

**Understanding and Transforming an Afterschool Tutoring Program Through  
Qualitative Research: Making Meaning of Memos**

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**Abstract**

Afterschool time is increasingly recognized as critical to children's healthy development. Despite the increased attention to this period of the day, little systematic research has been done on afterschool programs aimed at promoting positive development in children. The present study describes a small-scale afterschool program in Boston, Massachusetts, and the unique research process – writing qualitative memos (memoing) – that was introduced by the research-practitioners who were studying the program. While not the original research focus of the program, the memo-writing process was found to be a distinctive component of the program in that it not only provided useful qualitative data, but it also proved to be an effective tool for influencing and transforming practice.

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As the impact of out-of-school time on young people's development continues to gain recognition in this country, researchers and practitioners alike are searching to identify and replicate successful models in after-school education. A growing number of clearinghouses and coalitions are working to promote proven practices while also encouraging innovation

in a field that, in many cases, attempts the integration of education, youth empowerment, and community development. Our study focuses on one small-scale after-school initiative — a twice-a-week tutoring program in a mixed-income housing development in Boston, Massachusetts. The study's in-depth and inductive nature results from the fact that all members of our research team work as tutors as well. As researcher-practitioners, our aim has been to develop a grounded theory of the tutoring program, one that might inform our own practice as well as the work of others in after-school education.

Despite the increased attention on after-school education, the field still lacks systematic research (Noam, Biancarosa, & Dechausay, 2003). The literature that does exist tends to be thematic in nature, often providing a comparative analysis of the ways in which various programs approach a specific challenge, such as bridging school and after-school, promoting literacy during out-of-school time, or training and retaining after-school staff. Program-specific articles do exist, some authored by outsider researchers who have immersed themselves in the program and others presenting the work of researcher-practitioners (Fusco, 2001; Grosshandler & Grosshandler, 2002; Vyas and Punyashloke, 2002). Written case studies of specific initiatives are nevertheless rare, and while ethnographic documentation of life in schools is commonplace in educational research, little exists in terms of the ethnography of structured after-school settings. This is perhaps not surprising, given the novelty of after-school research — at least relative to school-based inquiry — and the focus on transferable evaluative research as opposed to more in-depth program portraiture. Though our research-practitioner role differs significantly from that of ethnographer or portraitist, our work shares many of the qualities associated with interpretive research, where theory is constructed in a hermeneutic fashion.

Actively involved in the program over the course of an academic year, our research team has been well positioned to carry out qualitative research aimed at capturing the experiences — both immediate and sustained — of the youth as well as the adult participants in the tutoring program. Though we may consider ourselves closer to the participant end of the “participant-observation continuum” (Glesne, 1999), with our priorities on site closely tied to our practitioner duties, our research team has devoted significant non-tutoring time and effort to the formative design and implementation of a qualitative study. We have

relied upon a phenomenological approach to help us identify the distinctive features of the tutoring program and the ways in which the participants experience the program.

This paper focuses on the one distinctive component that we ourselves introduced to the program – the documentation approach used by tutors to capture the events and interactions taking place within the tutoring program. Here we tell the story of how we implemented a documentation methodology of writing memos (“memoing”) and the ways in which we have utilized the resulting data to inform both our research and our practice. We argue that the memoing has proven to be a powerful tool for enhancing our understanding of what the program provides and how the participants experience the program, which are our main research questions. The memos have also provided us with information and perspectives that program staff has been able to feed back immediately into our practice, in terms both of approaches taken with individual students and of general program structure. Moreover, our research team’s involvement with the memos has led us to consider the ways in which memoing impacts the tutors and their engagement with the program. Though we have not made this topic the focus of our research, we present some examples of tutor reflection, both within memos and in comments about the memoing process, and link this phenomenon to theory on hermeneutic youth development practice and research. We also call for further study on this topic, arguing that methodologies promoting connectedness between practitioner and program are much needed in the field of after-school education.

### **Program Description**

Project IF, or “Inventing the Future” is a network of strength-based youth development programs initiated by Professor Michael Nakkula of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The program we are currently studying, “Tutors” is one of these initiatives. Project IF "Tutors" is an after-school tutoring program staffed by Harvard students, mainly from the Graduate School of Education who provide homework help, facilitate educational enrichment activities, and offer educational games for the children. The program finds its history in practice and research in the field of mentoring.

