Connecting Opportunity: Leaders' Perceptions of Cross-Sector Collaboration Focused on Disconnected Youth in Westchester County, New York: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Marian Gryzlo
St. John Fisher College

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Connecting Opportunity: Leaders' Perceptions of Cross-Sector Collaboration Focused on Disconnected Youth in Westchester County, New York: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Abstract
This qualitative study analyzed how leaders from the public, private, philanthropic, and educational sectors view the complex issue of cross-sector collaboration addressing disconnected youth in Westchester County, New York. The research explored participants' perceptions about this population, also known as opportunity youth, who are ages 16 to 24 and not in school, employed, or on-track to successfully transitioning to adult independence. The study used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its methodology to explore, examine, and interpret how leaders perceive the complex and challenging issue of disconnected youth who are living in a suburban county in the New York metropolitan region. Findings revealed that how participants defined the problem and viewed interconnections and interdependencies among the sectors were major themes related to cross-sector collaboration focused on reconnecting disconnected youth. Study results suggest cross-sector collaborative influence development should include: (a) a convening table or forum where leaders can share experiences related to their experiences with the issue; (b) identification of common threads among sectors related to disconnected youth as a target population; (c) finding overlapping value propositions by examining how each sector defines value; and (d) development of interlocking goals that provide greater incentives for collaboration across the sectors.

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/171
Connecting Opportunity:
Leaders’ Perceptions of Cross-Sector Collaboration Focused on
Disconnected Youth in Westchester County, New York
An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

By
Marian Gryzlo

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Jerry Willis

Committee Member
Dr. Richard Maurer

The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

August 2014
Dedication

This journey would not have been possible without the support, guidance and encouragement of many people. A special note of appreciation goes to my husband Joe for his understanding, support, and love and for reading this document more times than I can mention. In addition, thank you to my son Joseph, for inspiring me to be as focused in my studies and intellectual pursuits as he is, and my daughter Alison for showing me you can do anything you set your mind to but that breaks to enjoy life are essential. Thanks to my mom, Annie, for a daily dose of encouragement. In addition, deep gratitude goes to my chair, Dr. Jerry Willis, for patience and wisdom, and my committee member, Dr. Richard Maurer, for guidance and perspective. Also, special thanks to the team at Westchester Children’s Association, including Cora Greenberg and Allison Lake, wonderful leaders doing the work in the field; and to Dr. Michael Feller, who was there from the beginning encouraging me and inspiring me with his past and present experiences supporting youth. Much appreciation goes to Dr. Bret Halverson for keen insights into this topic and guidance on my study. Also, thanks to Dr. Marsha Gordon for connecting me to resources, networks and sharing her passion for the work. A special expression of appreciation is offered to Dr. Claudia Edwards, for many hours spent on her patio or on campus, talking about changing the world, one child at a time. Thanks to Dr. C. Michael Robinson for guiding me through the process and giving sage advice. I also send special gratitude to Jeanne Struck for her inspirational spirit when things were most challenging. Finally, thanks to my dissertation team, the Checkmates.
Biographical Sketch

Marian Gryzlo believes in bringing passion and creativity to her leadership, work, and life. She is founder and CEO of Think to Lead LLC, a management consulting firm committed to social innovation, strategic communication, and leadership development. She has more than 25 years working across the private, nonprofit, and educational sectors in the areas of partnership development, marketing, communications, evaluation, and policy analysis. She has worked with many major corporations, foundations, educational institutions, and individuals to help develop creative engagement strategies that benefit individuals, businesses and communities and her work has sparked multi-million dollar business-nonprofit partnerships, launched foundations and repositioned nonprofits for greater success. She teaches graduate business communications and marketing, facilitates workshops for leaders, coaches entrepreneurs, and trains business owners about creative ways to partner and combine business vision with social advocacy. Her experience has spanned sectors, including leadership positions in higher education, community affairs and philanthropy. Her educational background includes an MBA in Marketing from Iona College, a BA in Political Science and Communications from Binghamton University, and a certificate in organizational coaching from NYU. She met her husband Joe when they were both resident advisors and undergraduates at Binghamton University. They have a son Joseph and a daughter Alison, who keep her grounded and positive. She loves to read, travel and volunteer for causes that support young people working towards reaching their educational and life goals.
Abstract

This qualitative study analyzed how leaders from the public, private, philanthropic, and educational sectors view the complex issue of cross-sector collaboration addressing disconnected youth in Westchester County, New York. The research explored participants’ perceptions about this population, also known as opportunity youth, who are ages 16 to 24 and not in school, employed, or on-track to successfully transitioning to adult independence.

The study used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its methodology to explore, examine, and interpret how leaders perceive the complex and challenging issue of disconnected youth who are living in a suburban county in the New York metropolitan region. Findings revealed that how participants defined the problem and viewed interconnections and interdependencies among the sectors were major themes related to cross-sector collaboration focused on reconnecting disconnected youth.

Study results suggest cross-sector collaborative influence development should include: (a) a convening table or forum where leaders can share experiences related to their experiences with the issue; (b) identification of common threads among sectors related to disconnected youth as a target population; (c) finding overlapping value propositions by examining how each sector defines value; and (d) development of interlocking goals that provide greater incentives for collaboration across the sectors.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Researchers have estimated that one in seven Americans between the ages 16 to 24 is not working and not in school (Lewis & Burd-Sharps, 2013). Economists have asserted this population segment costs the U.S. economy $93 billion annually in expenditures and opportunity losses (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012). Of this population segment, 3.4 million are considered chronically disconnected, never having been in school or working after age 16; 3.3 million are categorized as under-attached, having had some education and work experience but not having attended postsecondary education or secured stable employment (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). Being connected to employment or education is important for both society and young people (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2013) asserted high school dropouts over age 25 face double the unemployment rate of those with an associates degree and that long-term unemployment and low education levels are linked with poor mental and physical health and a “greater need for income supports such as housing vouchers, public assistance, and nutrition assistance programs” (p. 7).

This phenomenon of disconnected youth, also referred to as opportunity youth, is playing out in communities throughout the United States, as leaders are calling for greater cross-sector collaboration and alliances that will collectively address the issue (Corcoran, Hanleybrown, Steinberg, & Tallant, 2012). Indeed, appeals for greater and more effective collaboration have elevated interest in the study of effective collaboratives focused on
how communities are addressing the issue of disconnected youth (Aspen Institute, 2012). Many advocacy organizations and policy-makers have focused on disconnected youth and the impact of this population on a local, statewide, and national level. For example, a blue ribbon panel convened by the White House in 2010 has called for greater cross-sector collaboration as a major policy priority (White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012).

Westchester County, New York is a suburban county just north of New York City with a total population estimate of 968,602 residents in 2013 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). In that county, an estimated 105,271 youth were between 16 and 24 in 2012. Of this group, 35,010 were not in school and 51,698 were not working (Westchester Children's Association, 2013). While it was impossible to obtain an exact number of disconnected youth due to different methods of defining and tracking this population, using 14.6% national estimate of Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2013) in Westchester County, there would be about 15,000 people between 16-24 not in school and not working. Other national estimates would place that number even higher, at about 17% (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012) or upwards of 18,000 in the county (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013). While different official data sources and definitions prevent consensus on defining and measuring this population, Lewis and Burd-Sharps (2013) argued their source, the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), has many advantages as primary data. The researchers cited ACS data as advantageous because it is updated annually; allows for state, metro area, and census-defined neighborhood cluster analysis; counts young people living in college dormitories, juvenile or adult correctional facilities; and includes students on summer recess.
The reasons for youth disconnection from school, training, or employment are indeed varied and complex. Westchester County offers a multitude of comprehensive, coordinated services and programs that were developed to meet the social needs of various segments within this diverse population (Westchester County, 2013). However, conflicting priorities, disparate programs, and unsustainable funding among programs in social services, education, job training, internships, and employment sometimes present challenges to leaders across the sectors.

This qualitative study sought to develop a better understanding of the dynamics of cross-sector collaboration focused on this particular segment of the population. Selsky and Parker (2005) proposed “when actors from different sectors focus on the same issue, they are likely to be motivated by different goals and to use different approaches” (p. 851). A better understanding of the beliefs about collaboration in Westchester County and the views and experiences of leaders engaged in addressing the reconnection of youth not on track to self-sufficiency will inform practice and theory. The study assessed how leaders in Westchester consider developing a more comprehensive, countywide collaborative approach to enhance long-term effectiveness. To achieve that goal, the research collected and analyzed data derived from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven leaders from the education, public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic sectors using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the research methodology.

**Problem Statement**

Leaders across the sectors faced challenges in collaborating when addressing the divergent and ever-changing population of disconnected youth, ages 16-24, in Westchester County, New York. Conflicting priorities, sector differences, fragmented
programs, and unsustainable funding streams presented challenges to leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors who are focused on the issue of reconnecting disconnected youth to education and employment. Cross-sector collaboration is a complex concept and often misunderstood, adding another layer of challenges (Thomson & Perry, 2006). An understanding of leader perspectives on the process and potential for further collaboration focused on reconnecting disconnected youth will inform policy and practice.

**Theoretical Rationale**

While Gray and Wood (1991) asserted no single theoretical perspective gives a sufficient foundation for a general collaboration framework, several influential theorists provided frameworks that were useful in assessing and interpreting findings in this study. Value creation theory (Austin, 2000), collaboration success factors (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001), social issue platforms (Selsky & Parker, 2005), collective impact theory (Kania & Kramer, 2011) and the cycle of collaboration (Donahue & Zeckhauser, 2011) were explored in light of how collaborative community-wide change occurs.

Collaborative community change initiatives seek to leverage synergy when addressing challenges (Lasker, 1997). An increased number of private and public sector alliances are responding to growing demands “to address social metaproblems too complex or protracted to be resolved by a single sector” (Parker & Selsky, 2004, p. 460). Kania and Kramer (2011) argued that “large-scale social change comes from better cross-sector coordination rather than from the isolated intervention of individual organizations” (p. 38). Cross-sector collaboration is a form of interaction that seeks to address social
problems by combining the capabilities and resources of many organizations with diverse proficiencies and access to different resources (Seitanidi & Ryan, 2007). Austin (2010) asserted, “The scrutiny starts with a paradox: the differences across sectors constitute both obstacles and advantages to collaboration. The partnering challenge is to overcome the former and leverage the latter…generally it is not simple arithmetic, but complex calculus” (p. 13). Along these lines, appeals for greater and more effective collaboration by policy makers have elevated interest in research on effective models of collaboration, in particular across the sectors (White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012).

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was (a) to understand factors that contribute to successful cross-sector collaboration focused on disconnected youth in Westchester County and to, (b) assess the potential for more comprehensive and effective collaboration among the sectors in Westchester County that focuses on reconnecting the disconnected youth population.

**Research Questions**

The study sought to address the following research questions:

1. What are the similar and different perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs among public, private, and nonprofit sector leaders in Westchester County about collaboration focused on disconnected youth?

2. What do leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors who are concerned about disconnected youth believe to be the most important factors that contribute to successful collaboration that most effectively reconnects young people to school or work?
3. How do leaders representing the public, private, and nonprofit sectors engaged in supporting disconnected youth describe their experiences and views about collaboration across the sectors to support this target population?

4. What do leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors see as areas of opportunity for future collaboration among the sectors focused on reconnecting youth to school, work, and opportunity?

Significance of the Study

The study allowed for a better understanding of the dynamics of collaboration, informing future directions of a cross-sector group of leaders focused on the issue of disconnected youth in Westchester County, New York. In addition, the experiences and perceptions of leaders engaged in collaborating to address the issue of disconnected youth on a local and countywide level provided insights about practice related to collaborating across sectors to achieve collective impact. Indeed, very few studies addressing the issue of opportunity youth have concentrated on putting theory into practice (Halverson, 2012). Collaboration focused on the issue of youth not on a path to self-sustainability has the potential to affect all sectors and has enormous potential human and financial implications. A 2012 White House study analyzed the economic and societal costs of neglecting this population, calling for cross-sector collaboration as one of its recommended core strategies (White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012). How cross-sector collaboration will collectively address this population is a critical societal issue (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012).
Chapter Summary

Leaders from a variety of sectors faced challenges collaborating when addressing the diverse and divergent population of disconnected youth. In Westchester County, New York, an estimated 15,000 young people ages 16-24 are considered disconnected from school, work and the community and not on a path to self-sustainability. Leaders representing education, nonprofit, workforce, and government in the county have been working collectively to identify attributes of the population and have issued preliminary findings about the issue and the implications of this population segment to the future of the region. The study discussed in this document provided a better understanding of the dynamics of collaboration in the county focused on the issue of disconnected youth by examining the points of view of leaders and decision makers who are involved in this issue as well as the opinions of other stakeholders. Findings also contributed to a better understanding of factors and dynamics that influence successful cross-sector collaboration in Westchester County and supported planning for future collaboration addressing the reconnection of youth to education, employment and opportunity. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on cross-sector collaboration and disconnected youth. Chapter 3 describes the methodology of this study. Chapter 4 presents study findings. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses study limitations and implications for practice.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction and Purpose

Cross-sector collaboration focused on youth not working, in school or in training is a major societal issue challenging numerous national, local, regional, and statewide communities. Young people who are not in school, in training or employed, often referred to as opportunity youth, represent an enormous social and economic cost to all sectors of society (Belfield & Levin, 2012). Numerous barriers hamper their transition from adolescence to adulthood and young people disengage from school and work for many different reasons (Settersten & Ray, 2010). Many national policy groups and advocacy organizations present this segment of youth as a major and complex societal issue needing to be addressed by cross-sector social alliances and partnerships.

Halverson (2012) asserts, “No group has suffered as disproportionately as young people, especially those vulnerable populations with low basic skills and multiple educational and social support barriers to employment” (p. 1). Corcoran et al. (2012) proposes that disconnected, fragmented programs and services and the lack of pathways with on-ramps for youth contribute to the difficulty of youth reconnecting to school or connecting to employment. In many past instances, the private sector’s role in youth policy has been characterized as “more symbolic than substantive” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011, p. 14). In addition, Carnevale, Hanson, and Gulish (2013) argue the previous linear model of education to full-time employment to retirement is no longer a relevant paradigm, requiring young people to combine work and learning at
even earlier stages in order to transition to a full-time career. Regardless of the reasons for their disconnection, examining the factors that contribute to the efficacy of cross-sector collaboratives addressing this population will inform practice and provide insight on policy issues.

Literature Review

**Youth as emerging adults.** The age range from 18 through 25 is a developmental stage referred to as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). The developmental age range differs slightly from how U.S. census data aggregates information about this segment of the population, however, sharing the general description of a large segment of those that fall within this developmental stage may be useful. Emerging adulthood has been described as:

A time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (Arnett, 2000, p. 469)

During those years, young people typically encounter their first educational and work experiences laying the groundwork for future career success. Being connected to employment or education is important for both youth and society (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). Coy (2012) describes what disconnected young people today are experiencing as a “quiet desperation of a generation in ‘waithood,’ suspended short of fully employed adulthood” (p. 1).

