Sport has been touted as a vehicle to aid in the positive development of youth (Brunelle, Danish, Forniers, 2007; DeMeulenaere 2010; Hartmann, 2009; Perkins & Masden, 2008; Skinner, Zakus & Colwell, 2008; Spaaij, 2009). Urban school administrators, teachers, and families constantly face barriers that can hamper the educational progress of their students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2008); however, sport based youth development programs are one means by which supplemental resources can positively affect students’ development. Some of the most impactful sport based youth development programs are those where youth become engaged in a model that uses power sharing and participation to incorporate them as active decision makers. By promoting positive development and encouraging engagement (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2002), programs based on “right relationships” (Doucot, 2010) between youth and mentors that endure over time have the potential to make lasting impacts on the both groups.

The current study serves as a follow up to the initial research conducted with five adolescent girls who participated in a university-affiliated sport based youth development after school program between 2005 and 2006 (Note: citation not given as it compromises the anonymity of this abstract). Upon the girls’ graduation from the program, the research team has continued to track the five girls through their participation in other programs in their community, further involvement of the university-affiliated program in their schools, and regular contact with their families. Formal interviews were conducted with each girl and one of her parents during the 2008-2009 academic years. Since this time, additional data has been collected in the form of participant observation and field notes from in-person, phone and electronic communication.

Given the longitudinal nature of the study, social capital theory was employed as a framework for understanding the impact of both the sport based youth development program and the connections formed between the participants and mentors. Sport is often associated with the production of social capital in youth when it is intentionally used as a channel to bridge relationships across different networks often with the goal of positive social gain (Hartman, 2003). In particular, three components of social capital- level of trust, information channels, and norms (Coleman, 1988; 1993)- were employed in data analysis. Additionally, results are organized using the following two of the a priori themes generated in the initial study: (a) connections to a community and a sense of belonging and (b) active participation in planning and recognizing one’s own influence in making a difference for self and others (Pittman, et al., 2002).

Findings suggest that the intentionality with which relationships were formed between mentors and participants (Hartmann, 2003) in the sport based youth development program led to enduring positive impacts. The youth gained the social capital and ability to navigate, some with the help of their families as well, the educational system successfully and become active participants in their community. While sport has continued to be a part of each of the participant’s lives to varying degrees, the relationships gained through sport have not only endured but also helped the participants establish trust, and learn and apply norms.