The Kargman Family Foundation initially funded the mentoring program, out of which the tutoring program evolved. Max Kargman, a graduate of Harvard University’s Graduate

School of Education, and the head of the foundation that bears his name, was interested in the idea of promoting academic development in youth through mentoring. Dr. Kargman was also involved in developing housing for low-income families. Keeping these interests in mind, the mentoring program was implemented to assist children in the housing communities he developed. As the field of after school education grew and as the financial limits of one-on-one mentoring were seen, the tutoring program developed as a means to reach more children.

Today, the tutoring program takes place in the community center of one of these mixed-income housing developments in a neighborhood of East Boston. This physical space has proven to be an important component of the program. The mixed income housing community is a social experiment that has changed the typical environment of children who come from lower-class families. They are provided with space to play that is insulated from a typical urban environment. Apart from the tutoring program, the children are provided with resources that many inner-city children from low-income families don't have, such as computer facilities, educational and recreational field trips, and holiday parties. The community center was designed specifically for all of these activities, including the tutoring program, to be easily accessible to the community and the youth. The center is located on the housing site and is literally feet away from where some of the children live. Because the facilities were meant specifically for members of the community, the tutoring program has a privileged status and does not have to compete for space with other programs, as might be the case if the program were located in a recreation department or a school (Halpern, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). This accessibility and a dedicated space have fostered the permanence of the program.

The program takes place two afternoons per week. The number of tutors assisting the children on each of the two days ranges from five to nine and the number of students attending the program on any given day ranges from 12 to 25. Rarely are there more than four students per tutor. The children represent a wide range of ages with the youngest student being a kindergartener and the oldest students being in eighth grade. The student population is racially and ethnically diverse, with the majority of children coming from recent immigrant families.

An important component of the tutoring program is the tutors. As previously mentioned, the tutors are all Harvard students and the tutoring team is distinct in the high levels of education and experience that each of the tutors has. The research literature regarding staffing of after school programs indicates that highly educated after school staff are rare, with most holding less than a bachelors degree (Halpern, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). The tutors employed by our program all have bachelors degrees in various disciplines and all are enrolled in graduate level courses in Harvard University's Graduate School of Education, Extension School, and Divinity School. Many of the tutors also have experience working with children as teachers, camp counselors, social workers, and youth development workers. Some tutors also use the tutoring experience to fulfill requirements of coursework. This added incentive of a learning experience has proven successful in other after school programs (Davis & Farbman, 2002; Fleischauer, & Fleischauer, 1994). The expertise that the tutors have gained from their experiences, both before and during the program, is often evident and provides a level of service to a child that is not always found in after school programs (Noam, Miller, & Barry, 2002).

Because the tutors are students, they are eligible for work-study funds, allowing them to be compensated for their time. Evidence suggests that after school programs that have staff that are compensated for their time are less likely to experience high turnover and that it might also improve the quality of the program (Halpern, 2000; Noam, Miller, & Barry, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

So, overall, the program has avoided some of the limitations of funding, staffing and space that often hinder after school programs, allowing us to focus on service delivery to the children. It has further allowed us to focus on understanding how the program works and what it provides.

### **Development of the Research Question and Program Documentation Methodology**

The development of our research question came out of the particular context of the program and the state that it was in when we arrived as a brand new research team. First, we were a research team composed of students and a program director that were all

involved in a qualitative research methods class at Harvard's Graduate School of Education. Not only were we charged with the responsibility of researching a program we knew little about, but we were also responsible for providing a quality after school tutoring service to the children of the community. The reason for our limited knowledge of the program was due in part to staff turnover. Staff turnover is a large problem in after school programs, which have an average yearly attrition rate of 60 percent (U.S. Department of Education, 1993), and the "Tutors" program is no different, despite the aforementioned assets that the program has. The tutoring program has been running for several years and each year often brings a new group of tutors with different skills and expertise and a different set of children with specific academic and personal needs. Generally there is some continuity in staff, however, when we entered the program this year we had no returning staff from the previous years. The lack of returning staff and the fact that the program evolves from year to year left the incoming staff and the research team at a loss for how the program should be run and how to focus activities for the children. Many of the children had been coming to the program for several years, some since its inception. They were able to provide some initial structure to the staff in terms of focusing the activities on homework help and games, until the tutors were able to settle into their new positions and create more educational activities for the children. The basic, yet dynamic nature of the program and our limited understanding of what tutoring was providing to the children led us to form a very broad research question: "What does our program provide children and how do the children experience the program?"

