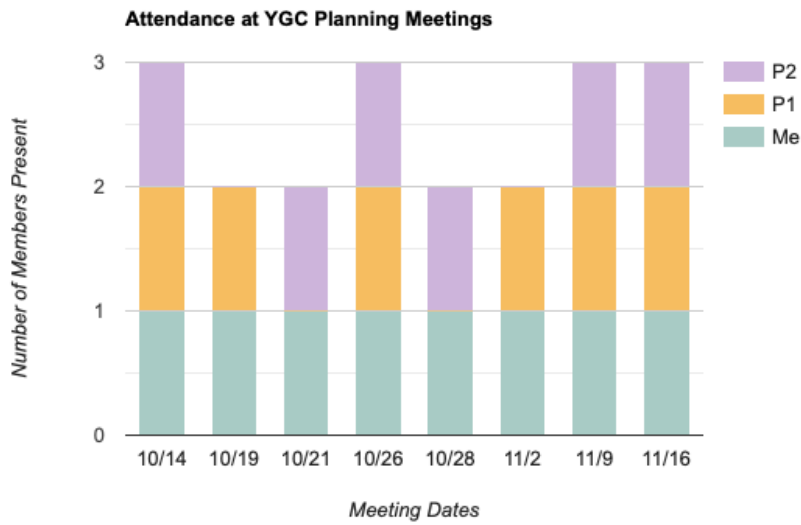


Figure 20: Attendance at YGC Planning Meetings

I included a graph in Figure 20 to display the attendance of all three YGC coordinators at our planning meetings. All three members were present for only half of the meetings this semester, and I was present for them all. The inconsistency of knowing who would come to our meetings made it really difficult for me to feel like we were working as a team. I felt like I could only trust myself to show up, and so I started making my own plans for AKOG outside of these meetings or replanning days on my own when I knew that the plans we made together in a meeting would not get executed on Saturdays. Two days of AKOG this semester, Game Day (changed last minute from Fall Day) and Shero Day (changed last minute into a craft day), I had to wake up early and replan the entire day in order to have some sense of what activities I would be facilitating at AKOG. In my reflections from Game Day, I write

Today was the worst day of AKOG for me so far. We once again did not have materials or money for materials because we didn't plan far enough ahead, so I remade an entirely new schedule the night before after getting home from work. I feel like "winging it" is the only plan we ever have. I felt like I was the only sole person in charge of all of AKOG and I felt like if I didn't make a new plan no one would have. I felt really bossy

and guilty making an entirely new plan by myself but I didn't know what to do if we didn't have a plan.

From my writing, it is clear that I felt I couldn't trust my team members to help me make a new plan. I also had lots of intense feelings about taking too much control in the group. From this reflection, I see that I was struggling with asking my teammates for help and feeling like I should act without them, especially as the newest member in the role.

In my interview with one of the YGC Coordinators, we talked a little bit about struggling to share equal responsibilities on the team this semester. The following quote from her (with "...” indicating that I've left out some of what she said) describes how she felt about our teamwork this semester:

I feel like the people specifically that you have on the team changes the dynamics so drastically. And I feel like that's something that we as a curriculum team haven't probably talked about very much or like really acknowledged how much we rely on each other ... I overslept this morning and I came in late and like I kind of did that knowing that I had to do that for me. But at the same time, I am fully aware that created so much more work for everyone else ...In some ways, like, I definitely feel like I took steps back from the program without really communicating that to other people or considering how that impacted others because, like I literally just couldn't. And that was really frustrating.

As she describes it, we have to be able to rely on each other as YGC Coordinators, but that is not something we acknowledge or talk about with one another. Instead, when we feel we cannot rely on each other, extra work gets put onto those who are doing their part. This creates a really unequal team dynamic when relying on the same people every time to be responsible for your work.

We also talked about the fluctuating roles of leadership on the YGC, when sometimes you are in charge of leading an activity and other times you can take a step back and know that someone else has it handled. We agree that this dynamic of shared responsibility and being able

to rely on each other makes the role easier, but that it doesn't always work out this way in practice.