Transitioning to first employment is indeed a critical state that has become even more challenging for young people as a result of the recent economic recession. Van
Horn, Zukin, Szeltner, and Stone (2012) found almost a third of high school graduates from years 2006-2011 were still unemployed and nearly half of recent graduates were looking for full-time work, based on a representative sample survey, many living at home as dependents of others. Such a large population of unemployed, uneducated, untrained individuals represents lost opportunity of human capital for U.S. employers (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011) and their presence is affecting communities where they live. In New York City, 20% of New Yorkers between 18 and 24, or 172,000 young people, are considered opportunity youth, on the fringe of New York’s labor market (Treschen & Parrot, 2013). Along those lines, one in three U.S. high school graduates ages 18-24 are currently unemployed and looking for work, representing 20 million people. Only about half (53%) of young people in the 50 largest U.S. cities graduated on time from high school between 1995 and 2005, an average well below the national average of 71% (Swanson, 2009). In addition, one third of the high school graduating class of 2013 did not meet any ACT benchmarks for college-readiness. Also, only 39% of 2013 graduates who took the ACT exam achieved three or more college-readiness benchmarks in science, math, reading or English (Adams, 2013).

While the problem of young people not working or in school is foreshadowed by students’ poor performance in K-12 education, youth who have attended postsecondary institutions are also among the population of an emerging workforce not yet employed. In a 2012 study done by the McKinsey Center for Government, researchers found that the business sector views the lack of skills in the emerging workforce as a significant challenge (Moushed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012). Also, the opinions of young people in the United States revealed 45% are not confident their postsecondary studies improve their
chances of getting a job. The center conducted a global study, asking attitudinal and behavioral questions in a survey of 2,832 employers, 908 providers of postsecondary education, and 4,656 youth. Results revealed fewer than half of the youth and the employers believed that new graduates are sufficiently equipped for entry-level positions, compared to 72% of education providers who believed new graduates are prepared for work (Moushed et al., 2012). Results also revealed that one-third of employers reported never communicating with education providers, and among those, less than half described it as productive. In addition, more than a third of postsecondary institutions reported they were unable to estimate graduates’ job-placement rates. Of those that said they could, 20% overestimated job placements compared with what youth reported. Also, fewer than half of young people said they had a firm understanding of which areas of study lead to careers with job openings and good salaries when they chose what to study in college. The transition from higher education to employment is another area where youth may veer off track and become disconnected (Moushed, et al., 2012).

**National context.** In December 2010, President Obama created the White House Council for Community Solutions. The stated goals of the Council were to:

- connect, convene and catalyze the best resources of the public, private, non-profit, and philanthropic sectors in communities across the country;
- identify and highlight solutions that work;
- identify key attributes of effective cross-sector solutions from institutions working together on community problems and;
- catalyze resources to support effective community-based solutions (White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012).
The White House Council for Community Solutions focused on communities collectively solving problems and looked past discrete programs that displayed success, which only affected limited populations. Instead, its work focused on those communities solving problems together, showing improved results across the entire community. The initiative proposed that cross-sector community collaboratives exemplify an emerging national trend, where communities are working together to solve their toughest challenges. The Council was interested in studying this trend by identifying examples of communities realizing significant change, defined as progress of 10% or greater on key community-wide indicators (White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012). The Commission conducted 613 interviews with disconnected youth highlighting numerous case studies of examples of success and reporting on the economic and societal costs of inaction related to opportunity youth. The group called for cross-sector collaboration as one of its recommended strategies (White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012).

The White House study brought much attention to the urgency of the issue. Led by a cross-sector coalition of leaders from the public, nonprofit, education, and business sectors, researchers analyzed data using a mixed methods approach. The White House sourced much of its data from the Congressional Research Service, which tracks disconnected youth based on questions asked in the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS) about workforce participation, school attendance, and marital status (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). The definition includes youth aged 16 through 24 who did not work anytime during a previous year, except for pursuing their education. This definition, however, does not count those young people in prisons, jails, college dorms, military quarters, and mental health, and other institutional settings, a major limitation of
the data (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). While the White House report characterized the views of opportunity youth as hopeful, other studies have found youth reporting a sense of hopelessness related to their future opportunities (Van Horn et al., 2012).

Regardless, numerous studies have attempted to quantify and give an economic value to this target population, using a similar framework for analysis. Young people who are unemployed, not in school, or not receiving training represent an enormous social and economic cost to all sectors of society. Researchers estimate 6.7 million young people ages 16-24, or about 17% nationwide, are opportunity youth. This group represented a projected economic loss of $93 billion to taxpayers in 2011 and a cost to society of $4.7 trillion over the groups’ lifetime (Belfield & Levin, 2012).

The White House established the White House Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, a working group comprised of 18 federal departments and agencies that support activities that focus on youth. The Working Group was formally established by Executive Order 13459, Improving the Coordination and Effectiveness of Youth Programs, in February 2008 (White House Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, 2013). The White House Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs introduced a draft strategic plan, Pathways for Youth, “to help partners address common goals for youth, elevate strong models of youth programs, policies, and other supports, and articulate areas for future collaborative work with and for youth” (Pathways for Youth, 2013, p. 1). The group’s vision statement emphasized “the importance of pathways for disconnected youth that include meaningful connections and safe, healthy, and stable places to live, learn, and work” (p.1). In 2013, White House Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs launched a website, www.findyouthinfo.gov,
which highlighted numerous community collaboratives as exemplars, and provided an
interactive community-mapping tool that links to funding sources that target this
population.

Policy makers and the federal government have also established numerous
funding programs designed to address youth who are disconnected from completing their
education. The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) allocated
funding through several programs targeted to address the issue of youth disengagement.
The Investing in Innovation Fund (I3) provided funding to support local educational
agencies and nonprofit organizations partnering to improve student achievement (U.S.
Department of Education, 2014). I3 invested in innovative practices demonstrated to have
impact on decreasing dropout rates and improving college enrollment and completion
rates.

The Social Innovation Fund (SIF), a program of the federal Corporation for
National and Community Service (CNCS), combined public and private resources to
expand promising community-based solutions that have proven results in three target
areas which are: (a) economic opportunity, (b) healthy futures, and (c) youth
development (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2013). The SIF
increased access to effective programs that enabled communities in need to overcome
challenges in youth development, economic opportunity, and health (Corporation for
National and Community Service, 2013). The SIF made grants to intermediaries that
identified promising, evidence-based approaches that were considered scalable. In the
past, grants ranged from $1 to 5 million annually for up to five years. Intermediaries had
to match federal funds dollar-for-dollar and competitively award funds to nonprofits
working in low-income communities that provided evidence of results. Once selected, nonprofits needed to match the funds received and participate in rigorous evaluations.

In 2013, President Obama’s 2013 budget provided funding for Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth to enable selected states and communities to use funds from different federal funding sources to create and test innovative approaches to work across department lines to improve outcomes for disconnected youth. Up to 10 pilots would enable communities to:

- blend together competitive and formula grant funding that they receive from the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, and the Corporation for National and Community Service. Pilots also will be able to seek waivers of specific program requirements that inadvertently may hamper effective services for youth. This flexibility only will be granted to high performing jurisdictions that then will be held accountable to a set of cross-agency, data-driven outcome (Uvin & Stack, n.d., para. 4).

Selection criteria was outlined as having evidence of (a) a strong outcome-based plan focused on a needs assessment that targets youth services to those most in need; (b) the capacity to implement a pilot project through strong partnerships with government, nonprofit, and private sector partners; (c) a plan to build knowledge through evaluation; and (d) a demonstrated need for flexibility to improve outcomes (Uvin & Stack, n.d.).

**Policy and advocacy groups focused on disconnected youth.** In addition to federal programs incentivizing community collaboration on issues affecting disconnected youth, there are numerous national policy organizations and coalitions focusing on the issue of opportunity youth, calling for greater collaboration across sectors. For example,
America’s Promise Alliance (Gifford, Evans, Berlin, & Bai, 2011) put forth a framework that aims to raise awareness about the dropout crisis and its impact on the future of youth. The nonprofit seeks to mobilize action to improve the high school graduation rate, proposing ten national and state indicators of academic achievement and youth success deemed important factors of future well-being indicators. They included:

- high school graduation
- 9th to 10th grade promotion
- preschool enrollment
- 4th Grade Reading Proficiency
- 8th Grade Math Proficiency
- 8th Grade Science Proficiency
- college enrollment among young adults
- voting among young adults
- volunteering and service among young adults
- participation in extracurricular activities (America’s Promise Alliance, 2013).

America’s Promise Alliance had over 350 nonprofit, businesses, education, and community partners who participated as members of its coalition in 2013. The Alliance established a 90% target graduation rate goal for the class of 2020, and a goal that no high school would have lower than an 80% graduation rate (America’s Promise Alliance, 2013).

The Forum for Youth Investment is a national nonpartisan nonprofit that helps communities prepare young people to be ready for college, work, and life by age 21. The Forum is parent of Ready by 21, described as a coalition representing business,
education, government, non-profit, research, and philanthropy sectors that works with leaders who are influencing youth and community development policies and best practices. The Forum for Youth Investment is an affiliate of the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, Community Systems Group LLC, and Sparkaction, which focus on programs, research, and collaboration targeted to youth (Forum for Youth Investment, 2014). The organization identified 13 capacities considered critical to the sustainability, success, and scalability of communities' change efforts. These standards define excellence in four areas considered crucial to leaders' ability to improve youth outcomes in a community. Forum for Youth Investment’s standards of excellence are: (a) building broader partnerships; (b) setting bigger goals; (c) using better data for improved decision-making; and (d) implementing bolder strategies to improve the quality, consistency, and reach of the formal and informal supports children and youth need (Forum for Youth Investment, 2012).

The Aspen Institute, a national research and policy organization, launched the Forum for Community Solutions (FCS) to develop and expand community-based models that emphasized cross-sector solutions to address critical community issues, including disconnected youth and other social and economic challenges (Aspen Institute, 2013). Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates and Rockefeller Foundations and others, FCS highlighted communities where citizens, practitioners, and leaders were making progress solving local challenges and sharing knowledge and resources (Aspen Institute, 2013). Initiative partners created the Opportunity Youth Incentive Fund to enhance collaborative approaches that addressed disconnected youth needs, The Fund awarded $6 million in grants of up to $500,000 per community for collaboratives that used cross-sector
collaboration to address the issue, funding cross-sector projects in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York (Aspen Institute, 2013). In addition, Forum partners invited leaders from across the sectors to explore and share successful strategies. Leaders have called for the crossing of party and sector and lines to make measurable progress on community challenges, defining success as a 10% improvement in identified metrics focused on community outcomes (Forum for Community Solutions, 2012).

Another group focused on the issue of disconnected youth is the Youth Transitions Funders Group (Youth Transitions Funders Group, 2013). It is led by Jobs for the Future and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation and the Mott Foundations. In their report for the Youth Transitions Funders Group, Sturgis and Hoye (2005) released a strategic assessment relating to dropout reduction and recovery efforts in Boston, Chicago, Houston, New York, Portland (Oregon), and Sacramento, based on field investigations. The researchers found common characteristics that supported a collaborative approach. The authors also developed the Alternative Pathways Framework, which highlights policies and practices that support youth staying or re-enrolling in school, and proposed directions for expanding educational alternatives effective for disconnected youth. Sturgis and Hoye (2005) proposed greater collection and sharing of data on out-of-school youth, development of expanded options for them, and the design of a political strategy to address policy deficiencies and mobilization of communities. Sturgis and Hoye’s (2005) framework included (a) shared responsibility and systematic coordination; (b) choice-based, high-
quality alternatives; (c) ability to refer, transition, and re-enroll; (d) guidance and advocacy; (e) flexible demonstrations of proficiency; and (f) policy incentives.

**Westchester County, New York.** Westchester is a community of great wealth, and of notable poverty. While in the United States, overall 20% of the population receives 48% of income, in Westchester 20% of the population receives 66% of income (Westchester County, 2013). There are an estimated 15,038 young people in Westchester County between 16-24 not in school and not working (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013). The reasons for their disconnection or disengagement from school, training, or employment are varied and complex. Westchester County offers a multitude of services to address mental health needs of children and youth and has been lauded for its replicable, creative, and interagency strategies that support families and overcome structural and financial barriers (Jacobstein & Cattan, n.d.). However, there is a lack of a coherent transition between certain programs and services (C. Greenberg, personal communication, October 15, 2013) and large segments of the population are often hard to define and even count. Furthermore, youth who are at risk of becoming disconnected are often involved in multiple systems, including educational, community-based, and social service organizations (Koga, 2012) which do not monitor and track the same metrics, or measure outcomes beyond the term of their involvement with the youth.

**Westchester Children’s Association.** WCA is a nonprofit advocacy group that convenes public, private, and nonprofit organizations to collectively address and solve problems facing youth in the county. Due to Westchester’s complex jurisdictional divisions and numerous socio-economic levels, available countywide data reveal only part of the story of disconnected youth, and disaggregated data is difficult to obtain. Also,
a true count of youth considered disconnected is difficult to retrieve due to differences in the reporting, collection, and interpretation of data (Westchester Children's Association, 2012). Nevertheless, WCA presented data from several sources that gave insights about Westchester disconnected youth, which was captured in its presentation “Disconnected Data, Disconnected Youth.” The presentation cited details about how difficult it is to get a firm count of this population due to different definitions and data reporting requirements (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013).

In 2009, WCA convened a meeting of non-governmental stakeholders to assess interest in forming a group “to collaborate on improving outcomes for disconnected youth in Westchester” (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013, p. 5). Fourteen organizations became founding members of the WCA “Connecting Youth Project” (CYP). At the time of this writing, members of the group included 30 individuals, representing county government, social service agencies, residential and non-residential youth programs, educational advocacy organizations, mental health service organizations, post-secondary education, and workforce investment. The group worked to improve outcomes for young people, ages 16-24, who are disconnected from school, work, and the community. Members collaborated for over two years to more clearly define the population of unemployed and out of school youth, and describe the experiences of the young people. Members regularly convened to share information and develop cross-system responses to address this population. As a result of their two years of work, WCA issued a report of the group’s findings in March 2013, “Dreams Deferred… Reconnecting Youth to School, Work and Community” (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013). At its first meeting since it issued this report (September 2013) the group agreed to focus on
four goals of the work of its collaborative: employment, juvenile justice, education and youth leadership. The stated short-term priorities of the Connecting Youth Project included enhancing youth employment, advocating for raising the age of criminal responsibility for youth in New York State, reducing exclusionary disciplinary and suspension practices in schools, and engaging youth.

Data is critical to being able to identify and then address the needs and challenges of opportunity youth (Sturgis & Hoye, 2005). WCA presented data from several sources that gave insights about disconnected youth in Westchester. However, WCA indicated the data it was able to obtain might not be a true count of this population due to differences in reporting, collecting, and interpreting data. This corresponded with findings of other national, regional and local studies identified in the literature (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009; Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012).

Westchester County’s trends as they relate to children and youth reflect a microcosm of phenomena occurring in many other communities throughout the United States, related to changing demographics. In Westchester, 32% of children lived in single-parent households in 2012, and more than one in four are being raised by a grandparent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Approximately a third of children over the age of five spoke a language at home other than English (Westchester County Profile, 2013). In addition, one in four children in Westchester lived in families at or below 200% of the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Data also revealed 34.3% of 16-19 year olds and 15.2% of 20-24 year olds were unemployed (Westchester Children’s Association, 2012). Also, according to data cited in its report, 2,284 youth between 16 and 24 were arrested for property, drug or violent crimes. Furthermore, of 322 youth in foster care in
2012, 71 youth turned 18 and aged out of the system in Westchester County (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013).