Little systematic research had been done on the "Tutors" program prior to the present study. Our research team, charged with developing and implementing a year-long study of the program, first had to determine an effective method of collecting data, at least for the initial phase of the research, as we got our bearings. We made the decision to introduce a new method of program documentation for use by the tutors. In previous years, tutors had been asked to fill out a checklist and short-answer form for each child with whom the tutor had worked during a given tutoring session. Judging by examples of completed forms on file, we felt that this system of data collection lacked in richness and depth, and we even questioned whether the expectation that tutors fill out a form for every child might possible

discourage them from interacting with multiple children. Paralleling our own grounded theory approach, we sought a means by which tutors could document their interactions and observations at the afterschool program site without the risk of being limited or influenced by set questions and a predictable structure. Our studies in qualitative inquiry, with a focus on ethnographic research, also informed our desire to tap into tutors' phenomenological experiences through written narratives. Asking tutors to take field notes as part of their work on site was unrealistic, as this would have removed them from their intended role as engaged practitioner. Thus the documentation process would necessarily have to take place after the fact.

We opted for an approach that we referred to as memoing, a methodology we had discussed in our reading of Maxwell's "Qualitative Research Design." (1996). While Maxwell (1996) views the memo as an analytic tool of the researcher, we offered a much broader definition of the memoing process to our practitioners, the tutors. The written explanation of what we envisioned for the memos, while inviting tutors to be reflective or interpretive in their writing, stated explicitly that the memo could be purely descriptive. The guidelines were also open-ended in terms of content: "[the memo] could be focused on a specific moment with a child or a situation that you saw developing over an hour or the entire session. It could be focused on kids' academic frustrations or on their inter-personal issues." Our only stipulation was that tutors write a memo following each session and that they devote at least thirty minutes to the contemplation and writing process. To promote a timely transfer of information and impressions into writing, tutors were expected to complete his or her memo for a given session by the end of the following day. Memos were to be written in electronic form and e-mailed to the program staff.

In considering the various ways we could organize the memoing data, we thought about both our practice and research needs. For our research purposes, being able to access the data by tutor, by session date, and by child seemed key. While downloading the incoming memos into tutor-specific and date-specific files was a straightforward process, creating a child-specific filing system required more manipulation. After reading each incoming memo, program staff would copy any reference to a specific child (a reference meaning a passage of at least a couple of sentences) and paste the reference into a document devoted

to that one child for that given session. Additional references from other tutors' memos would be pasted into that same file, with each tutor's name preceding his or her passage. As for informing and strengthening our practice, we made the decision to make the memos available to all the tutors, choosing the "by child" filing system as our organizing structure. Two to three days following each session, once the incoming memos had been organized, program staff would send out an e-mail to all the tutors. Attached to the e-mail were all the documents created for each child for that given session, consisting of the pasted-in references from different tutors' memos. Each document was named after the child, with the corresponding date. This system of text disseminating provided tutors with access to their colleagues' commentary, insights, and ruminations on specific children. Though there was no obligation to read any or all of the attached documents, tutors would nevertheless have the option of knowing the perspectives of others tutors. Given that our program does not involve long-term, one-to-one pairing of tutors and tutees, we felt that this exchange of information among multiple tutors interacting with the same child would be a valuable tool for practice.

Looking back on this early stage in our research design, it is intriguing to consider whether the initial idea to introduce memoing — and the inherent leap of faith that this method of documentation would actually provide us with meaningful data — found inspiration in our own situation as researchers and practitioners with a limited understanding of the program. Though we all brought certain theoretical frameworks and preconceived notions with us to the research site, we were, nonetheless, not entirely familiar with the site as well as with the past incarnations of the tutoring program. Perhaps, as a result, we were willing to take a risk and offer the tutors, whom we essentially recruited as data collectors, nothing more than a blank page. Regardless of its origins, our decision to implement this new documentation approach has had a major impact on the nature and development of our research over the course of the year.