In the interview she suggests that there may need to be someone put in charge of the YGC team who will come to every meeting, keep the group organized, and pick up extra work when others cannot. I almost felt as though this is the unofficial role I took on in the group this semester without knowing or wanting to take on more responsibility than others. This led to me having a very difficult semester in terms of stress and burnout, like the other YGC members described feeling in the position. Additionally, this affected my own experiences of energy, value, preparedness, and desire for greater connection in AKOG. I think that teamwork was one of our biggest struggles this semester and that not sharing equal responsibility or talking about how much responsibility each team member should have can lead to greater problems over time.

**Claim:** Teamwork, including relying on each other to share responsibilities, is an important factor in group leadership that, when not present, can cause difficulties

#### → **Successes of the YGC Team: Mentors Responses to Specific Activities**

It's hard to know if the difficulties that we faced as a YGC team impacted the mentors' experiences in AKOG at all because our struggles were mostly internal to our YGC team. When talking about successes, participants tended to cite more specific experiences and activities in AKOG that went well. Our successes as a curriculum team had a bigger influence on the mentors than our internal difficulties because they directly involved them. In this section, I will be diving into mentors' specific responses about what experiences they thought were successful at AKOG as well as experiences they thought were difficult, and what the future YGC Coordinators can learn from them.



When asked what they thought about our successes as a YGC group, one YGC

Coordinator shared:

I would say the STEM day felt like the biggest success that we had because of a lot of factors. We had girls, which you know some of these things aren't things that we can control. There were a lot of factors that were in our favor. The weather was nice, people were in a good mood, we had all the materials that we needed and we had a good plan going into it. And we just had something fun and exciting that, like the girls don't do every single day. It was kind of messy like the egg drop, and then there were just like opportunities for unstructured fun with materials we don't typically have... There was an element of like "none of us know what's going to happen." There's a shared experience versus when you're doing crafts, that's like really you know there's nothing unexpected.

This response is really thoughtful and full of good information about what we define a successful day in AKOG as. As she says, some factors like the amount of people who showed up and how nice the weather was were not things that we had any control over and were factors that had a large impact on AKOG every day this semester. However, factors like preparation, balancing the amount of structure, and creating opportunities for people to share exciting experiences together are all important ways we succeeded in giving people at AKOG a positive experience. One younger girls' mentor describes when AKOG has been successful for her:

I think we're always kind of talking and like doing an activity at the same time, which I think is kind of when AKOG gets the most successful when we're able to do something fun but then also talk to each other and it's not as awkward, as we have some sort of an activity we're doing.

This mentor also describes a good balance of structured activities to do together and freedom to talk and engage with each other in the ways the mentors and mentees want. Others agree, saying in the weekly surveys "I feel like the best time I have spent getting to know mentees is during unstructured time when we can just chat," and "free time where girls can choose what to do [has been helpful]."

In the same interview, when asked about what specific activities she likes to do with her mentees, this mentor explained how working on individual projects is not always as successful as doing things together. She says,

“From my experience we never really managed to get like ‘isolating activities’ to really work. I can't think of a time when mentees were really engaged with journaling and writing in their journals.”

In this quote, she uses the term “isolating activities.” I had used the term right before this to describe doing things on your own but at the same time as other people - like card making, journaling, or crafts. The language we used to describe these types of activities is in direct opposition to the shared experiences we all agreed to be successful. It can be difficult to feel like your relationships are developing when engaging in activities that are typically done alone.

From these conversations, I have learned that some of our biggest successes as a YGC group came from creating space for people to work together and balance freedom and structure. In order to see how these two conversations relate to the feelings of other mentors in the program, I created separate tables for each week of AKOG with mentors' specific responses to different activities. In Tables 5-10, I have organized what mentors have said about their highlights (successes) and struggles (difficulties) related to specific activities. I felt it was important to include all of the mentors' related responses rather than picking through them so that readers have the chance to see all the data I am working with and potentially draw different conclusions than I do. When mentors say a lot about a specific activity, I want to show this and find connections between their comments. Similarly, when mentors say little to nothing about a specific activity, I want to think about why this might be the case and what “not saying anything” says about the curriculum.