In terms of public education, 59.4% of Westchester public school third graders did not meet grade level standards in English Language Arts in 2013. Within this average, the lowest performance was in Yonkers at 16.99%, and the highest performance was in Blind Brook-Rye at 80%. Also, 63.0% of Westchester eighth graders did not meet standards in 2013. In Mount Vernon, only 3.5% of students met eighth-grade state math proficiency standards, compared to 74.8% in Chappaqua.

**Youth employment.** The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) provides block grant funding to communities through the U.S. Department of Labor (United States Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, 2010). The WIA legislative mandates require local workforce investment boards (WIB) to target a minimum of a third of funding allocations to address education and training for youth workforce development, specifically aimed at low-income youth between the ages of 14 and 21. The WIA authorizing legislation also requires that membership on the WIB should represent leaders and policy-makers from across every sector. Board make-up must include local educational entities, private sector employers, postsecondary educational institutions, trade organizations, labor, community-based organizations, and economic development agencies. While some WIBs are independent and separate entities with their own tax-exempt status, the Westchester County Department of Social Services runs the Office of Workforce Investment, which oversees the Westchester Putnam Workforce Investment Board (WPWIB). WIA’s key principles require that funds are targeted to support opportunities for youth living in high poverty areas and promote
youth development and citizenship, including leadership development through community service and adult mentoring. The youth formula grant program eligibility includes being categorized as a low-income individual who is between the ages of 14 and 21. Youth must also have one or more of the following barriers: (a) dropped out of school; (b) deficiency in basic skills; (c) be a foster child, homeless or a runaway; (d) be pregnant or parenting; (e) an offender, or; (f) required support to complete education or to gain employment (Bradley & Collins, 2013).

The total WPWIB budget for youth was $1,489,604 in 2013. Its main program for youth was the Westchester Workforce Development Academy for Youth (WWDAY), a WPWIB-funded year-round initiative that served 14 to 21 years olds considered economically disadvantaged high school dropouts, or those youth at-risk of dropping out of high school or failing. This program had two major service components: in-school for ages 14 to 18, and out-of-school, for ages 19 to 21. The WWDAY provided youth with: (a) summer employment; (b) guidance and counseling; (c) adult mentors, (d) tutoring, (e) alternative secondary school services, (f) unpaid and paid work experiences, (g) occupational skill training, (h) leadership development, and, (i) supportive services follow-up. WWDAY operated in-school programs in six high schools in Westchester County, including Peekskill, White Plains, Port Chester, New Rochelle, Mount Vernon, and Nelly Thornton High Schools, for youth aged 14 to 18, providing coordinated services with school staff. For older youth aged 19 to 21, services were provided in an out-of-school program operated in its One-Stop centers and at targeted partner locations (Westchester Putnam Workforce Investment Board, 2012). In 2013, 184 youth were placed at 55 local businesses through the private sector summer jobs initiative, a
partnership led by the Business Council of Westchester, and seven youth agencies. Described as a response to the uncertainty of public funding for summer youth employment, the program engaged employers who paid an estimated $258,000 in wages to youth participants (Westchester Putnam Workforce Investment Board, 2012). In addition, the Westchester County Department of Social Services awarded the WIB $231,000 to operate the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Summer Youth Employment Program, which in 2011 provided employment to 192 youth aged 14 to 20 years old, with 66 employers. The Westchester County Department of Social Services Commissioner also provided $60,000 for foster care youth to work in county parks during the summer, coordinating their employment through the Westchester County Department of Parks and Recreation. The program employed 38 foster youth. The One-Stop was awarded a grant from New York State Department of Labor to run the New York Youth Works Program in summer 2012. The state program was designed to encourage businesses to hire unemployed, disadvantaged youth between the ages of 16 and 24. The program supported job training and employment for eligible youth who lived in Yonkers, Mount Vernon and New Rochelle (Westchester Putnam Workforce Investment Board Strategic Plan, 2012).

**Westchester County Youth Bureau.** The Westchester County Youth Bureau funds, monitors and supports nonprofit agencies and organizations that provide programs and services to youth. Its stated goal is to promote positive youth development and to encourage healthy lifestyles (Westchester County, 2014). The Westchester County Youth Bureau provides funding through the New York State Office of Children and Family Services through its Special Delinquency Prevention Program, Youth
Development/Delinquency Prevention Program - Youth Services, and Youth Initiatives Funding (Westchester County, 2014). The Bureau also provides funds through its Invest-in-Kids Program, established in 1993 initially as the Westchester County Urban Youth Initiative. It provides funding approved by the county legislature each year from the county tax levy. Invest-in-Kids sought to address the needs of at-risk youth under the age of 21 in 11 urban communities: Elmsford, Greenburgh, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, Ossining, Peekskill, Port Chester, Sleepy Hollow, Tarrytown, White Plains, and Yonkers. Since the inception of this funding stream, small grants were made available to community programs serving at-risk, income eligible youth based on United States Department of Housing and Urban Development Community Development Block Grant criteria. Program criteria for the Invest-in-Kids program included requirements that grantees conduct youth development programming for throughout the entire year and that programs be observable and measureable. The Invest-In-Kids fund required a 35% match of the approved budget from grantees. In addition, priority areas for funding in the 14-21 year-old category were listed in the county’s Invest-in-Kids application for 2012-2014 as programs that address: (a) dropout rates; (b) risky behaviors, and (c) unemployment, defined as lack of job, career, or college readiness skills (Westchester County Youth Bureau, n.d.). A map that visually displays the county youth programs and services by jurisdiction is included in Appendix A.

**Examples of community-wide collaboratives on disconnected youth.**

Examining how several other communities have collectively and systematically addressed the issue of disconnected youth provides useful insights into cross-sector collaboration focused on this issue. In its report on how to implement a community-wide
collaboration for youth in a local community, the National Collaboration for Youth proposed that collaborative is a step beyond a coalition in that it requires greater investment from members and a commitment to work together on an ongoing basis to achieve progress collectively (Katz, Leaver, Pittman, Minor, & Argenio, 2011). While there were many case studies of communities in various stages of addressing disconnected youth as a social issue, several initiatives that involve partnerships among the private, public, nonprofit, and education sectors were chosen based on several factors. These communities, while in different stages of planning or implementation, have applied a multi-sector approach to address disconnected youth in their communities. They were chosen because they are either similar to Westchester County in population size, jurisdictional complexity, and regional focus or they displayed other characteristics that illustrated the different approaches of cross-sector collaboration focused on disconnected youth. The following are several examples of collaborative approaches taken by communities focused on disconnected youth.

**Durham, North Carolina.** The Durham Education and Employment Alliance initiative is a multi-sector, long-term approach to addressing the issue of disconnected youth in Durham, North Carolina, well known for its “Research Triangle.” Similar to Westchester County, the city of Durham had many high technology and research-driven firms and first-class higher educational institutions. Another similarity was it encompassed a countywide region, although initially focused on the city of Durham. In its 2012 report “Building an Education-to-Career System,” members of a cross-sector initiative reported how Durham was a region thriving with a strong employer base, and employment growth rate. Stratton, Rose, Parcell, and Mooney (2012) noted that between
4,500 and 6,000 disconnected youth were at major risk of dropping out of high school or were not pursuing employment education, and stated:

We may not be able to change the market, but we can build a system that equips our youth and young adults with the skills necessary for rewarding careers in the Triangle. We can build a “Made in Durham” pipeline of education and training that assures our young people are as qualified as any newcomer… a substantial number will struggle in the process and some will not make it at all...All of them have talent and the aspiration for a better life. Together, they represent a source of workforce skills, civic participation, and taxpayer revenue that Durham can ill afford to waste. (p. iii)

Leaders of the initiative argued that its success could not be achieved by only one sector or by one institution, but would require a multi-sector approach. The final report included recommendations that called for both systemic and governance changes. Specifically, leaders called for setting a community-wide goal for increased higher education attainment and full-time employment for young adults and the creation of annual metrics to monitor progress toward the goal. Leaders also called for program reforms to create cultural institutional change across sectors, and for launch of a Durham Education and Employment Alliance to oversee design and implementation of an education to-career system for the city and county. Stratton et al. (2012) also recommended youth leaders be directly involved in creating and assessing programs and services within the education-to-career system through a Youth Consumers Council, which would report directly to the mayor. Finally, Stratton et al. (2012) recommended a cross-sector data sharing system would track individual and organizational progress, and
a labor market information system would support planning and evaluation of its proposed
education-to-career system (Stratton et al., 2012).

**Northern Kentucky.** In its Collective Impact case study of the Northern Kentucky
Education Council, the Forum for Youth Investment (2014), which worked with the
initiative, highlighted the approach used during over a decade of work to align the
community to serve youth with a cradle to career approach. Northern Kentucky
encompasses Boone, Campbell and Kenton counties, plus 37 distinctive communities in
the state. Similar to Westchester County, Northern Kentucky was described as having a
strong and expanding economy, with excellent schools, top healthcare facilities,
outstanding transportation services, and a pro-business attitude that contributes to
successful economic development activities (Forum for Youth Investment, 2014). The
2011 population was estimated at 373,083 residents living in those counties (Northern
Kentucky Tri-County Economic Development Corporation, n.d.).

Launched in 1993 by Northern Kentucky University and the Northern Kentucky
Superintendents’ Association, the Northern Kentucky Education Council began as an
idea that increasing “communication and cooperation among educators across all
educational levels, and particularly between secondary and post-secondary education”
would benefit the youth in their community (Northern Education Education Council, n.d.,
para. 1). An initial Council of Partners in Education was launched involving 20 faculty
and administrators that convened to discuss mutual interests. In 2008, Northern Kentucky
began an alignment process to address educational duplication and resource allocation
issues. Education, business and community sectors agreed to work collaboratively and
merge efforts. A Leadership Capacity Audit was conducted by the Forum for Youth
Investment (FYI) that provided Northern Kentucky a chance to review its community's current activities, measure them against FYI’s 13 standards and affirm their importance with stakeholders. The Northern Kentucky Education Council served as catalyst for the regional education goals. The group also conducted a program landscape survey on in-school and out-of-school program data and established metrics to track regional progress (Forum for Youth Investment, 2014).

**Philadelphia.** As reported by Corcoran et al. (2012), in 2004 the city of Philadelphia launched a public campaign that brought together representatives of public education, city agencies, philanthropy, youth-serving nonprofits, parents, and youth in a citywide collaborative designed to improve outcomes for opportunity youth and to stem the tide of the community’s drop-out crisis and disconnected youth challenges. Allen (2010) asserted that Philadelphia’s Project U-Turn demonstrated a comprehensive collective impact approach addressing opportunity youth, and stated:

Project U-Turn has effected policy change, made funding services for out-of-school youth a priority, and created an aligned service delivery system to serve Opportunity Youth. This work has led to the creation of 13 new schools for off-track and out-of-school youth, called Accelerated Schools in Philadelphia; a re-engagement center that facilitates a dropout’s enrollment in an appropriate educational option; and an education support center within the child welfare system that supports education stability for youth in dependent and delinquent care. The campaign has leveraged more than $175 million in public and private resources and led to a 12% growth in Philadelphia’s high school graduation rate since its launch in 2004. (p. 12)
In addition to Project U-Turn, Philadelphia Works, a workforce organization, is focused on disconnected youth. In 2012, the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board and the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation merged to create the new organization. Philadelphia Works partners with Project U-Turn, the Philadelphia Youth Network, and many other cross-sector groups to advance employment attainment for disconnected youth. It funds and provides technical assistance on career guidance, job training, and job placement services offered by one-stop centers (Philadelphia Works Inc., 2014). Both entities are working at the intersection of education and employment issues related to reconnecting disconnected youth in one geographic region.

**Seattle.** Seattle has also developed a community-wide, cross-sector collaborative to address the educational and transitional needs of disconnected youth. The Road Map Project is a coalition whose goal included doubling the number of South Seattle and South King County students pursuing a college diploma or career credential by 2020 (Road Map Project, 2013). The Community Center for Education Results collaborated with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the city of Seattle, University of Washington, Seattle Community Colleges, and others to launch the new organization.

The Road Map Project focused on collective action and community engagement by bringing stakeholders together to collaborate on shared goals to create a new model for efforts to reduce educational inequality (Road Map Project, 2013). Through collaboration on data-driven decision making, outreach, and performance monitoring, the project supported area organizations focused on improving student outcomes and closing achievement gaps in South Seattle and South King County (Katz & Rodin, 2012).
**Texas.** E3 Alliance, which stands for Education Equals Economics, is a regional, data-driven education collaborative based in Austin, Texas. Promoting better alignment of systems, E3 Alliance worked to create regional systemic change through a collective impact approach. (E3 Alliance, 2013). Founded in 2006, E3 Alliance acted as a catalyst for change, working to break down barriers and build better alignment across the education continuum. The organization website stated its belief that:

> Only through greater educational achievement for current and future generations of children, can Central Texas realize economic prosperity and a high quality of life for our community. Such achievement requires systemic change from cradle to career, and that is our commitment to our community (E3 Alliance, 2013, para.1).

It listed its key differentiators as a focus on data, a student-centric approach, and a regional, collaborative strategy that supported an effective platform for scalable change and collective impact, which required a broad range of community representatives to work together. E3 engaged 12 school districts, eight institutions of higher education, and dozens of businesses, nonprofits, and policy leaders across Central Texas to address complex community issues collectively (E3 Alliance, 2013).

**Washington, DC area.** In a report on the state of youth in the National Capital Region, a portrait of the community revealed several similar features and challenges to Westchester County. The region, encompassing the District of Columbia, Montgomery and Prince George’s counties in Maryland, the cities of Alexandria and Falls Church, and the counties of Loudon, Arlington, Fairfax, and Prince William in Virginia, was known
for its affluence, well-educated population and strong transportation system (Venture Philanthropy Partners and Child Trends, 2012).

Study findings provided a statistical snapshot of the region’s youth and a comprehensive examination of the state of children and youth living in and around the Washington, DC area. Venture Philanthropy Partners and Child Trends (2012) identified issues and trends through a regional lens, and asserted:

While the Region is separated by state and city boundaries; political disagreements; parochial interests; and not one, but two rivers, it is the economic and educational differences that most starkly divide our citizenry. Despite the overall affluence, there remains an enormous gap between those who have the knowledge, skills, opportunities and resources they need to enjoy a healthy, productive life and those who don’t—particularly among the area’s children and young people (p. 2).

Findings included a growing immigrant population, many with limited English skills, a rising poverty rate for children, over 43,000 youth between ages 5 and 19 not in school and considered drop outs, and over 14,000 disconnected youth, which they proposed translated into a taxpayer burden of up to $13 billion over the population’s lifespan from lost economic and tax revenues and use of social services (Venture Philanthropy Partners and Child Trends, 2012). The authors argued the needs of the National Capital Region’s children were not bound by jurisdictions, and recommended a regional approach to understand and collectively address the challenges.