### **The Data**

We anticipated that the memos would be a means for understanding what experiences the children were having in our program. While the memos did provide this information, we

also had an unexpected result. The memos proved to be an effective method for almost instantaneously influencing our practice as tutors. Some of the memos provided basic descriptions of events that occurred at “Tutors,” however, many tutors used the memos as an opportunity for self-reflection, telling us about what the program meant to them, and how they thought about and ultimately adjusted their interactions with the children. The memos, therefore, became an opportunity for the tutors to adapt their practice to the particular needs of each child.

An example of how a tutor reflected on the particular needs of a child is shown in the case of one of the children, Adam. Adam existed on the periphery of tutors while not really engaging in any learning activities. He was present regularly, but was difficult to engage, especially when the topic was homework. One day we saw that he did have some interests in solving riddles and playing various “brain-teasers.” The tutors noticed this, wrote about it in their memos and adjusted their behavior accordingly. A tutor writes:

My goal when Adam is around is always to try to keep him as engaged as possible so that he will stay at (and come back to) tutors. When we arrived I spent some time working out riddles and mind tricks with Adam. Then we played several games of Connect Four. I spent almost an hour with Adam today, which is longer than I have ever spent with him before. My goal with him is to come up with some activities and interests we have in common in order to gain his trust and make him want to stay longer and be more productive while at tutors.

This example illustrates how a tutor uses the memo to reflect on the kind of attention a child needs to remain engaged in the tutoring process and how this reflection is likely to influence practice.

Another example that shows the process of several tutors using each other’s memos to reflect on, communicate, and adjust their practice is the case of Juan. The tutors noted that Juan was reluctant to get help with his homework very soon after he began attending Tutors. This tutor describes the first day that Juan arrived at tutors:

I met Juan today as well. Juan's a fourteen-year old boy who sat down and did all his work himself. I tried very hard to show an interest in what he was doing and he said he didn't really need help.

Even though he did his work on his own, he may have benefited from the help that the tutors were offering. The tutors had suspicions that that Juan was doing poorly in school based upon the fact that he rarely brought homework. He continued to come to Tutors regularly, however. The memos around this time reflect the tutors' concern for Juan's academic achievement. Another tutor writes about Juan:

The first part of Tutors today was quieter and less populated than usual. I spent most of the first hour with Juan, who seems to want to be at Tutors more and more. What's interesting is that Juan informed me on Wednesday...that getting extra help (i.e. homework help at Tutors) means you're SPED (slang for Special Education)... So I'm aware that Juan is not willing to ask for help on his homework or school work in general. Therefore I decided it best simply to work on developing a relationship with him and build some trust...He is obviously fond of the tutors, and keeps coming to hang out with us. I'd like to get to the point where he feels comfortable enough with us that we could work on a learning plan with him.

The learning plans that this tutor mentions are tools we developed to go over a child's grades with him or her and to set future academic goals. Usually, it is an important step in engaging a child around academics and in setting goals for a child's academic success. This tutor not only describes Juan's lack of interest in schoolwork, but also notes the opportunity for change and sets a plan of action to engage him in educational activities. After Juan had been coming to tutors for nearly a semester and after a good deal of work and communication through conversations and especially memos, a tutor was able to help Juan fill out a learning plan. She describes her thought in this memo:

Today I worked with Juan to partially complete his independent learning goal sheet. At the very beginning of 'Tutors,' we asked him if he had brought in his report card...He is currently failing three subjects—science, math, and theater...It really shocked me that he

would be struggling so much in some subjects, yet never once ask for help with schoolwork during ‘Tutors.’ [Juan]...expressed a lot of concern about his performance in mathematics, and we talked about what he could do to try to improve his grade. I encouraged him to bring his homework to ‘Tutors,’ but he told me that he never gets homework. I suggested then that he bring his textbook along so that someone could go over the difficult concepts with him, and he told me that they didn’t have books. Finally, I suggested that he spend about fifteen minutes each day at ‘Tutors’ working through a math problem that someone invents, and he seemed agreeable to that.

So, again the memos are used for reflection about practice while capturing a tutor’s sincere desire to help a child out.

This desire to help a child such as Juan can find its origins in how the tutors describe how they are transformed by their relationships with children. One tutor, an exchange student from England, describes a sincere affection for Juan’s personality:

Initially I chatted with Juan, who is always friendly and amiable...we had an interesting chat about our different cultures and he explained American football to me and the culture surrounding it. I was impressed by how much care he took with this and seemed engaged in telling me about these things.