Theme	Activities	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Highlights	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Struggles
Welcome to AKOG Day	Create name tags	- The group games were so fun and they let us get to know each other!	- The first day is always my least favorite but as long as we stay busy I think it runs well! Only when we're sitting around waiting for instructions it's not great.
	Decorate our journals		
	Brainstorm Community Guidelines		
	“This or That” debate game (pick a side and defend it)		
	Dancing in a circle game		
	Chalk, hula hoops, and bubbles		
My Takeaways From These Responses:	Games that involve the whole group are a success. Giving clear instructions and transitioning at appropriate times and with efficiency is important.		

Table 5: Mentors Responses to Week One Curriculum

Theme	Activities	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Highlights	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Struggles
Let Your Creativity Shine Day	Friendship bracelet making	- I really liked today’s activities! The stickers were so fun and I loved the crafts we did, the time went by so quickly! - I liked the stations!! We all got to do different activities throughout the day	- The friendship bracelets were fun but difficult to efficiently teach, and I ended up getting a little too sucked into my work rather than teach the girls how to do it! - I loved the hula hoop race, I haven't done that
	Watercolor self-portraits		
	DIY Stickers		

	Rock Paper Scissors race	<p>- I loved the hula hoop race, I haven't done that before ...</p> <p>- I really enjoyed how there were varying stations for the let your creativity shine day! Thought that made for an interesting and more engaging day because I was always interested in the next station</p> <p>- Having different stations for creativity day was perfect since the girls didn't have time to get bored of something and learning how to make stickers was so fun!</p>	before but I think it would be helpful to have someone there to monitor just because there gets a point where people feel done with it and we could move onto another game
My Takeaways From These Responses:	<p>The importance of transition time is mentioned once again. Days will be more successful if we enforce appropriate and efficient transitions between activities. Mentors left a lot of comments in support of the rotating stations. Having rotating stations can ensure people feel like they have more choice over the day. One comment about the friendship bracelets relates to what the interviewed mentor was talking about with isolated activities. When doing activities, it is more successful when we promote collaboration.</p>		

Table 6: Mentors Responses to Week Two Curriculum

Theme	Activities	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Highlights	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Struggles
Game Day (changed last minute from Fall Day)	Board Games	<p>- I loved telestrations!! It was a fun game to play and also socialize with</p> <p>- Learning to play the new games was really fun and it gave us a good activity to play and also be able to talk and bond.</p> <p>- It was lots of fun playing</p>	<p>- While I really like Game Day, I think this day was my least favorite day, because the games were focused on what the individual player was doing and didn't leave a lot of room for group collaboration.</p>
	Scattergories		
	Fill in the black game		
	Telestrations drawing game		

	Medusa eye contact circle game	the drawing game specifically, I haven't laughed that hard in a long time - The games seemed to be fun for both the mentors and the mentees. The mentors in my group were able to keep themselves entertained, despite not having any mentees. - All the games were fun and we were given the perfect time to do it!	
	Wink detective circle game		
My Takeaways From These Responses:	Mentors cite enjoying trying new games. I think there is a lot of value in designing plans that are exciting and possibly new for both mentees and mentors. However, during some of the games, players may have been too focused on their individual work. In the future, this could be more successful by implementing more team style games where people can work together and still have fun.		

Table 7: Mentors Responses to Week Four Curriculum

Theme	Activities	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Highlights	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Struggles
STEM Day	Paper chain contest	- The egg drop was so exciting and required a lot of team building - I really enjoyed connecting with the girls one on one and just being silly. On stem day I tossed an egg back and forth with two girls and it was just so much fun. - I loved the teamwork aspect of the day! A lot of us were able to work with mentors/mentees and talk	N/A
	Egg drop		
	Baking soda volcanoes		

		<p>to them more closely and learn more about each other.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The egg drop was fun</li> <li>- Loved the egg drop!</li> <li>- Making two groups of mentors instead of four was fun! I think it helped mentors meet others and work together for the activities!</li> </ul>	
My Takeaways From These Responses:	<p>Once again, people cite teamwork and shared experiences as the highlights of the day. Providing chances for groups of people to collaborate together instead of working individually on each experiment made this day very successful. Additionally, one mentor cites tossing an egg back and forth, which was not a planned activity by YGC. While it is important for us to offer and instruct a planned activity, it is also important to leave some space for people to make their own choices about what they want to do together.</p>		