Collaboration theories. A common theme in addressing the issue of disconnected youth is the call for systemic community-wide change and cross-sector
collaboration and more effective public-private partnerships. Thomson and Perry (2006) argued that those anticipating collaboration should be willing to consider the nature of the process involved. Cross-sector collaboration is a complex concept and often misunderstood, adding another layer of challenges. While the government, private industry, funders, community organizations, educators, and policy makers have been calling for greater cross-sector collaboration, Thomson and Perry (2006) believed that those anticipating collaboration should be willing to consider the nature of the process involved. The literature review revealed, no less than 20 different terms describe the concept, leading to confusion among scholars. Terminology includes cross-sector social partnerships, cause-based partnerships (Selsky & Parker, 2005), multistakeholder collaboratives (Turcott & Pasquerro, 2001), and public-private partnerships (Linder, 1999).

Theories and frameworks mentioned in the literature included value creation, resource dependency, societal sector platforms, communication, and relational process frameworks. There is no one size fits all; the lines between sectors are sometimes blurred and roles and expectations are often not clear.

Various scholars have proposed different elements as critical to successful collaboration. Very early stage models of collaboration in the literature position the process of collaboration along a continuum, with discreet, separate categories. The Peterson model proposes only three categories: cooperation, coordination, and collaboration (Peterson, 1991). Hogue’s Levels of Community Linkage Model (Hogue, 1993) expanded Peterson’s model to include (a) networking, (b) cooperation or alliance
(c) coordination or partnership, (d) coalition, and (e) collaboration. Table 1.1 illustrates the Community Linkage Model.

Table 1.1

**Characteristics of Community Linkages through Collaboration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Structure</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accomplish shared vision and impact benchmarks</td>
<td>Consensus used in shared decision making</td>
<td>Leadership high, trust level high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build interdependent system to address issues and opportunities</td>
<td>Roles, time, and evaluation formalized</td>
<td>Ideas and decisions equally shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Links are formal and written in work assignments</td>
<td>Highly developed communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Adapted from *Community-based collaboration: Community wellness multiplied* by T. Hogue. 1993, (para. 29) Bend, OR: Chandler Center for Community Leadership. Copyright 1993 by Chandler Center for Community Leadership.*

Bailey and Koney (2000) built upon Hogue’s model, adding a new category, *coadunation*, meaning having grown together. These early models did not reflect integration; all were linear. The early models did not address the dynamic and ever-changing internal and external environments in which a partnership exists.

More recent literature suggested that ever-changing dynamic external forces require adaptability among all partners. Collaboration was described as a journey, not a destination (Gadja, 2004). Challenges related to partnership alignment and integration have been the focus of research on cross-sector social alliances for the past two decades. These partnerships differed in size, scope, and purpose, and could be short or long-term, involve two or more organizations, and could be voluntary or fully mandated (Selsky &
Parker, 2005). They may be transactional, motivated by self-interest, or integrative (Austin, 2000), allowing for the parties to closely align in many ways. Bryson, Crosby and Stone (2006) believed understanding the external environment in which cross-sector collaborations are embedded is essential to assessing how collaboration can be most effective in achieving desired outcomes.

In his seminal book, *The Collaboration Challenge*, Austin (2000) argued for a more integrated approach to collaboration and concluded that connection, strategic fit, value creation, and relationship management are major variables contributing to the success of such initiatives. The Collaborative Value Creation (CVC) framework (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012) built upon his earlier theory of the Collaborative Value Spectrum (Austin, 2000). The premise of the CVC framework is that co-creating value is the fundamental purpose of cross-sector collaboration. The aim of the CVC framework is to facilitate thinking about partnerships as internal and external ways to create value and to improve understanding of collaboration stages, partnering processes, and outcomes (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012).

Other collaboration theories reflected additional theoretical underpinnings of current thinking on collaboration and the development of partnerships across sectors. Recent studies revealed progression from linear models to an evolving matrix of interrelated dynamics. For example, Selsky and Parker (2005) compared three platforms of cross-sector collaboration in an attempt to give more structure to the field of study. They discussed resource-dependency, social issue, and societal sector platforms as a means of making sense of how context and partnership interaction impacts outcomes. Their research gave a contextual framework for cross-sector social partnerships,
proposing variables within each platform. They concurred with challenges presented by Austin related to the dynamic nature of partnering. Also, this framework’s societal sector platform was future-focused and involved redefining sector roles in order to promote social innovation - something leaders in industry have called for to address complex issues.

An alternate framework to inform the work was presented by Thomson and Perry (2006). Their work synthesized the work of previous scholars in collaboration and proposed five key dimensions, drawing upon case studies to explain their framework: structure, administration, autonomy, mutuality, and reciprocity. The researchers believed those five characteristics must exist in order to address the creative tension inherent in cross-sector relationships, which can only be addressed by reconciling private interests with collective interest. Their research was the first attempt to use a structure equation model to measure and understand collaboration. They created a collaboration scale to measure collaboration. The model is based on Gray’s and Wood’s (1991) earlier theoretical framework of collaboration. Like Selsky and Parker (2005), Thomson and Perry (2006) argued for the need of collective interest that will offset inherent challenges. This theory is relevant to the study because it allows for a multitude of perspectives to discover what mutuality and reciprocity means to all parties. Also, as each sector may have a different interpretations of meaning, the lens provided by the theorists allows for better understanding of those interpretations. The categories offered a useful framework in developing interview questions.

In their review of 80 articles on collaboration and coaliton functioning, Foster-Fishman, Berkowitz, Lounsbury, Jacobson, and Allen (2001) proposed that collaboration
is about developing social relationships and new ways of interacting. The researchers found that member, relational, organizational, and programmatic capacity were important to effective collaboration. Various scholars have proposed many other alternatives as elements critical to successful collaboration, which were synthesized in studies on collaboration done by Mattessich et al. (2001).

According to Lasker and Weiss (2003) when people with different kinds of knowledge and perspectives think about an issue, they have a better ability to see the larger context, break new ground and understand the local context. This includes a better capacity to identify strategies most likely to work in a particular environment related to a specific issue. Specifically, by combining complementary skills, services, and resources, cross-sector collaboration can more effectively build on community assets that are tailored to local conditions and connect many programs, services, policies, and sectors, attacking an issue from multiple vantage points simultaneously (Lasker & Weiss, 2003).

**Wilder collaboration factors.** In 1992, Mattessich et al. (2001) first reviewed and synthesized literature related to collaboration and addressed the key questions: “What are the ingredients of successful collaboration? What makes the difference between success and failure in joint projects? What makes collaboration work?” (p. 4). Based on the results of research, the authors developed a theoretical framework for successful collaboration practice, called the Wilder Collaboration Factors Inventory®, used as an assessment tool for groups that are in the process of, or thinking about collaboration. From 113 studies examined and screened, only 18 studies met their definition of collaboration and the factors that contributed to the success of collaborative partnerships. They defined collaboration as:
…a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to mutual relationships and goals; a jointly developed structure and shared responsibility; mutual authority and accountability for success; and sharing of resources and rewards. (p. 4)

Mattessich et al. (2001) originally identified 19 factors reported as influencing the success of collaboration and an additional factor was subsequently added. The 20 factors were then grouped into six categories that comprised the dimensions of the conceptual framework for part of the research. The six categories that made up the framework were (a) environment, (b) membership characteristics, (c) process and structure, (d) communication, (e) purpose, and (f) resources. Table 2.2 illustrates the major areas identified in their meta-analysis.
### Table 2.2

**Conditions that Lead to Successful Collaboration**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors Influencing Successful Collaboration According to Mattesich, Murray-Close and Monsey (2001)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of collaboration or cooperation in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative group seen as leader in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorable political/social climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual respect, understanding, and trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate cross-section of members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members see collaboration in their self-interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to compromise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process/Structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members share a stake in both process and outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple layers of decision-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Development of clear goals and policy guidelines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open and frequent communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Established informal and formal communication links</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete, attainable goals and objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sufficient funds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled convener</td>
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</table>

Donohue and Zeckhouser (2011) defined collaboration as most likely to occur between the public and the private sector when conditions for “collaborative governance” occur, that is “carefully structured arrangements that interweave public and private collaboration on terms of shared discretion. They argued that “the conversation becomes meaningful only when it zones in on specific goals, specific settings, specific actors” (p. 9). They speak of a *force multiplier*, or a systematic way to scale efforts through collaboration between sectors, in particular the public and the private sector, and stated, “Collaboration has the potential to unleash the energies of people and organizations across the sectoral spectrum” (p. 240).

Donohue and Zeckhouser’s (2011) Cycle of Collaboration model included: (a) analyze, which entails assessing in advance who the players might be from the private sector to engage in addressing a public issue; (b) assign, or get the right players in the right position; (c) design, or specifically assigning what each player will be expected and allowed to do; and (d) assess, which represents evaluating results to ensure collaborations are “enduring arrangements rather than one-shot affairs”.

**Collective impact.** Collective impact is defined as “the commitment of a group of important actors from different sectors to a common agenda for solving specific social problems, distinctly different from collaboration” (Kania & Kramer, 2011, pp. 36-38) because, among other requisites, it requires a centralized infrastructure and dedicated staff. Referring to collective impact as distinctly different from collaboration, Kania and Kramer (2011) proposed that a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a *backbone* organization were key conditions that allow for social change with great impact through collaboration. A
backbone organization was defined as one that provides structure and support to an initiative. Corcoran et al. (2012) asserted that disconnected, fragmented programs and services, and the lack of pathways with on-ramps for youth contribute to the difficulty of youth reconnecting to school or connecting to employment and that backbone organizations, often also intermediaries, have been prominent in community collaboratives focused on disconnected youth.

Collective impact represents an idea that has been building in communities for years and is related to the concept of collaboration across sectors. Hanleybrown, Kania and Kramer (2012) stated:

The complex nature of most social problems belies the idea that any single program or organization, however well managed and funded, can singlehandedly create lasting large-scale change. It holds that demonstrably improving complex problems requires deep collaboration among many sectors and players – real collaboration that requires the disciplined development of specific conditions and standards to monitor progress. (p.1)

Kania and Kramer (2011) conducted a case study of a Strive initiative in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. Described as a cradle to career cross-sector framework, Strive has been held up as a model collective impact approach for communities grappling with daunting social challenges. The authors attributed the success of the Strive initiative they studied to a convergence of 300 influential leaders from the private, philanthropic, government, public K-12 education, higher education, and the nonprofit educational and advocacy communities (Kania & Kramer, 2011).
The Cincinnati-based Strive Together organization has already helped launch 100 such community-based, collective impact initiatives nationwide, 11 in New York State as of Fall 2013. The researcher attended a Design Institute for the planning of a Strive Initiative being developed in Yonkers, New York, Westchester County’s largest city. At the event, attended by over 250 community members from all sectors and regions of the city as well as the county, the director of strategic assistance for StriveTogether facilitated the participatory session. Strive Together framework proposed indicators of student success, including kindergarten readiness, fourth grade reading and postsecondary enrollment, as well as key transition points on a continuum. However, the organization encouraged each Strive community to develop its own unique indicators and measures as well (Strive Together, n.d.).

The room was filled with energy, focused conversation, and flip charts. Participants were encouraged to post their ideas, opinions and preferences on charts lining the walls. Participants were challenged to share, discuss and comment on what their organizations could bring to a “bigger table.” Organizations in attendance included Pathways to Success, Yonkers Hispanic Advisory Board, Yonkers Partners in Education, Yonkers Family YMCA, and Westchester Community College. It was reported that many organizations were involved in the pre-planning of the event. Vanessa Threatte (personal communication, November 19, 2013) the executive director of New York’s Cradle to Career Alliance based at the State University of New York, a national partner, reported there are 11 communities in New York that have launched Strive initiatives including Albany, Astoria, Broome County, Rochester, and the South Bronx.
Key takeaways from the presentations and comments included the need for a common definition of outcomes, commitment to continuous improvement, common measures across communities, problem definition, manageable scope of long and short-term outcomes, and a “network charter” of stakeholders at the same table.

Chapter Summary

Advocacy organizations estimated there are between 15,000 and 18,000 young people in Westchester County between 16-24 not in school and not working, often referred to as disconnected youth (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013). The reasons for their disconnection from school, training, or employment are varied and complex. Local systems and supports focus on various segments of this population. However, these systems targeted to such a diverse population often lack coordination, connection, integration, or transition. Government, private industry, funders, community organizations, educators, and policy makers have been calling for greater cross-sector collaboration. The White House Council on Community Resources, White House Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs, Forum for Youth Investment, Civic Enterprises, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Aspen Research Institute, Brookings Institute, and numerous other scholars and practitioners from all sectors have called for greater collaboration to achieve collective impact.

Cross-sector social alliances focused on unemployed youth not enrolled in school or training is a timely research topic affecting many United States communities, in addition to Westchester County. Numerous barriers often hamper the transition of young people from adolescence to adulthood and they disengage from school and work for many different reasons. Cross-sector collaboration is a form of interaction that seeks to
address social problems by combining resources and capabilities of many organizations, with diverse competencies and access to different resources (Seitanidi & Ryan 2007). Opportunity Nation, a national campaign focused on mobilizing communities to address this population, has estimated there are 6.7 million youth not working or in school nationwide (Opportunity Nation, 2013).

Collaboration has been defined as occurring when “a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures to act or decide on issues related to that domain” (Gray & Wood, 1991, p. 146). Indeed, conflicting priorities, fragmented programs, and unsustainable funding present challenges to leaders collaborating across the sectors in dealing with such a divergent and ever-changing population. The research sought to more fully understand and define those types of challenges and opportunities. Findings about further collaborative potential contribute to knowledge that can be applied in developing policy and practice focused on youth in Westchester County.

A literature review of national programs, studies and scholarship related to the economic and social impact of disconnected youth in United States' communities revealed numerous implications for policy makers, educators, employers, and communities that increasingly seek to address these issues using collaborative strategies that cross sector lines. A White House study brought much attention to the urgency of the issue, and has spurred several other funders to focus on this as an area of research (White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012).

Numerous stakeholders have begun to form national, regional, and local coalitions and alliances to understand the varied reasons youth disconnect and to assess different
strategies, tools and frameworks that may assist communities addressing the issue.

Cross-sector collaboration theories and a collective impact framework are among several approaches that have been applied in initiatives in communities, including Philadelphia, Northern Kentucky and Seattle. A nonprofit children’s advocacy and policy organization located in Westchester County, New York has convened a cross-sector group of stakeholders working in various aspects with disconnected youth, and has compiled data and proposed various policy recommendations to begin to further address this diverse group’s needs in the county. The study of what representatives from nonprofit, government, business and philanthropy believe about collaboration to create positive change for disconnected young people provides important insights for policy makers, practitioners, educators and employers.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This qualitative study used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as its methodology. Developed by Jonathan Smith in 1996, IPA focuses on producing detailed interpretive accounts grounded in the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Cope, 2010). Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe IPA as a qualitative approach that seeks to understand personal experiences and explore a person’s connection to or involvement in a particular event or process. IPA was originally designed in the context of psychology, and has expanded to other fields including health care, social sciences, and education. IPA methodology is not a process through which the researcher simply reports what a participant has said. The researcher has a very active role in making sense and giving meaning to what the subject’s comments reveal, requiring the researcher to be engaged and thoughtfully interpret data (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is an inductive approach: it allows themes to emerge from personal accounts rather than applying a predetermined theory, allowing for possibilities not considered in advance (Clarke, 2009). The methodology finds its roots in hermeneutics, interpretive theory, and the philosophy of phenomenology that emphasizes understanding the lived world (Husserl, 1931).