Here we see how a tutor feels that she has benefited from her interaction with a child and how this seemingly small interaction is meaningful not only to the child but also to the tutor. This process of relationship building, which was underscored by the memos, led to benefits beyond the relationships themselves. For Juan, it actually allowed him to utilize a tutor’s help to complete a science project:

I think that Emma (a tutor) suggested that I might be able to help think of an idea for a project, so Juan called me over. Emma and Juan thought about doing something about food preservatives for his science project and they asked me if I knew anything about them. I immediately thought of the fact that I brought ingredients to make guacamole for our holiday

party that included limes that are used to prevent the avocados from turning brown. I explained to Juan that the citric acid in the limes works to preserve the fruit. We then brainstormed ideas about how he could devise an experiment to see what substances preserve fruit better than others.

The tutors and Juan devised an experiment on food preservatives and carried it out over the next few tutoring sessions. Juan, amazingly, received a very good grade on his science project and was selected as the representative from his class at the school-wide science fair. It is our belief that this ability to engage Juan would not have happened so quickly had the previous reflection in the memos about ways to engage him not been written and shared.

Through these examples, we see that the memos provide invaluable information. First, they are able to relay basic facts about events at Tutors. Second, they are also able to show the phenomenological experiences of the tutors in the program. Lastly, the reflection on experiences in the program is utilized as a means of transforming practice with favorable results.

### **Triangulating the Memoing Data**

Having focused much of our attention on the memoing throughout the fall semester, we shifted our attention second semester, intent on expanding our methodology and triangulating the memoing data. The limitations of the memos as a data source were evident to us. A thick layer of tutor subjectivity lay between the kids' experience and the memos' content. The memos were far less systematic than proper field notes. Style and substance varied considerably, with some tutors producing full, reflective paragraphs while others tended toward a limited listing of events and interactions. Some tutors turned inward, analyzing their own tendencies and motivations, and others articulated their ideas and questions about specific children or particular program components. We sought a new form of data collection that would compensate, at least in part, for some of these drawbacks.

Capturing the youth voice seemed of primary importance in supplementing the adult-generated memoing data, and thus we opted for focus groups with children active in the program. Though we envisioned eventually carrying out interviews and possibly even case

studies on specific kids, we understood that focus group data would provide the groundwork for more in-depth, individualized research. We planned for and ran three focus groups with program participants, organizing the groups by age and, in the case of the middle school children, by gender (Other target populations we considered were parents of participants as well as children from the housing development who do *not* attend the program). Working first individually and then as a team, we used two of the focus group transcripts to create a draft codebook, relying on the Boyatzis (1998) methodology of code development, in which researchers identify themes that they see as emerging directly from the text(s) being analyzed. Our present code book, though not a finished product, consists of twenty codes, including: “Homework, games, and snacks”; “Tutors don’t give you the answer”; and “Big Kids/Little Kids.”

Despite the many contrasts between the memoing data and focus group data, it became evident that our initial experience with the former informed how we engaged with the latter. While some might consider the fact that one analysis influenced another to be problematic, we argue that it is a natural and even healthy example of the hermeneutic research process. Engagement with one data set led to a more complex interpretation of another one. Our experience with the focus group coding also highlighted the sorts of dilemmas that we have continually encountered as researcher-practitioners. One question that has followed us throughout the year asks to what extent should we allow our familiarity with the program and its people, events, and setting to inform our interpretation of the data. In coding the focus group data, we were forced to acknowledge explicitly the ways in which our version, or versions, lined up or conflicted with what we heard from the children. And just as our answer has come to be that we cannot ignore or cordon off our intimacy with the subjects of our research, we also believe that we must acknowledge and use to our advantage the insights gained from of one data source when working with another.

### **The Impact of Memoing on the Tutors**

Though our research on the memos has focused primarily on making meaning of their content, the question of what role memoing plays in the overall experience of the tutors is

one that has come up repeatedly in our discussions. We see the potential for a future phase of research that would involve examining the possible effects of the memoing process on tutor outcomes, including level of engagement, initiative, integration of outside learning and experiences, and long-term commitment. In considering the literature that might inform this sort of study, we have found what seems to be a gap between writings on ethnographic practice and articles focused on the concept of the “reflective practitioner.”