Table 8: Mentors Responses to Week Five Curriculum

Theme	Activities	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Highlights	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Struggles
Shero Day (changed last minute into a craft day)	Card making	- I enjoyed being able to do something new and creative like the hat making!	- Shero day (?) was less organized/engaging - Felt a bit disorganized and didn't feel super related to the theme
	Fleece hat making		
My Takeaways From These Responses:	<p>The disorganization and last minute plans on this day made a clear impact on the mentors' experiences. Simply from the lack of positive comments, I can see that this day did not stand out as being very successful. From this, the YGC team should learn that having an organized plan makes days more successful than when we wing it. Also, offering opportunities for mentors and mentees to do activities they have never done before is important.</p>		

Table 9: Mentors Responses to Week Six Curriculum

Theme	Activities	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Highlights	Quotes from Mentors Regarding Specific Struggles
Winter Fest	<p>Paper snowflakes</p> <hr/> <p>Fake Snow Marshmallow Igloos</p>	<p>- The igloos were fun!!</p> <p>- Today went really well! I honestly didn't think making the snow would be popular with the 12 year olds but they got really into it and had fun! Having hot chocolate was also really nice to have something fun that we can have while we hang out and chat!</p> <p>- I enjoyed the creativity of snow themed activities we did!</p>	<p>- The snowflakes were fun but the girls didn't get really into them, i think they mostly wanted to hang out with their favorite mentors and chat which made it hard to get them engaged but they were having fun so i didn't want to push them to do anything else</p> <p>- I though the theme was great and I think I would maybe suggest having a guiding part in the snowflake activity or something that brought it all together like hanging them up somewhere</p> <p>- The activities were not as fun for the mentors without any mentees. It was fairly messy and the cold temperature was not making the experience more enjoyable.</p>
My Takeaways From These Responses:	<p>From these comments, I see that mentors felt a little split about how this day went for them. From this we can learn that not every activity or theme is going to be enjoyed equally by everyone involved. It is important to offer activities that we think mentees and mentors will enjoy, because if the mentors cannot get into it then it can be more difficult for the mentees to. We can also see that some people really enjoyed how our activities related to the theme. Having relevant activities and a coherent theme is appreciated by participants.</p>		

Table 10: Mentors Responses to Week Seven Curriculum

These tables offer a lot of useful information about how mentors reacted to specific activities and themes. From this, I have identified what aspects of AKOG went well for mentors and what aspects were difficult, and how the YGC team can use this information to have more future successes. Overall, there are a few general themes I picked out from their responses. First, mentors think that the day is more successful for them when we do activities that involve the whole group or offer them the chance to work with others. This is clear from their comments about whole group games versus working on projects alone.

Similarly, mentors feel the day is successful when our activities and themes promote teamwork and collaboration. These types of comments were left on the STEM Day activities that challenged mentors and mentees to work together and more comments about struggles on the Game Day activities when teamwork was not offered as much.

Additionally, mentors think it is important for the YGC team to offer them new activities that they have not done before. Having the chance to discover something new with other people is exciting, while repeating things you may have done a lot of times in the past makes it more difficult for mentors to be engaged. While mentors think planning new activities is important, they also benefit when the YGC team allows for some free time and choice in what they are doing. This is shown in comments about doing unplanned activities with mentors or liking the stations that offered lots of choice.

However, too much free time can be uncomfortable or draining. The YGC Coordinators have to have smooth transitions that cut down the time when no choices are being offered and mentors and mentees are waiting around. Lastly, some mentors benefit when the activities of the



day make sense and go along with the theme. This is shown in comments that say they enjoyed the Winter Day’s related activities but did not enjoy the last minute changes on Shero Day.

**Claim:** There are several controllable factors that YGC can focus on to improve their experiences at AKOG (such as intentional team-based activities, activities relevant to a coherent theme, carefully organized plans, activities new to everyone, space for choice and creativity).