A phenomenological approach seeks greater understanding of phenomena, but the meaning of the term phenomena is not the same as the everyday meaning. In The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Smith (2013) defines phenomenology as:
The study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions (para.1).

Perhaps the most important element of this definition is that the phenomena to be studied are neither physical entities nor “real world” experiences. Instead, phenomena are the “structures of consciousness” of an individual; they are the perceptions of an individual about their experiences (J. Willis, personal communication, August 5, 2013). Smith (2011) describes IPA as an example of the double hermeneutic, as the researcher is attempting to make sense of what a person is perceiving while at the same time the person is trying to make sense of what he or she is experiencing or has experienced.

Willis (2007) states, “phenomenology focuses on the subjectivity and relativity of reality, continually pointing to the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them” (p. 53). Perhaps the most important element of the definition is that the phenomena to be studied are neither physical entities nor “real world experiences.”

IPA often involves detailed analysis of each individual case, usually through the analysis of transcripts of in-depth, semi-structured interviews in a search for patterns. For example, Cope (2010) used IPA to understand the experience of failure in a study involving eight entrepreneurs. Smith and Eatough (2006) recommend six to eight interviews as an appropriate number of participants, allowing for a rich and deep analysis. Smith et al. (2009) recommend novice IPA researchers use three to six
interviews in a study because of the time and effort required to analyze interviews using this procedure. Smith and Osborne (2008) assert researchers should be pragmatic in choosing participants, and that a purposive sample is a preferred approach. As Patton (1990) states:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposeful sampling. (p. 169)

In 2011, Smith analyzed 293 papers that used IPA as a methodology published. The papers were published between 1996 and 2008 and presented his analysis of those he believed were of high quality. Smith asserted high quality IPA work must be phenomenological, hermeneutic and idiographic; transparent to the reader; coherent, plausible and interesting; and utilize sufficient sampling to show deep evidence for each theme. He also suggested that high quality work should portray a clear focus, strong data, a well-presented analysis, and evidence of interpretation. Smith also emphasized analysis should be interpretative, not just descriptive, and should capture nuances of similarities and differences. In the future, Smith hopes to see IPA used in mixed-methods studies, while ensuring that the qualitative arm of the study be given due weight (Smith, 2011).

This IPA study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the similar and different perceptions, attitudes and beliefs among public, private and nonprofit sector leaders in Westchester County about collaboration focused on disconnected youth?
2. What do leaders in the public, private and nonprofit sectors who are concerned about disconnected youth believe to be the most important factors that contribute to successful collaboration that most effectively reconnects young people to school or work?

3. How do leaders representing the public, private and nonprofit sectors engaged in supporting disconnected youth describe their experiences and views about collaboration across the sectors to support this target population?

4. What do leaders in the public, private and nonprofit sectors see as areas of opportunity for future collaboration among the sectors focused on reconnecting youth to school, work and opportunity?

**Researcher bias and positioning.** The researcher has experience as a practitioner working with organizations from the business, nonprofit, government, higher education, and philanthropic sectors that focus on supporting youth. This positionality is important to note related to the study. This background and stated bias may be an asset, as IPA requires the researcher to be engaged and to thoughtfully interpret data (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher’s experience includes providing services as a consultant in philanthropy and organizational development, and working with corporations interested in youth and education as strategic priorities. She also has served on numerous nonprofit boards and community advisory committees targeting this population.

Along these lines, the researcher has more recently been provided access to Westchester Children’s Association (WCA) as this study was being developed. The nonprofit’s executive director served as the researcher’s executive mentor and allowed her to conduct doctoral fieldwork at the organization for four months. Corbin Dwyer and
Buckle (2009) believe being a member of the group under investigation can enhance qualitative research and influence the process in a positive way. The researcher’s observations of the organization informed her about issues related to children and youth in the county and the nature of collaboration from the perspective of a countywide policy organization. She also observed how the organization conducted research, developed platforms to support youth funding, and convened stakeholders to address various policy issues. Her participatory involvement enhanced her perspective on the issue.

**Research Context**

There are many educational, business, government, and nonprofit organizations focused on addressing the issue of disconnected youth in Westchester County. The goal of this research was to understand the dynamics of collaboration and the experiences of leaders engaged in supporting disconnected youth on a local and countywide level. The research design strategy entailed procuring deep, vivid qualitative data through in-depth semi-structured interviews with a small sample of leaders who specifically focus on this population. This approach gave breadth and depth to the analysis.

The study site was Westchester County, New York. The county was home to 961,106 people in 2013, including 109,750 between the ages of 16-24 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Located north of New York City, south of Putnam County and Connecticut, and connected to Rockland County to its west and across the Hudson River by the Tappan Zee Bridge, Westchester covers an area of 450 square miles. Forty-five municipalities serve residents living in cities, towns, and villages (Westchestergov.com, 2012). Westchester County includes urban, suburban and small-town communities. The diverse county exhibits extremes of wealth and poverty in addition to a solid middle
class. Census data reveal a population now comprised of more than 40% people of color (Vink, 2013). Forty-seven school districts served over 146,000 students in 252 public schools in the 2012/2013 school year (NYSED, 2014) at an annual cost of over $3.5 billion. The county is very diverse, has multiple jurisdictions, and a wide range of socio-economic levels. Unfortunately, countywide data reveal only part of the story of disconnected youth, but disaggregated data is difficult to obtain (Westchester Children’s Association, 2013).

**Research Participants**

Seven individuals representing the public, private, nonprofit, philanthropic, and education sectors were identified. Selection criteria included their: (a) understanding of issues faced by disconnected youth through their professional reputation and experience; (b) their organizational affiliation and role; (c) leadership and involvement evidenced by participation in collaborative initiatives, or participation on committees or boards that address issues impacting Westchester young people; and (d) willingness to participate in the study. However, participants are not generalized as representative of their sector. IPA interviews tend to be more effective as a way of identifying common themes shared by participants rather than contrasting and comparing the perceptions of different groups. Thus the study focused on shared rather than sector-held perceptions. Those shared perceptions developed from in-depth interviews have important implications for how to organize and support cross-sector efforts to meet the needs of disconnected youth in the context of the county.
Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument for the IPA study was the researcher, who recorded the interviews using a digital recorder and maintained detailed researcher notes. Data collection entailed in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interview data was analyzed in search of patterns; interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to analysis.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

The IPA data was obtained by conducting and recording semi-structured, in-depth, in person, individual interviews with a sample of seven participants. IPA methodology experts (Smith et al., 2009) referred to this type of interview as a “conversation with a purpose” (p. 57). The interview protocol included open-ended, expansive, and exploratory questions (see Appendix B). Smith et al. (2009) recommended preparing about six to eight core questions that relate back to the research questions, but also advised keeping the process fluid. An expert panel reviewed questions in advance and changes were made as needed.

Participants were provided with an informed consent agreement, and were assured confidentiality. Participants were given the option of choosing the location for the interview. All meetings were held at the workplace of the participants either in their office or in a private space. Interviews were recorded on a Sony MP3 Linear PCM recording device. After the completion of the interviews, digital recordings were uploaded to the researcher’s private computer and saved as MPS format sound. Once saved to the password-protected computer, the recordings were uploaded to a secure website, www.transferbigfiles.com, and saved as password-encrypted files. After uploading each interview, a transcription service was provided with the password to the
site. The transcriptionist retrieved, then transcribed each interview as it was received, returning it to the researcher as a Word file, with no identifying information. This seamless process allowed accurate, formatted data to be provided back to the researcher for analysis. The entire data collection and transcription process took six weeks and resulted in about 140 pages of data, double-spaced and line numbered to assist in coding. The data was stored, protected, and will be kept confidential for four years. At that point, the data will be destroyed.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. The researcher reviewed the data according to procedures suggested by Smith et al. (2009) as a general framework. The process followed for each case after the interviews were completed included: (a) reading and rereading transcripts, (b) initial interpretive noting on the document, (c) development of emergent themes, and (d) searching for connections across emergent themes. Coding software was used to supplement the initial note taking on the transcripts, and visual mapping software supported the illustration of evolving superordinate themes. Identifying patterns across cases and interpreting them provided a greater understanding of the perceptions and experiences of professionals from various sectors in Westchester who focus on disconnected youth. Findings provided a broad as well as deep perspective on how further collaboration may occur to address the challenges of disconnected youth in the county.

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative validity is based on determining if the findings are accurate from the viewpoint of the researcher, the participant or the readers. Creswell (2013) illustrated the acceptable strategies to document study accuracy, which he referred to as “validation strategies” for qualitative research. He listed:
• bias clarification
• prolonged engagement and persistent observation
• triangulation
• clarifying researcher bias
• member checking
• rich, thick description
• negative case analysis
• peer debriefing or debriefing
• external audits (p. 250).

Procedurally, the researcher checked for accuracy of the findings by employing four of the noted validity strategies. She used member checking, provided rich, thick description within the data analysis, stated researcher bias within the study; and used peer debriefing with three persons with earned doctorates and subject area expertise.

Chapter Summary

The research study was guided by the methods of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA focuses on producing detailed interpretive accounts grounded in participants’ experiences (Clarke, 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2008; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). The study design provided rich data for analysis to understand leader views of how collaboration across the sectors may address the challenges of youth considered off-track from education or employment in the county. Participants from education, nonprofit, the public and the private sector were interviewed using IPA as a methodology. The researcher’s role in this type of research is very active, and she participated fully, making her own inferences from the interviewees’ interpretations. For
these reasons, the bias and background of the researcher, which might be seen as a limitation, provides strength to the analysis in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Chapter 4 reports study findings, addressing the guiding research questions: What are the similar and different perceptions, attitudes and beliefs among public, private, and nonprofit sector leaders in Westchester County about collaboration focused on disconnected youth? What do leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors who are concerned about disconnected youth believe to be the most important factors that contribute to successful collaboration that most effectively reconnects young people to school or work? How do leaders representing the public, private, and nonprofit sectors engaged in supporting disconnected youth describe their experiences and views about collaboration across the sectors to support this target population? Finally, what do leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors see as areas of opportunity for future collaboration among the sectors focused on reconnecting youth to school, work, and opportunity?

This chapter provides detailed background information about the participants. The chapter then introduces the three superordinate themes, or higher-level themes, that act as an umbrella for seven subthemes that emerged from data analysis. This is followed by a presentation of the seven individual case studies, which analyzed data from each participant as it related to the superordinate themes and research questions. The chapter concludes with a cross-case synthesis, presenting findings organized around the
superordinate themes, comparing and contrasting results to encapsulate results and discussing implications at a broad and sublevel analysis.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

From January through February 2014, seven semi-structured, in-person interviews were conducted with subjects that encompassed a sample of leaders from the private, public, nonprofit, and education sectors. Prior to the interview, participants signed a consent form as required by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board. See letter of introduction in Appendix C and participant informed consent in Appendix D.

The participants’ organizations were all located in Westchester County, New York. Each person interviewed held a senior leadership position. Organizational affiliations included a municipal youth agency, a corporate funder with an interest in youth and workforce development, a K-12 public educational organization, a nonprofit social services organization, a mid-sized technology firm headquartered in Westchester, a higher education institution, and a nonprofit youth services agency. Because many of the participants were relatively high profile, protecting their identity called for special efforts. Aliases were used; in addition, to protect confidentiality some identifying factors not relevant to the implications of the findings were changed.

Participant descriptions, with some details altered to protect identities, are listed below. All organizational affiliations are located in Westchester County.

- Executive director of a government-funded youth services agency in Westchester, referred to as youth agency leader
- Leader at a large private corporation with operations in Westchester, responsible for philanthropy, referred to as philanthropy leader
• Senior leader of a large, diverse K-12 public school district in Westchester, referred to as K-12 education leader
• Senior leader at a nonprofit social service agency serving Westchester, referred to as social service leader
• Leader at a pharmaceutical firm headquartered in Westchester, in the human resources area, referred to as private sector employer
• Senior leader of a post-secondary institution in Westchester, referred to as higher education leader
• Executive leader of a countywide youth-serving nonprofit which provides youth services, referred to as nonprofit leader

Affiliations of the participants interviewed are illustrated in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1. Affiliations of Leaders Interviewed.
In the data analysis phase of the research, a heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) methodology approach was followed, which included immersion, incubation or quiet contemplation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis (Patton, 1999). The researcher immersed herself in the data followed by a time of incubation that involved deep thinking about the data. That stage was followed by a stage of illumination, which was intended to develop a greater understanding of themes and patterns emerging. After that stage, explication or clarification of meaning evolved from self-dialogue and reflection.

Once all interviews were completed, they were read, and then reread several times. Each interview was treated as a separate case study, as suggested by IPA guidelines (Smith, 2011). Notes and thoughts were jotted in the margins of the interview transcripts. The voice recordings were replayed while paying particular attention to voice inflection and intonations that would further inform meaning. Memos for each individual case, summarizing initial impressions, captured key thoughts and the essence of the data, highlighting key words and the researcher’s initial impressions, which were derived from an open-ended initial coding process (Saldaña, 2009). The memos included key words and phrases the researcher interpreted as representing the overall essence of the subject’s individual interview, and those researcher impressions were included as part of the analysis, which is also an important part of an IPA approach to data analysis.

The purpose of the data collection and analysis was to identify common and divergent themes shared by individual participants about the phenomenon of cross-sector collaboration focused on disconnected youth, rather than to contrast and compare perceptions of different groups or generalize findings based on sector. “Phenomenology
focuses on the subjectivity and relativity of reality, continually pointing to the need to understand how humans view themselves and the world around them” (Willis, 2007, p. 53). The focus of analysis was on collective leader views rather than sector-held perceptions. Concepts were used as a way to make sense of and represent an understanding of the data. According to Patton (1990) the “skilled analyst is able to get out of the way of the data to let the data tell its own story” (p. 393).

An inductive approach was used, allowing themes to emerge from data, rather than be pre-imposed (Patton, 1990). Initial patterns emerged as interviews were analyzed. The researcher was particularly interested in patterns of convergence and divergence (Smith, 2011). The search for convergence involves determining which things “fit together” (Patton, 1990, p. 402) leading to a coherent system of shared themes and relationships. During analysis, the researcher determined that descriptive coding and in vivo coding were most appropriate for this study. “A code in qualitative work is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, and/or evocative attribute” for data (Saldaña, 2009, p. 3). A descriptive code represents the major topic from an excerpt of the data. The qualitative software, QSR NVivo 10, supported the initial coding and recoding process. Descriptive coding allowed for categorization of the data in a way that allowed for further analysis. For example, early in the analysis, descriptive codes included phrases such as “family influences” and “perceived academic ability of youth.” In addition, in vivo coding was applied, which Saldaña (2009) defines as a code that represents the participants exact words. When an in vivo code was used, the word or phrase was placed in quotation marks. In this research some examples of early in vivo codes were the words “credentials,” “skills,” “systems,”
“resources,” and “kids who have academic challenges.” In vivo coding provided an opportunity to “honor the participant’s voice” (Saldaña, 2009, p. 74) and allowed for a fluid and iterative process of analysis. This important process provided the foundation for second-cycle coding. As would be expected, several early emergent themes surfaced. These themes were coded and organized, then reorganized and coded again.