The original rationale for the memoing centered on our team’s interest in having the program, its environment, and its participants documented from various perspectives over a sustained period of time. However, what we requested of the tutors was a far cry from systematic ethnographic documentation. Making memoing part of a tutor’s duty and compensating tutors financially for their memoing time provided an extrinsic motivation for the tutors, who had joined the program and had entered into the afterschool program community as practitioners. Most ethnographic researchers would be operating within a much different construct, motivated by their own line of inquiry, with their primary purpose in becoming a part of a specific environment being to study how individuals and groups there function. The process of documenting their experience would be considered as fundamental to their work as would be the actual observation (Emerson, Fretz, Snow, 1995), whereas memoing for the tutors was most decidedly a secondary component of their tutoring experience.

Just as we were not intending for the memos to provide authentically ethnographic data, we also were not asking tutors to be reflective for the sake of improved practice or professional development. A wealth of literature exists on the topic of reflective practice, with a significant percentage of articles focusing on pre-service training and pedagogy. While we recognize this realm of inquiry and practice as an important one, it was not one that we set out to explore when introducing the memoing. Though our research team acknowledged the important contribution of the memos to our qualitative study, we were not inviting tutors to engage in any sort of structured action research, an approach associated with many initiatives aimed at promoting reflective practice. Program staff often responded to the contemplative comments made and questions posed by tutors in their memos, but no formal feedback system was established, something that would have been critical to a

collaborative inquiry model. While we made active use of the memoing data in adapting our practice and developing our research plan, tutors' reflectiveness was not a prerequisite for these processes to occur. From the very beginning, we made clear that being reflective in memoing was a welcome option but by no means was it a requirement.

Reflective writing, nevertheless, became common practice early on for many tutors. This was not surprising, given the caliber of the tutors and the context of their participation in the program – Harvard graduate students with past experience and, in most cases, future aspirations in the field of education. The nature of tutors' reflections varies greatly, with some comments being more inwardly focused than others. In portraying certain teaching moments, tutors have written about how they referenced specific pedagogical approaches learned in their graduate classes. Some memos include references to other memos, as tutors consider what their peers have written about specific children and contemplate collaborative strategies. Tutors often use the memos to reflect on concrete aspects of the program, posing questions about how our practice could be more effective and the environment more conducive to achieving our aims. Occasionally the memoing process allows tutors to recognize and reflect upon the emotions they felt at the time of tutoring or being with the children in other program contexts. One tutor acknowledges feeling “defensive” of one child toward another following a certain incident, and others comment on the sadness or joy they felt as the result of specific events or interactions.

One tutor, in particular, has tended to engage in reflection that shows a strong awareness of self-development and growth resulting from her involvement and relationships with the children in the housing community. Though the following excerpt is taken from a memo written following one of the more emotionally charged sessions of the year, it nonetheless offers powerful evidence of the ways in which a tutor recognizes change in herself as a result of interacting with a young person:

I've been sitting in front of my computer screen for a while now, hoping that the words I type will convey the same power and force that hit me today at Tutors. Nothing at Tutors, and definitely nothing at [Harvard], could have prepared me for the intense and revealing discussion I had with Abdul. Although half my age, he spoke words of conviction,

determination, and social justice I never imagined anyone so young could formulate. ... This somber incident taught me about the power of listening to a child's voice. Out of their mouths we will hear voices that yearn to be heard...that will be heard.

In their book, "Matters of Interpretation: Reciprocal Transformation in Therapeutic and Developmental Relationships with Youth," Dr. Nakkula and co-author Sharon Ravitch (1998) discuss the importance and implications of youth development workers engaging in reflective writing in order to capture the hermeneutic nature of their practice. Along with the authors' theoretical writings, the book includes contributions by Harvard Graduate School of Education students involved in year-long practicum placements in schools and therapeutic settings. These youth development workers in-training share their experiences in working with at-risk children, drawing directly from the extensive notes they kept throughout the year. Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) explain that this "emphasis on systematic note taking and reflection on everyday events is the direct result of our trainees requesting tangible skills to counter the feelings of not accomplishing enough in their work" (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998 p.57). The authors go on to explain how documentation of incremental changes helps trainees track and ultimately appreciate the overall impact they are having on the youth with whom they work. Though our tutors are unlikely to draw on their memo portfolio in as thorough and culminating a way as the trainees, tutors have expressed a similar appreciation for the value-added nature of memoing. Reflecting on the memoing process during a focus group our team ran with the tutors, one tutor explains:

And *every* week I go home and I'm like, "I have nothing to write about today" and then like two pages later, I'm like "Ok, I think I've done enough." Once I start to write I think that I have a lot to say. And it makes you appreciate more – I've talked about this with other tutors and staff – but for me, anyway, it makes me appreciate more of what I do. Cause you go home and you say, what did I do today, what do I have to write about. And then I start writing and I realize, oh I did a lot today, I learned a lot today, I had a lot of positive interactions today and I have, you know, it always kind of amazing me what comes out when you really sit and think and process it.

Referencing the hermeneutic framework developed by Gadamer, Nakkula and Ravitch (1998) compare the two arcs of the hermeneutic circle: the first arc is that of projection, when we move, or are projected, into situations where our energy goes toward active engagement; reflection represents the “return arc,” in which we take the opportunity to interpret our actions in these situations. In processing and interpreting past events, we take critical steps toward revising our approaches to understanding future actions (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). This sort of interpretation and its implications for self-development and future-oriented adaptation is seen in one tutor’s comments about the memoing process, also shared during the tutor focus group:

...[T]he one thing that I recognize in doing the memos is the ordinary things do surprise you and how you’re able to look at things that seem like they’re normal – what kids say or maybe even their characteristics – and how those things stand out to you. I think that’s what has helped me with the memos – I mean, to go home, try to process a day that might have been, not confusing but scattered in a sense. But then there is a cohesiveness as you look at – if you actually write your memos, just seeing what kids are going through – different moods. And knowing how to prepare for the next time. In a way, it’s a little bit of therapy for myself – to just self assess and also to process what happened that day so that I’m, in a way, mentally ready for the next day, or next tutoring day.

Though the impact of the memoing process on tutors has not been the focus of our research this year, we have become cognizant of and intrigued by the ways in which memoing strengthens tutors’ connectedness to the program. Our speculations began with one tutor, who seemed only minimally committed to the program in the first semester (claiming part way through the fall that he would unlikely be able to return the second semester) but who consistently wrote memos, about his developing relationship with one specific boy and about the impact of this boy’s adoration on his own experience. This tutor did end up staying with the program, and his friendship with the little boy has become a focal point in the lore of this year’s “Tutors” program. Acknowledging certain luxuries of our program –

the fact that we can pay our tutors for their memoing time and that these graduate students appreciate the importance of the activity, both for the program and for their own educational experience – we nonetheless propose that memoing by after-school practitioners has promise as a program methodology. As we have presented, memoing provides unique data for program research. But, perhaps more importantly, we believe that further study of memoing's impact on practitioners' connectedness to their work could have important implications for a field in which retention of personnel is a critical issue.

### **Conclusion**

We have presented some of the findings we have garnered from our research, but most importantly we have described the impact of our primary qualitative methodological approach, writing memos. We believe that this approach has captured the spirit of hermeneutic practice and research, described as such:

Hermeneutic development work...is a way of being-of being an applied developmentalist-that is rooted in engaged activity of understanding and conceptualizing how people are and how applied youth development works (theory); of uncovering and making sense of the ways in which people change and grow, and determining a manner and extent to which one's practice is effective in altering and promoting change and growth (inquiry or research); and of interacting with people to help them construct, interpret, share and revise their life stories (practice).

(Nakkula and Ravitch, 1998, pp. 35-36)

We initially approached our research as a means of providing empirical evidence for the theoretical claims that after-school education and programming are important to the development of youth. Being new to the program we were studying we decided to embark on an inquiry that would help us understand it at a broad level, hoping to get a holistic perspective of it. The implementation of the memos was done in an effort to get qualitative descriptions of the events that were occurring at the program. While we did gain facts and "objective" information about what was occurring at Tutors and about the children, we also received some unexpected information. We found that the subjective experience of the tutors came through the memos. They offered an opportunity for reflection about practice

and the adjustment of practice to suit the needs of the children and the program. We speculate that this reflection also influenced how the tutors viewed the program and ultimately enhanced their commitment to it. Overall, the process of memoing has served the program very well, providing the means for our research to almost immediately transform our practice. We believe that the methodology that we employed would lend itself well to future research that is participatory in nature with the aims of influencing practice and informing research.

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