These comments from mentors can help the future YGC Coordinators focus on creating plans that will be more successful for everyone at AKOG. However, I also want to take space to once again recognize that not every participant at AKOG shares the same thoughts, opinions, and experiences. At the end of the semester, a survey was sent out to all of the younger girls AKOG mentors (not just my research participants) to ask them to rank their favorite to least favorite days at AKOG. This survey was intended to be used to see if any particular days at AKOG stood out to everyone as the best or the worst so that we could use the information for future planning.

Please rank the days of AKOG last semester from your favorite (1) to least favorite (6). Select each number only once.

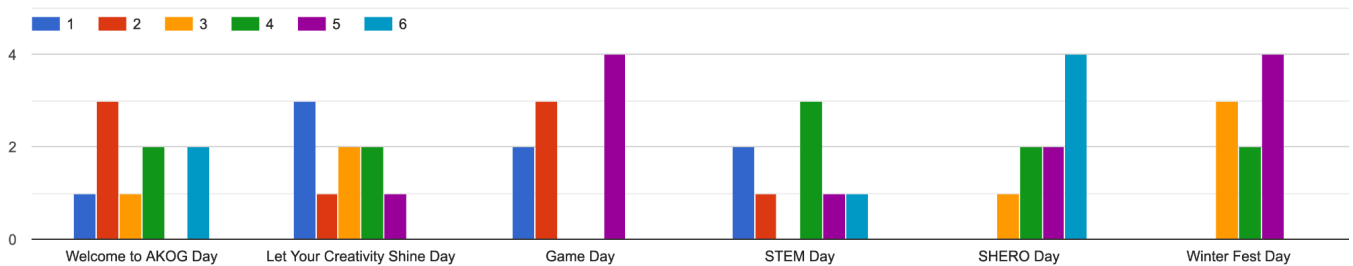


Figure 21: Survey Results About Ranking AKOG Curriculum

In Figure 21, we can see that 4/9 mentors ranked Shero Day as their least favorite day while Game Day and Winter Fest Day were tied as second least favorite with 4/9 responses each. I can likely conclude that these days were likely the least successful for mentors based on these

numbers and the comments received. Let Your Creativity Shine Day got the most responses of people saying it was their favorite, but with only 3 people ranking it as so, I cannot conclude that mentors overwhelmingly shared this experience. STEM Day and Game Day were tied as second favorites. This is interesting because people also ranked Game Day as their least favorite, so some people liked it and some did not. You can see this split between liking and not liking it in their comments as well, and I think it is notable to realize that people were split about their experiences on this day.

Overall, with only 4/9 mentors agreeing on anything at all, it is clear that there was not a huge consensus on most of least favorite days. This data does a good job at showing that mentors in AKOG have different opinions about their experiences and that, while I have tried to make general claims about how to improve AKOG for them, people will always have different personal preferences.

**Claim:** Mentors have different personal preferences that impact their experiences at AKOG which the YGC Coordinators cannot control.

### **Data Discussion: A Letter to the Future Leaders of AKOG**

In order to tie together what I've learned from this data, this section of my paper is going to switch tones to be a bit more informal. This section can be read as a letter to the future leaders of AKOG, particularly the YGC Coordinators who will follow in my footsteps.

Hi there,

If you made it through reading this entire paper, I am super impressed. Or if you're just skipping ahead to get to the part where I talk about what this all means, I don't blame you. When read all at once, the data I gathered about AKOG this semester can feel like a lot. Even though

I'm supposed to be the expert here, it's still hard to compress it all down into just a few takeaways. In order to get to the main points, I am going to provide a quick summary of my findings and claims:

- The pandemic has had a huge impact on relationships and mentee attendance in AKOG.
- This has made AKOG a much smaller program than in the past, and has made it easier for us to be involved in whole group activities that have helped rebuild some sense of community and relationships.
- Still, social circles in AKOG can be too small. It's nice to have a small group to be close with, but it can feel lonely when those people aren't there or if they are not including you.
- Stress, burnout, and large levels of commitment can be tied to low energy at AKOG, especially for members of the Steering Committee, that may discourage people from taking on leadership roles in the program.
- Mentors are pretty clear about their role in the program, but Steering Committee members could still improve on setting clear expectations and better preparing mentors for Saturdays.
- Sense of worth can increase more in AKOG by creating a closer community in the group (improving the mentor to mentee ratio, more mentor bonding, debriefs and check-ins for mentors to voice opinions).
- The YGC Coordinators struggled with disorganization and a lack of teamwork that caused a lot of stress in the role. Improving these two factors could help them tackle controllable factors in improving mentors' experiences.