During the second coding, the research themes, patterns, and categories began to emerge with greater clarity. Word frequency searches and text mapping features of the QSR NVivo 10 software were used to explore how themes and categories related. When seeking patterns, the researcher paid special attention to Hatch’s (2002) characterization of patterns: (a) similarities, (b) differences, (c) frequencies, (d) sequence, (e) correspondence, and (f) causation. Finally, the researcher created large wall charts of major themes to assist in visualization and identification of repeated and related concepts, leading to the creation of superordinate themes that encompassed two or more of the initial themes that emerged. Of note were several coded categories consistent across the interviews, including the discussion of systems, resources, and skills. Themes were considered recurrent if at least four of seven interviews included them.

The data were then analyzed further and themes were grouped into high-level superordinate themes as a way of making sense of patterns that emerged from the data. Table 4.1 represents the final pattern of themes and superordinate themes. While data analysis provided a multitude of options for deconstructing and reconstructing the data to find meaning, the researcher played an active role in determining the most effective way to present the data, in the tradition of the qualitative researcher as the instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). More specifically, in IPA research the researcher actively participates in
the process of interpreting the data and thus is part of the overall methodology (Smith et al., 2009).

Three superordinate themes emerged from the interviews: (a) how the problem of disconnected youth is defined; (b) the interconnectedness of the public, private, nonprofit and education sectors; and (c) how the public, private, nonprofit, and education sectors are interdependent. This brief overview of the broad findings (the superordinate themes) of the research will serve as an advance organizer. In the next section each case study will be presented. That will be followed by a cross case analysis that discusses superordinate themes, themes, and relationships that emerged from the data analysis. Table 4.1 summarizes the superordinate and supporting themes. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary of the results.

Table 4.1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Superordinate themes</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supporting themes</td>
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<td>Problem definition</td>
<td>How the population is defined, described or understood</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Leader’s past experiences</td>
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<td>Interconnectedness</td>
<td>Systems impacting youth</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Transitions and linkages between systems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Relationships and interactions between leaders of different sectors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interdependency</td>
<td>Reliance on other sectors for resources including finances, people, space, clients,</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>skilled talent pool, training</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Political, economic, and social influences</td>
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The individual case studies. The interviews usually began with the open-ended question asking how the participants arrived at their current role, and they were invited to share their story. Responses set the tone for the rest of the interview. The experiences discussed by the participants were helpful in putting the participants’ views about disconnected youth into a meaningful context. “Relativism is the idea that the reality we perceive is always conditioned by our experiences and our culture” (Willis, 2007, p. 4). Indeed, the design of the interview protocol as semi-structured allowed unanticipated and unscripted exchanges to occur as conversation took place, and let the interviewee take the conversation where he or she might want to take it. This provided very rich and meaningful data in the form of narrative. In the following section, each participant’s interview is analyzed and discussed as it relates to the research questions.

**Municipal youth agency leader.** The leader of the youth agency shared how his experience as a youth 50 years ago left a lasting impression on his life.

I think my involvement with youth programming really came from my growth and development in Mississippi and the fact that my mom and dad were actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the thought, at that time, was how my parents were often away from home and I never wanted to be like that, but I think that had some influence on my decision in terms of serving the community…My mom and dad were active in the Civil Rights Movement, but at the time of my growing up I had the benefit of programs that helped me in my development, from Boy Scouts to playing baseball and sports and being involved in school programs and plays and activities, and my parents kind of cultivated and nurtured our development and growth.
His discussion of how he was a beneficiary of youth-serving agencies while growing up in the racially divided south during the volatile early days of the Civil Rights Movement revealed a deep commitment to the work he does in his current leadership position. He brings programs to youth similar to those programs that were an important part of his formative development. Other recurrent themes in his interview included relationships, resources, moral responsibility, community, sustainability, and communication. He spoke metaphorically of “breaking down walls” and “opening doors” as well as “changing the trajectory of lives” through “intentional pathways.”

This leader’s views of youth were from an asset-based approach, and he mentioned several times how nurturing young people and stirring up their “gifts and talents” and recognizing their “worth and value” were important. He spoke of prevention versus intervention, proof of outcomes and demonstration of impact. Relevancy of programming related to jobs seemed important for him as revealed by his mention of careers several times, and his acknowledgement of his agency’s work with Westchester Putnam Workforce Investment Board.

He also referenced servant leadership, in the context of how he viewed his role as a “calling.” His background, growing up in Mississippi when the Civil Rights Movement was very active, appeared to be a major influencer on his work, what he referred to often as a “journey.” That journey had a clear theme of working on behalf of underserved, or what he called during the interview “disenfranchised youth.” This gave insight into his approach to building relationships and connections related to youth education and employment, revealing the interconnectedness of his work. He used the phrase that he beliefs in a “community of promise versus a community of risk.”
He raised the issue of the importance of providing pathways and connections as opportunities for young people in education and jobs, reflecting the superordinate theme of interconnectedness, illustrated by his words:

The issue is how do you help communities thrive? It’s all about relationships, it’s about education, it’s about providing opportunities or ladders of hope for young people because we know that young people are going to replace us one day and if they’re going to stay in our community we must insure and intentionally provide pathways for young people to live in this community.

He also appeared worried about what would happen when he leaves or if the money runs out, illustrating the theme of interdependence. Under his positive conversation, there seemed an undercurrent of worry. He has been there over 20 years. He stated his agency was in the process of creating a nonprofit foundation to be able to attract more funding, which revealed to his concern for sustainability. He described close relationships with educators and elected officials, and another theme evident through the interview was the importance of relationships with the business community. He stated, “We believe that it’s important that businesses partner with us because they’re looking for the workforce of today and tomorrow and they have a vested interest of helping to shape the workforce.”

His work appeared driven by his servant leadership approach to break boundaries for young people, yet he operates in a very political system heavily reliant on government funding and resources. Below is a revealing quote about the depth of his concern about the context in which he is operating:
Our communities all over the country have lots of young men and women of all races, but predominantly African American and Latino, who have given up, and now are behind prison walls. So, that’s why we talk about prevention as opposed to intervention. Our job is to keep kids out of the pipeline to prison or out of the hurt that sometimes comes our community’s way. There’s racism, discrimination, unemployment, and family disintegration. So, we work really hard trying to engage our community to make sure that they have people who care about them, cause it’s all about care.

His municipality seemed a microcosm of challenges in many urban communities, driven by relationships, dependent on government resources and adjusting to the multitude of different educational, social, cultural, and recreational needs of a diverse population of youth.

**Corporate philanthropy leader.** Around the same time as the youth agency leader was growing up in a racially divided south, the philanthropy leader, who is white, was spending his early years noticing the economic and racial divide in a northeastern city. Like the other leader, he mentions the influence his mother had on him, during a simple exchange shared between a teen and mom while driving her to work, through the “other side of town.” He spoke of the first time he became painfully aware of the divided opportunities young people faced when he was growing up in upstate New York. When he drove his mother through downtown, they would discuss issues related to poverty that opened his eyes to inequity and unfairness.

My mom was a public health nurse, so in order to get to use the only car we had I used to have to drive her to…. a housing project which is where she had one of
her practicums, and on the way there and on the way back we’d talk right, you
know, you talk to your mom and you find out, like all kinds of things that I would
have never known about, food ‘deserts’ and things like ‘How come there’s this
disparity between where we live in the neighborhood?’

He continued reminiscing and shared an exchange he had with a classmate in high
school:

I remember sitting down with one of the guys in my homeroom, I was probably a
junior and I don’t know, we were talking about something, and I said to him well
‘Where are you going to go to college?’ and he said ‘Oh no I’m going to be 16 in
a couple weeks and in my neighborhood, you know, you turn 16 you get yourself
a job at the GM factory and get a car and it’s all good.’ That was really (he
pauses) it’s obviously powerful, because it stayed with me.

A slight edge entered his voice when he spoke about how this memory connects to his
present day role and work.

Affordable housing, economic disparities. It’s all coming into focus now with the
disconnect between the have and the have-nots and the income inequalities and
things like that. It really all boils down to having, I guess, a vision or a mentor
and sort of looking at how do we change the paradigm….but this year is the 60th
anniversary of Brown vs. Board of Education and the 50th anniversary of the war
on poverty, yet I would argue that our education system is probably more
disparate today than it was in the 1950’s and certainly the war on poverty- we
haven’t won too many battles on that one.
While he began the interview with the theme of his exposure to inequity and racial division growing up, throughout the interview he was both philosophical and cynical about the systems that he described as inefficient, not working, and not equitable, although he did share what he thinks is a good example of a community addressing the issue of disconnected youth. He described what he believes is an effective model of cross-sector collaboration that benefits youth in another community,

The Urban League of Rochester [would] reach out to this core of kids, there’s lots of them around, and they put them into a yearlong comprehensive program that includes the GED piece but also a lot of the soft skills. A lot of the things, motivation, managing your money, it’s a whole comprehensive thing and they get them into some type of either job or into a certificate program, a community college, something that gives them, will give them, the credential, the skills that they need in order to get a family wage job and become a productive citizen. They’ve been very successful at it.

He spoke of the positives, but then brings the discussion to the resource challenges,

Unfortunately it costs a lot of money …I’d much rather see us play a significant role in the prevention, I’m one of those ‘preventionists,’ an ‘ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure guys,’ you know, and a lot of times we wait until after the fact, and we come in and we say okay, how can we fix this problem?

He also mentioned the jurisdictional complexity of the county, a theme echoed by a majority of the participants, “Well one of the most difficult things in a place like Westchester County is that we have so many different municipalities, so many school
districts so many different players.” He also spoke in terms of a continuum, highlighting interconnectedness beyond the 16 to 24-year-old age category described as the focus of the research, and discussed his view of the importance of connecting between early childhood education, K to 12 education, post-secondary experiences including college, technical school or gaining credentials.

He discussed the Strive initiative launched in Yonkers, a community-wide collective impact project with a goal of creating a cradle to career model that engages all the sectors in the city to improve educational and career outcomes for all children and youth in Yonkers. The researcher attended the Strive planning and design meeting in Yonkers in December of 2013 as part of fieldwork and saw firsthand over 300 stakeholders participating in a community-wide, action planning process. He described what is occurring with Strive in Yonkers as something to watch as a potential pilot that might be a model for the county. When asked if he thought it would be possible to replicate that as a countywide initiative and if so what it would take, he replied,

So the question is, how do we get those people all collaborating? If we had some kind of a way to get a countywide Strive initiative, which really does look at the cradle to career continuum and try to bring all the pieces together, to me that’s a beautiful model. In the launch of the Strive model in Rochester, in their case it was the head of the United Way and the head of the community college that came together and said we really want this to work and they cast a wide-open net... Now what was the question, could it happen? It could, sure it could happen.
The philanthropy leader spoke of how critical skills are, and how interdependent the private sector and higher education are, in particular in closing what he called the “skills gap” and the perceived lack of skills of young people, in particular in technology:

If those young people are willing and able to tough it out and work really hard, they can eliminate that skills gap, that basic math, reading, writing gap that they have and go on to become productive. So whether it’s a certificate program…or something that prepares them to do work that pays a family wage-- electrician, plumbers, auto mechanics-- they all require good reading and good math skills because today it’s all about technology. …when they earn a GED or graduate from high school, they’ve got a piece of paper but they don’t have the skills.

He also described how his company has become much more proactive in developing its own future workforce, trying to influence outcomes in higher education by working closely with the sector.

You know, if you can take an art history major and put him through a fairly rigorous kind of program, like a Cisco Academy- and I mean they can still study their art history and do whatever they want with art history-but they can actually get a real job and become a productive part of the economy. So, I think a lot of the shifts are going to be happening through the private sector back working with the public sector… I mean if our clients can’t find a qualified workforce they’re going to move. You know, they’re going to move from here to North Carolina or Texas, or wherever they can find the right environment.
His reference to a successful model revealed a pragmatic way of looking at possible solutions for an issue of concern. According to Cisco’s website, the Cisco Networking Academy: has trained more than 4 million students to date, students worldwide gain the skills needed to build, design, and maintain computer networks; improving their career prospects while filling the global demand for networking professionals… Students develop foundational skills in Information Communication and Technology (ICT) while acquiring vital 21st-century career skills in problem solving, collaboration, and critical thinking (Cisco Networking Academy, 2014, para. 1).

He clearly had given much thought to the county’s potential and readiness for this type of a program.

**Social services nonprofit leader.** Unlike the two leaders discussed previously, the social services leader’s journey began in Westchester. She grew up in Peekskill, a graduate of Peekskill public schools. She set the context of her background by telling how she, a Latina woman from the city, through hard work, determination and resilience, earned a doctorate from an Ivy League school at a very young age, defying the odds and the stereotypes that it could not be done, becoming the first in her family to achieve such a distinguished goal. While proud and smiling when recounting her story, she also shared her frustration that she is still seen as an exception to the rule, and that such an accomplishment should be the norm for someone like her, versus something unusual and out of the ordinary for a Latina woman.
Her description of disconnected youth, quoted below, revealed her perceptions of how the interconnection of systems in place impact youth, and also how being dependent on outside funding sources to accomplish her nonprofit’s work heavily influenced her work. Indeed, systems, resources, and challenges to collaboration were major themes of her interview. Here she described her views that systems frequently do not serve the best interests of disconnected youth:

They’re a population of kids that, you know, what they represent is everything that’s wrong with social services. They represent everything that’s wrong with the educational system. I mean, they are the poster children for systems that have failed.

She also emphasized sector differences, lack of resources, and the lack of understanding among the sectors about what disconnection means to the youth and to society. She spoke of silos and intrasector competition. For example, she said,

Every day is such a struggle in terms of keeping programs alive that I think even the best intentioned people find themselves becoming competitive, find themselves vying for the attention of the funding sources, find themselves together in a room saying, ‘I’m the best’ or ‘I can do this,’ or ‘I can do this the best,’ and it makes collaboration really difficult.

Her demeanor and voice revealed a sense of frustration, anger, determination, and hopefulness at different times during the interview. When asked who should be at the table to address the issues of disconnected youth in the community, she replied "Government. Kids. Government. People with money." There was no mention of...
employers, business or education, showing the difference in her perception of interconnection from some of the other participants.

The social sector leader’s words revealed a perception of self-interest as a major influence, based on one’s sector affiliation or political aspirations—implying the best interests of the young themselves are sometimes not the priority, a theme echoed by others as well. She spoke of “broken systems,” the “struggle,” and “game of buy in” as illustrated by this comment,

So politicians are looking to get re-elected, right? Private donors are looking to feel good about themselves, and social service agencies are looking for funding to continue their missions, and in the middle of all that there’re all these kids. So the question is, ‘How do you create an agenda that somehow makes them the focus of the objective of each of these different sectors so that organically they gravitate towards these kids?’