There are a few factors to the mentors' experiences that you (the YGC Coordinators) don't have a lot of control over. This includes mentors' personal preferences about what activities they enjoy and the current mentor to mentee ratio that relies on how many mentees attend the program. My findings suggest, however, that there are a lot of factors you can work to improve, and I think the first step starts by evaluating the team you're working with. Ask each other: What are your communication styles? How do you like to stay organized? Can you be honest with each other about how much work you can take on? My experience on the YGC team has taught me

that we have to rely on each other a lot, and being able to do this requires trust and teamwork. It can be stressful, overwhelming, and lonely if you don't share the weight of running the program. Please be honest with each other about how you are feeling and if the role is too much for your team to handle. If you think it might be, maybe reconsider what the responsibilities of the YGC Coordinators should be.

As I suggested in my findings, one way to alleviate the pressure put onto the YGC Coordinators would be to redesign the role to include the mentors more. This would also help with most of the factors mentors talked about that could improve their experience in the program (building a closer community, having their voices be heard, feeling more prepared, feeling valuable at AKOG, etc.). With all the changes the pandemic has made on this program, I am left wondering how the mindset of "returning to what AKOG used to be" is harming us. It is more important, in my opinion, to think about what systems in AKOG serve us and what could continue to change in order to better the program. Just because something has always been done one way does not mean that it has to stay like that. With a smaller number of participants now than in the past, it may be time to provide the younger girls mentors with more responsibility in the club.

I suspect that providing mentors with more agency in the organization could also lead to a change in the way they think about their role. The thought behind this entire paper was that improving the curriculum at AKOG could help mentors feel better equipped in building relationships. I started with the idea that some curricula can be more supportive than other curricula in helping mentors build relationships and feel connected to the club. While I still think this is true, I am left wondering if mentors in AKOG rely too heavily on the programming from

the curriculum to enable their relationships with mentees. The curriculum content should simply support their mentorship and guide the day. If there was no guiding theme and activities, like the one week we decided to cancel AKOG, would mentors be able to participate in AKOG just as meaningfully? By working closely with the mentees, they should know what activities and themes mentees would be most interested in and should have the opportunity to organize and participate in them. Mentors should be coming to AKOG equipped and trained to build relationships regardless of what the YGC Coordinators do to help them. Curricula should help mentors build relationships, not try to do the work for them.

This is not to say that mentors must apply to AKOG with all the experience needed to be a “perfect” mentor. As I talked about in the introduction of this paper, this is how I thought about mentoring before I realized that the space could be supportive in helping me become a stronger youth worker. Mentors in AKOG become good mentors through experience. I think it is the job of future leaders to help them create meaningful experiences in AKOG, through the suggestions offered above, and with some more suggestions to follow. However, it is not sustainable for the YGC Coordinators or any individual members of AKOG to feel responsible for everyone’s experiences in the program. AKOG is a community, and therefore all members must be involved in creating supportive and fulfilling experiences.

After much discussion with my thesis defense committee, it seems that my entire paper has been dancing around one theme without explicitly stating it: Mentors’ experiences and relationships in AKOG are dependent on whether or not they feel cared for. The same is true for Steering Committee members, and the same is also true for people outside of this specific program and context. People, in general, need to feel cared for and to care about one another in

order to create a sense of accountability. This research is showing over and over that mentors need AKOG to feel like their own space - not a chore or “service labor” they can put on a resume, but a place they are getting something out of by showing up. In order to ensure that this care is being created in AKOG, there needs to be more structural routines and rituals built into the program.

Some suggestions for how to build more care and joy into the program came from my thesis defense committee. Some routines and rituals we discussed were things I’ve previously mentioned in this paper, like having more mentor bonding nights, debriefs, and including mentors in the planning process. We discussed building in more regular celebrations for the mentors, such as having a scheduled time every Saturday for mentors to share what was meaningful for them each week or to share about why they are there as a mentor. Having more opportunities for mentors to share their experiences with each other could naturally create a tighter knit community over time. The most important takeaway from this discussion, however, is the necessity of making these routines a regular and lasting part of AKOG.

Creating routines in AKOG that last, while mentors fluctuate in and out of the program, can be extremely difficult. My committee and I talked a lot about how quickly and drastically we’ve seen AKOG change as a program over the course of the pandemic. Seemingly overnight, many of the routines, rituals, and community members that had been a part of AKOG for years disappeared. While some aspects of being a student-led organization give us fluidity and independence, other aspects make it hard to ensure that there is continuity in the organization. We discussed the idea of building an archivist position into the Steering Committee, possibly for credit or a stipend through the university. This person could maintain records about the

organization so that in periods of transition, such as what is happening now after the pandemic, leaders would not feel so lost. Additionally, we talked about how important it could be for us to develop a close relationship with a future faculty advisor who would be able to serve as a consistent member of the program over many years.

In general, my biggest takeaway from this research has to do with support. The curriculum has to support the mentors, the mentors have to support one another, members of the Steering Committee require each other's support to run the program, and the program as a whole needs the support of all of its members to continue. All of the questions I investigated and the claims I found in answering them are connected and cannot be separated from one another or the idea of needing support. The most important thing I've learned is that a sense of support must be built between every single member of the program in order to create a shared feeling of community, accountability, and love for being a part of AKOG.

At the beginning of this research, I felt a lot of anxiety about what would happen to AKOG after the pandemic. Lots of on-campus organizations started to disappear after struggling to rebuild their membership and losing the knowledge of graduated past members. As I write this now, I feel much more confident that the people taking over AKOG are a powerful group with ambitious ideas and a love for the program that will take it to great places. I wrote at the start of this paper, "I think it is safe to assume that AKOG today is much different than what it was years before, is currently changing, and will continue to change in the future." The future change is left up to you. I hope this paper can serve as a sort of guide to what AKOG has undergone and where it could go next. Thank you for all of your hard work!

PS. We just submitted an order of shelving at our last Steering Committee meeting.

Whatever you choose to do in the future, please find a way to organize and create an inventory of our materials in the JSC closet. Just text me if you need any help and I'll be there!

- Riley

## **Conclusion**

In this final section, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of my work, as well as what I have personally learned from this experience. First, I think that I did succeed in my initial hope to identify ways to improve curriculum planning at AKOG. I intended to do this work to help the future YGC Coordinators improve the mentoring experience, and I think it can be used for this. As for what it adds to the general literature, my project includes a lot about youth program mentors and leaders' responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. My research could potentially be used to learn about the mindsets that youth workers have post-pandemic (stress, burnout, nostalgia for the past). While I expected to pay more attention to what my data said about gender and race in youth mentoring relationships, I faced many limitations throughout my project (including fewer participants than I hoped for) that made these factors a lesser point of focus.

If I were to redesign this project and do it all over again, I would change a few things about my data collection. First, I would likely ask participants to identify themselves in every survey I collected. By asking for anonymous surveys, I expected that participants would feel more safe to be honest about their experiences. However, most of the feedback I received was rather short and did not contain anything sensitive. If I had asked for names, it would have been beneficial to see how the same mentors responded each week and to look for trends in their



individual responses. Second, I would likely ask for mentors to say a few words about the rankings they provided each week on energy, preparation, and relationship building. I originally did not want to ask for comments because I wanted to keep the survey as brief and easy to fill out as possible. However, having more explanations from mentors about why they had certain feelings would have been a valuable addition to my findings.

Overall, I learned a lot from this project about how to conduct research and reduce data to tell important stories. While I do not plan to do formal research like this in the future, I discovered that informal qualitative research is something I do almost every day. As a future teacher, I've discovered a lot of connections between the skills I have developed doing qualitative research and the skills I will need to assess my students' needs and strengths. I feel proud of the work I have done in this project and thankful for all the people who have helped me put it together.

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