The social sector leader’s words revealed “self-interest” as an important factor to collaboration, generalized based on one’s sector affiliation or political aspirations. She discussed the many services and skills required to compensate for lost time, using the interesting metaphor of a “makeover” for the youth, and said:

I mean if you’re working with disconnected youth you want a makeover for that kid. You want them to have a therapist. You want them to have a case manager. You want them to have some sort of mentor. You want them to have some sort of spiritual advisor. You want them to have some sort of concrete skills training that’s looking at hard skills. You want them to have some sort of concrete skills training that’s looking at soft skills. I mean you have to wrap many of [the]
services around one person to compensate for the years of absence, you know, of
competent structured systems because that’s what you’re looking at.

Her views appeared holistic and focused on the complexity of how services and
skills are interconnected, based on who is involved in providing social services. Her use
of the words “years of absence” gave a hint of playing catch up and assuming there are
deficits when working with youth who are considered disconnected, from her point of
view.

**K-12 public education leader.** Along the same lines, the public education K-12
leader emphasized cooperation and interconnectedness as a necessary approach to help
give direction and hope to young people who may be directionless. He reminisced about
his start in the field working in a juvenile detention center with at-risk children in the
New York City School system, and connected it to his current approach of putting the
young people first, bringing services to them, and keeping them in the community.

I was working with at-risk populations, seeing what some of the needs were. This
was back when within an incarcerated program, educational experiences were not
required. This goes back some time. The kids were pretty much just being
warehouse and there was no educational experience for them and so I would
bring in different things for them to work on. There’s a movement within the
community to provide an alternative experience for those kids while they’re there
and that came after I wound up leaving. But I stayed working with that system, it
was a county court house that actually had looked at trying to reinvest in their
youth without sending them away from the community, trying to help them
reconnect.
Interestingly, during the interview, he did not refer to the youth as disconnected but substituted his own words, “disenfranchised” and “at-risk” which implied a different nuance- that their situation was not within their own control. His use of the word “warehoused” also suggested the young people were not being treated like individuals but more like products being stored. Yet his choice of the word “reinvest” was interesting. It implied a positive, hopeful orientation, contrary to the social service leader who used language which implied scarcity. He spoke about what could be done if innovative approaches were undertaken and repeatedly emphasized the need to get the right people in the same room at the right time, giving past examples of success, in his view, when new approaches were taken.

He also spoke of other experiences that made an impression, such as volunteering in the Newark School system with at-risk children:

My job was to work helping them to connect with their educational system and the goal was them not dropping out and becoming one of these disenfranchised youth. They started working with the kids when they were in the 6th grade and down. I connected with the principal, administrators in the building, teachers, provided support services for the students, you know, tutors and we had connected with the universities for the weekend so that they actually had leadership experiences, exposure to a college-university setting, which I thought was key. A lot of the kids talked about going to college but it was a pipe dream then because they had never been on a college campus, let alone going and sitting in a classroom and actually hearing a professor talk with them about opportunities of the school. Some of the kids actually saw this as a positive experience.
His emphasis on exposing youth to possibilities illustrated his views, and he used the phrase “exploratory expeditionary learning” when discussing what he thought of as an effective past model in Westchester County of a public regional magnet school that involved three school districts and was offered on a college campus. It was launched with a three-year grant, but when the grant expired, the school did not continue. Of all the interviews, the K-12 leader focused the most on experiences for youth as being essential, referring to that theme 22 times during the interviews. He spoke optimistically of “finding those types of experiences for kids to engage in to see if they’re interested.” He also referenced working with higher education, workforce development, and employers, speaking of the new “energy” that a grant he is involved in, is bringing to the county. He said previously, “People haven’t been in the same room or had the right discussions with the right people to know that there are things that could be done.” But he said now they are, and that collaboration was occurring. He continually emphasized “having the right people in the same room at the same time” to “talk about what you want to do and then have them see that there’s value in it; it’s a win/win situation all the way around.”

When asked if he could create something new for Westchester youth if funds were unlimited, he painted a vivid picture, his eyes lighting up, and he spoke of his vision for a public magnet school, inspired by a school he visited, “I would create a program, have a high school that would be for the region for these kids to go to. Not an alternative high school but a different way of thinking.” He described a school in southeast Connecticut, a public magnet school with an apprentice type of experience that included a simulator that replicates the river the town is located on, which also offered rigorous academic coursework. He gave more detail,
Students as a part of their education have to learn how to navigate. When they are done they’re going to have their pilot’s license to run freighters if they want to, if that’s the direction they want to go. They do a lot of work with marine biology, they have fish that they help grow and then harvest… it is an innovative place for kids to learn.

His use of words like passion, innovation and motivation, “lighting a fire,” and finding a “spark” gave an indication that he views youth as filled with potential and experiences as ways to draw them in and unleash their potential so they will develop higher aspirations. He described experiences connecting youth with real life as potentially transformative, with an excitement in his voice when he spoke of tapping into their motivation:

I knew from my prior experiences, looking at how to motivate children beyond the environment they’re in, having that connection with a real life experience either through universities or through job experiences, was really powerful and extremely motivating to the point- it didn’t matter whether you were paid or not, the experience spoke for itself and it was transforming for the kids that were involved.

**Private sector employer.** The meeting at the private sector employer’s offices had a different ambiance than the previous meetings. There were many people moving within the corridors of the three-story building, and lots of action and energy. The firm’s modern headquarters in northern Westchester revealed colorful walls, bright lights, and scientists and engineers dressed in jeans walking through the halls. The theme of interdependence was prevalent throughout most of the interview, in terms of the
perceived view of youth as a pool of potential employees. Similar to the youth agency leader, the private sector employer spoke about youth in terms of their potential and possibilities, and focused on skills, career awareness, bridges, and pipelines.

The interview began with a request for clarification of what disconnected youth meant. Once an explanation was given, she indicated she does work with many segments that fit that population:

We actually target students or youth…between the ages of 18 and 24 through a number of programs that help them either get the career awareness that they don’t have, or understanding the career opportunities…we put on these youth employment conferences where we bring in employers and speak to students about not only how they present themselves and interview skills but also how do they get re-introduced to educational pathways to get them back on track to a successful career path. So that’s kind of been an opportunity for me to really better understand what’s plaguing our underserved youth.

She spoke of “deepening the pipeline of students entering careers in STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) and said,

We know that’s where the most lucrative careers will be, going forward. I think it’s one in three jobs will require some sort of STEM skill, or you know experience in a STEM discipline in the future, so it’s preparing the students to be our 21st century workforce. We also know that students are not performing well in math and science, and that we’re trailing behind other industrialized nations.

Career awareness and readiness were clearly themes important to the private sector leader, who was a former member of a Workforce Investment Board, and in the
past worked in the nonprofit healthcare industry. To illustrate how lack of exposure to math and science was placing young people at a disadvantage in terms of viable opportunities, she shared an anecdote about a career fair her company sponsored at a public school that resulted in only two students out of an audience of 500, getting on the line to learn more about careers in biotechnology, among the 15 career tracks. She said,

There’s a lot of work that we need to do around raising awareness about this industry, and the opportunities in this industry, and what it’s going to take to be successful in this industry, and prepare students for careers in science.

To further illustrate the theme of interconnectedness, she also spoke of “bridge programs” as a means for getting students from a two year to a four-year college or university and helping in the transition to careers, especially in the STEM disciplines, mentioning discussions with two local colleges. Her suggested approach was to consider pathways, starting at a much younger age, in middle school:

We’re looking at that whole educational pathway and helping to build those foundational skills, looking at programs or partnerships where we can fund organizations and their work to help students build those foundational skills in middle school… I think with that career awareness comes, you know, you can engage youth in that dream to aspire to these careers and to want to prepare to be successful in these careers. I think the opportunity to engage youth probably comes at a much younger age than what you’re focusing on in terms of disconnected youth.

She also spoke of the “fall off” of students completing their Associates Degree and not pursuing a four year degree. She said:
I think there’s a responsibility on the part of our higher education system as well, like I was saying, to create, to help develop the workforce that’s going to serve our local business needs. So if we’re considered a hub for biotechnology, our local colleges really need to take notice … you know, even the students that they’re recruiting from across the country, keep them, let’s keep that workforce here.

Indeed, she shared that there are 80 biotechnology firms in the Hudson Valley region in New York, and that this presents a major career opportunity for youth in Westchester. She continued her theme of career awareness and sector collaboration, discussing a program her company developed in partnership with a nonprofit that works with a public education system, which is being launched to bring students as young as middle school to her business. When asked if the lack of preparedness in math and science is viewed as affecting her business, she responded:

Absolutely, I think I’ve said it a number of times in my work that our local schools for one, our local colleges and universities, are not producing the students that we’re hiring, but we are not recruiting on a local level, especially when we look to hire kind of entry level research associates or anyone coming into a science role here in the research and science development capacity here. They’re not coming from our local colleges.

Higher education leader. The higher education leader in the brick building on the rolling hills of the tree-lined college campus provided insights that revealed his views of the interconnectedness, as well as an interdependency among the sectors. His perspective spanned several decades, on a journey that began working with youth, much
like the K-12 leader, but instead of in prisons, it began at a summer camp. His journey through academia included earning a doctorate from an Ivy League school, which brought him to work in Washington, DC to establish an educational foundation, and to teach in Detroit and Atlanta, working in some of the most challenging districts, eventually becoming head of a top school district in New Jersey. He described it as:

a great career in the sense that I’ve had experience in school districts, now in higher education in urban communities, big ones… started out teaching in a suburban community, then 10 years of experience at the federal level working at the research in policy dimensions. So I’ve had a little piece of everything, plus I’ve taught at I don’t know, four or five colleges and universities along the way.

He appeared both a thoughtful academic and an effective practitioner. He spoke several times about influences that youth are exposed to saying, “So schools can have a powerful effect on some kids, individual teachers can have a powerful effect on some kids, but there are so many other competing influences.” He continued,

I’ve always felt that schools should partner with other people and organizations that have a potential influence on kids so that they can kind of aggregate all of these forces and influences, complement one another and try to eliminate counterproductive or contradictory influences.

He talked about how his college is creating relationships to support bridging the gap between high school and higher education as a way to introduce and prepare them for college work, providing assessment, and bringing the young people to the campus to expose many of them to a college campus for the first time. He explained how it worked,
So we’re trying to work with the administration and staffs of the high schools to help them strengthen the skills and motivation of kids while they’re still in high school and the reality is for many of these kids the senior year in high school is wasted time.

He related this to the issue of resources, and the economic loss to the students who cannot pass placement tests:

That’s a shame because when they come here and don’t pass the placement test they end up taking remedial courses for which they get no college credit and yet they pay tuition to take those remedial courses or they use up their financial aid eligibility.

This statement brings to light how the continuum of K-12 public education to higher education is a critical part of where many disconnected youth drop off, and his efforts appear to address this transition, but an approach he has taken, inviting about 50 high school juniors to his campus for a day from under resourced school districts is explained:

So they took the placement test….we fed back the scores to their respective administration. Our disappointment is that I don’t believe the high schools are doing much with those scores for a number of reasons. One is that there’s been some turnover, on the part of high school administrators in those schools. Second is that with the budget cuts over the last few years they’re really constrained in terms of flexibility and staffing, so they haven’t really been able to get out of the traditional framework of 44 minute periods, but we keep on pushing and trying.
His words seem to suggest that both politics and systems in place are a strong force in education. Along these lines, he shared his views about how he believes the public school sectors are coping with the current state mandates on education that have created difficult challenges for public education in the county, explaining:

Most of the administrators are just trying to cope with all the stuff from the state that’s coming down on them, the testing, the new evaluation requirements. It’s not a good time to be a school administrator. You know, there’s been a lot of turnover and a lot of them are counting the days towards retirement because it’s not as much fun and it’s not as rewarding as it used to be.

This revealed, again, the impact of the political system, as well as resources, and the interdependence between public education, higher education, and policy makers mandating new requirements. Indeed, to his point of this not being a good time to be an administrator, in Westchester County, when this was written, five large public school districts in Westchester had interim superintendents in place, leaving a major leadership gap at a very challenging time for public education in the county.

**Nonprofit agency leader.** To arrive at the nonprofit leader’s office, the researcher entered a reception area where two women, a child about three years old, and a young man were also waiting in a reception area. A man came out to greet the child, kneeling beside her. This was the only interview site that gave a glimpse of clients served. A receptionist behind a tall counter in a secured area took individuals’ names. They entered directly from an elevator that opened right into the area that had a well-worn sofa and many children’s books on a coffee table.
The conversation began about how he got to where he is today. Similar to the higher education leader, an early experience working in a summer camp introduced the nonprofit leader to his agency, where he rose in the ranks to CFO. In contrast to the other participants, the nonprofit leader appeared closer in age to the youth he served which was suggested by his appearance and language, style, and openness during the interview. His early responsibilities included work in a program for youth with serious emotional disturbances. While he himself was admittedly unclear about his career direction, and stated “I didn’t graduate on time, so to speak,” he was offered a full time role the day after he graduated from college, and he has been with the same agency ever since.

Fourteen years later, he leads many of the programs of the countywide nonprofit. A major theme of his interview focused on what he referred to as “youth voice,” or what the youth themselves were saying about issues, systems and challenges. Also, his definition of the population seemed the broadest:

People talk about transitional age youth, it could be to some people that it means 18 to 24, some people say 16 to 26, some people would say 18 to 30…if you’re still struggling and still transitioning, you know, I think it’s gray.

When asked if there is a youth agenda in Westchester County for people that are disconnected, he replied:

I don’t think there’s a unified one for the most part. I think there’s an effort to encourage youth to use their voice about issues that the youth think are important to them, things that affect them, they may talk about gun violence, they may talk about racism in their community, police brutality and things like that that happen in their community, the environment, whatever the youth pick.
The theme of interconnectedness was prevalent in the interview, referred to 29 times, more than double of any other interview. He used the word “systems” repeatedly during the interview, stating the “focus from the systems is to try to get youth to talk about what they’re experiencing in the system so that we can make a system that serves youth better.” He described the relationship between the public and the nonprofit sectors, mentioning foster care, respite care, mental health, community-based organizations, and the county departments of mental health, and community services, and social services. He also spoke of the important close relationship between his nonprofit’s youth and the education system, stating this about some of the agency’s programs:

[We] are incredibly well connected with the school district, but it’s more similar to a personal relationship, understanding who our kids are and why they’re here and how to work with them better. It’s not like a broader vision, for example, “How could we work together in a coordinated kind of way?”… there is little opportunity for an economy of scale because to get to the people, you’d be talking to a room of 47 superintendents or whatever, to try to come together for a unified way for Westchester County to do whatever it is you want to do. I don’t know how you want to do that. That’s too many people.

He gave an interesting example of how on the ground relationships translate into better results for young people living in a group home, describing how a fight in the school was handled effectively after the school leaders understood the context of the young people and looked at the bigger picture of how best to address the situation so it would be resolved versus escalated. He described a situation where some youth living in
one of his agency’s residential units got into a fight in school. He described how the school came to the facility to have the superintendent’s hearing:

   We had it at the house and the staff from the school came and they saw that this was a home environment and that it wasn’t like a gang thing or an affiliation thing, it was like these kids really felt like they were brothers in that house and that probably really helped this school welcome them back much more quickly than if it had just been coming to this school and here’s another, you know, pupil, a young man of color jumping in on a fight to protect a friend, and what’s the motivation, is there going to be retaliation?

He commented that without that relationship and the school’s willingness to have the hearing at the home, the incident might have had a different outcome that would not have served the school, the students or the community well.

He spoke of challenges connecting youth to opportunities in the workforce, “I don’t have a network of businesses that I can help our kids get connected to” and brought up the issue of a local government-sponsored program designed to provide summer work opportunities for youth in foster care. The policy of that program was that any youth who did not complete a previous summer job experience “for any reason” were not eligible to participate in the following year. His voice was angry,

   If you didn’t finish it you can’t come back, right. So if this is the only way, a kid who’s in foster care anyway, which isn’t all disconnected youth, but any kid who’s in foster care who needs to get some work experience, if that’s the only access to the business world, this funnel point is done. And since then it would take an agency to have a friend, a neighbor, a board member, a connection in the
community to find that kid a job. You know, that’s the economy of scale. They’re supposed to be able to go out and help promote employment in the county. We can go to the garage where we get our cars worked on, if we know a kid who wants to learn auto mechanics and try to negotiate a job, but there’s no scale to that.

Also, related to the issue of youth employment at Playland, a park currently owned by the county and a major provider of summer jobs for Westchester youth, he spoke of transportation as a major barrier to young people who may not have cars or families with cars.

Playland closes and ends their shift at 11:00 p.m. The last bus leaves Playland at 10:00 p.m. so how do kids get home if they don’t have a way home? The county buses stop running when the park closes but if you have to work after it closes then you have to be able to get a ride. So we haven’t been able to have any of our group home kids work at the county because we can’t have the staff leaving to pick kids up if there’s other kids in the house and we’re not going to just get everyone up out of bed at 11:00 at night so that we can pick up the couple kids who are working at Playland. So it’s just this incredible disconnect between what we’re supposed to be doing and what we’re, what’s actually happening.

His observations and those of the other subjects revealed how the interconnectedness of systems, decisions and decision-makers impact youth connection in intentional and sometimes unintended ways.

**Superordinate themes.** The leaders’ definitions of the problem were revealed by how they framed or defined what disconnected youth and collaboration meant to them in
their own words. This included leaders’ descriptions of their background experiences, which provided a lens to their thinking, as well as to their thoughts on the external context in which they described their experiences. The following provides a cross-case synthesis of the superordinate themes that carried across all the interviews. This section compares, contrasts and highlights the findings in light of answering the research questions.

Interconnectedness was reflected through discussion of systems, relationships and transitions. Both positive and negative examples were given illustrating how leaders perceived interconnectedness as either supportive of their work on behalf of disconnected youth or how it is a challenge to their effectiveness. Within this theme were the concepts of transitions between systems, for example moving from K-12 to higher education, foster care to employment and independent living, or from higher education to employment. Six of the seven leaders mentioned how important a shared agenda is to making collective progress. Concepts such as pipelines, feeder systems, and bridge programs are also included within this theme. Grants were mentioned within this context, seen as promoting important cooperation and alignment of interconnected systems, while conversely sometimes creating tension due to perceived uneven power relationships between grantor and grantee, or competition between organizations in the same sector.

The private and education sectors leaders spoke often of interconnectedness in terms of motivation and skills, while the nonprofit and government leaders spoke of systems and services. In addition, the private sector leaders spoke more of engaging and exposing youth to careers, while the nonprofit and social service leaders used language which included words like “providing” and “preventing.”
For example, the higher education leader described how a young person not doing well in high school has a long-term ripple effect on prospects for college and career. He stated “those kids who aren’t doing well in high school, a number of them will end up here but not pass the placement test and they’ll spend their time in these unmotivating remedial courses.” Similarly, the K-12 leader talked about how important educational experiences are that motivate youth, emphasizing the importance of trying things out “to see if it’s something they’re really interested in doing and then once they do find that spark go with it.”

One school district in the county provides space to its municipal youth agency free of charge. The youth agency and its program sites are embedded in school buildings. The agency does not pay rent for the space, and provides after school and college and career preparation programs for over 2,500 children. Here is how the participant explained how synergistic this relationship is for youth, educators, families, and taxpayers:

I have a great relationship with the superintendent, the Board of Education, the principals, we run programs in every school here. So I mean they give us space, they give us utilities so how many people can say that? The school district, and schools tend to be very territorial, they tend to be very guarded about who comes into their community and most people they don’t give space to, so we have nurtured and developed a relationship with the Board of Education because we know, and they know, nobody can do everything. So, at the end of the school day we know that kids need after school programming and recreational programs so we use their facilities, but again it’s based on outcomes. The schools know that
parents are working, they don’t want to see kids coming home from school and
living in an unsupervised environment. … it creates these particular risk factors.

So, when kids are protected in our programming everyone wins.

This synergistic relationship has served both the city and the schools well. The
agency leader reported that the graduation rate of one program for African American
young men was that 100% of the students graduating and going on to college. In general,
about 86 to 88% of African American youth and 80% of Latino youth in his city
graduate, well above other Westchester city-school districts’ average graduation rates.

Interdependence, or how leaders described their dependence on another sector,
incorporated much discussion of resources, people, and politics. Examples within this
category included stories about the re-entry of youth out of “systems,” the need for
skilled employees by area employers, complex rules and regulations governing grant
allocation and funding eligibility, and the economic and social implications of providing
remedial coursework for public school students entering college unprepared for the
workforce. Under this superordinate theme were extensive discussions that touched upon
career awareness, exposure and readiness, and credentials to allow young people to take
part in the workforce and contribute to the regional economy, as consumers and
taxpayers.

Interdependence suggested mutual reliance, which was a major finding of the data
analysis. In the context of this research, interdependence included the lost potential of
disconnected youth and losses to the greater community in terms of financial and
opportunity costs. Within this theme are the subthemes of resources, people and politics.
Examples raised by the subjects included discussion of the dependence between social
service agencies and government funders; between K-12 and higher education, which provides remedial training to new students which used up a student’s limited financial resources; and between employees and government-funded workforce programs geared to provide training for a workforce necessary to address current business needs. Complex rules, seemingly arbitrary regulations, and mandates from the state related to funding allocations and eligibility were said to have major economic, social, and human implications for youth in the county.

The philanthropy leader spoke of how critical skills are, and how interdependent the private sector and higher education are, in particular in closing what he called the “skills gap” and the perceived lack of skills of young people, in particular in technology:

If those young people are willing and able to “tough it out” and work really hard they can eliminate that skills gap, that basic math, reading, writing gap that they have and go on to become productive, so whether it’s a certificate program…or something that prepares them to do work that pays a family wage-- electrician, plumbers, auto mechanics-- they all require good reading and good math skills because today it’s all about technology. …they’ve got a piece of paper but they don’t have the skills.

Skills and certifications for jobs that are in demand in the region were also discussed by the K-12 leader as an illustration of the interconnectedness and interdependence between education and business. He commented that many school districts do not have connections and relationships with business to get the “high tech skills or the STEM skills,” mentioning the Workforce Development Board is “looking at how to get into the schools to do the very same thing.” He commented about how
important it is in his view for “finding those type of experiences for kids to actually engage in to see if they’re interested” or what he referred to as “exploratory expeditionary learning experience.”

Contrasting how skills were a predominant theme for employers and educators, the word “system” was mentioned 47 times by the two leaders from the nonprofit sector, almost double the mention of the word from all the other leaders combined. An example of how important this concept was to the nonprofit leader was illustrated when asked about systems:

I think the foster care system wants to hear about how we can better prepare our kids to transition back to their homes or back to independent living depending on their age. I think the mental health system wants to figure out ways to work better with youths so they understand the treatment they’re getting and why… So they (the county) have a goal of trying to figure out how to reduce the number of people interacting with their homeless system and if a high proportion of those are former foster care youth… and I think asking youth about their experience is important. Youth who were foster children, and youth who have been. or are homeless, asking them about what, (pause for emphasis) from their point of view (pause) what they think the system could have done better, how they could have been treated or handled or prepared better.

His words reinforce how complex the systems are in the county, and reveal how there are many systems within systems. There is even an overarching and highly regarded “System of Care” within Westchester that is recognized nationally as a model, co-led by the County Department of Mental Health and the Department of Social Services. The
system brings together education, nonprofit social services, educational groups, and juvenile justice to support disconnected youth from a social service perspective.

Six of the seven subjects mentioned politics as a major contextual challenge that contributed to dependency, whether created by competition for funding allocations, policies that impact operations or formulas for funding, or appointment of persons setting agendas for youth. The philanthropy leader spoke often of politics in his comments about his view of the context of disconnected youth:

- It’s very political, let’s be honest, it’s very political. When you’ve got elected officials who appointed officials to run programs and select service providers there’s bound to be some political decisions made and I think again there’s always going to be politics, there’s always going to be no matter where you go, but if you can separate the politics and the elected officials from the process you end up with a much richer solution.

Equally as vocal about the political nature of addressing the issue was the nonprofit leader. This was one of the few areas within the theme of context that the private sector and the nonprofit sector concurred, connecting the competitive nature of obtaining funding with the power dynamics of the political landscape, commenting how “politicians are looking to get re-elected.” then asking, “How do you create an agenda that somehow makes them (youth) the focus of the objective of each of these different sectors?”

The higher education leader talked about the economic context of youth impacting their ability to complete their education:
If more of them knew that there was a job at the end of the pipeline I think there just would be greater motivation for them to take studies more serious and invest time. You know, so many of them are facing economic challenges, in part to support a family and part to support themselves. It’s very hard for them to squeeze education into that equation and you know, I think because employment opportunities seem rather distant for them the trade-offs tend to be more in terms of giving their current employment, as dead end as it is, a higher priority than investment in their studies, or a vision of what is next after high school.

His remarks are similar to the private sector employer’s comments, which mention the context of a changed job market, a challenging economy and need for the private sector to be more connected to higher education in order to expose and motivate students to work toward certain career paths. Aligned with this, the private sector employer said:

Business needs to recognize that there exists an opportunity in developing the workforce of tomorrow, and that there’s a responsibility on the part of our higher education system as well, to create, and to help develop the workforce that’s going to serve our local business needs.

Along these lines, the words of the nonprofit leader spoke to the challenge of working with the private sector:

You sit and you talk about mental health and they talk about revenue and you talk about social emotional well-being and they talk about marketing, and you start to have these conversations and you’re trying to get people whose entire universe
revolves around the particular product to understand why the product we sell is valuable.

Resources were discussed in many contexts, but a predominant theme was the lack of sufficient resources or the fear of losing resources. A visual word cloud of the word “resources” in QSR Nvivo10 revealed linkages to words including scarcity, keeping, limited, and stretched. The nonprofit leaders mentioned resources 16 times; the education leader and public sector leaders, ten times, compared to the private sector employer’s seven mentions, and the funder did not mention the word at all.

The data also suggested competition for resources has contributed to creating greater collaboration and sharing, as well as to tension and conflict. The higher education leader explained his previous work leading a school district:

We tried to develop high school programs that were responsive to the wide range of kids that were in the district. We had an alternative school that served some of the most challenging kids and we looked for other resources in the community that could supplement what we were able to do in the school district.

The social sector leader spoke of “chasing after money” and expressed an extreme concern about the impact competition for funding was having on her sector:

Every day is such a struggle in terms of keeping programs alive that I think even the best intentioned people find themselves becoming competitive, find themselves vying for the attention of the funding sources, find themselves in a room saying I’m the best or I can do this, or I can do this the best, and it makes collaboration really difficult but it’s not a testament to the fact that collaboration is difficult in and of itself, it’s a testament of the scarcity of the resources.
When asked what keeps him up at night, the youth agency director simply responded, “I just lost 1.7 million dollars.” He later balanced that statement telling a story of an individual who came to visit his program, “a billionaire”, who became a donor, “He heard about the work that we were doing and wanted to come and see for himself to see if this would be something he wanted to pour his resources into.” A decision to “pour” resources into his program in many ways seems to represent validation that his agency is achieving its goals and is a worthwhile investment.

Competition for financial resources also translated into viewing some disconnected youth themselves as assets that bring with them financial resources, and as a means to meet metrics and quotas, which represent more funding per capita. The nonprofit leader shared a story, which obviously upset him, and affected his perceptions. They literally have had kids slated to move into a group home and someone from another agency going to meet them at the non-secured detention center where they were and explaining to them how their rules are looser than another so that the kid will want to go there… if you wanted that kid because you have empty beds, that’s an issue because we’re expending all sorts of resources to compete on stuff when we could be like talking about how do we better serve kids in the system?

The trend in Westchester has been to move away from residential homes, with more than 60 facilities reportedly closing or merging in the county over the last few decades, leaving only about 15 in operation as the service model has changed to a non-residential care model. The competition for youth appears an unintended consequence of policies that phased out residential care for youth, again revealing the interdependencies between policymakers, nonprofits and ultimately the youth themselves. Speaking of the
pressure to maintain resources, the same nonprofit leader called it a “competition—we all need to keep our numbers up.” He emphasized how resources should be invested in youth for their positive development and out of moral responsibility, asking rhetorically,

   These are our neighbors, these are people, right? These are kids and it’s like this whole idea of like ‘Are these people deserving of this help? Are they deserving of my help? Should they be taking my tax dollars?’ As if they’re not taking your tax dollars when they’re in jail?

His comments appear to imply that he believes some individuals may view spending money on disconnected youth as not justified, and that the funds are not seen as an investment by them, but rather a drain on taxpayer dollars, but that he strongly disagrees with that notion.

   The private sector funder also spoke of limited resources, and acknowledged it occurred in her sector, as well as in other sectors, speaking about the “scarcity of resources” as part of the “universal challenges to any partnership” and “probably a huge obstacle to fruitful collaboration.” In this regard, her view as aligned with the social service leader indicating lack of resources is a factor that impedes collaboration. However, the difference was this scarcity seemed to lead to greater innovation. Her company’s approach, she explained, was to allocate resources to bring about the “greatest impact to benefit youth, exemplified by a new program her company was sponsoring, a science van, created by a science professor, that travels to schools and provides a crash course in ninth grade science regents review to supplement what is not available in the school districts with which she partners. This showed innovation, collaboration and cooperation between business, higher education, a nonprofit and a public school district,
addressing an area of high importance to the company, leveraging their financial as well as human resources in the process.

In spite of such examples of collaboration, term silos was used as a metaphor several times. The youth agency leader spoke of silos, saying, “Many ways still ….people don’t work together. Some people still work in silos.” The social services leaders said, “The children, they’re emblematic of disconnected systems and everybody is operating in silos. They are looking at basically feeding their own needs and figuring out how to keep themselves alive in their own worlds, most of these people.” Similarly, the nonprofit leader mentioned that more progress could be made if someone was “high enough that they are not in the silo.”

Career readiness was also a theme mentioned by all participants, and all emphasized how the job market has changed. The youth agency leader said:

Knowing that the job market has changed, there are very few jobs as you know in sociology, psychology, education, human services, right. So what we have in our country are the Walmarts and the Targets and then we have the math, science, technology, engineering. So we have to change our view of work so that we encourage our young people to stretch themselves, to think critically, and precisely, but that comes before they get to middle school and high school, we have to help our young people have the mindset that they can do whatever they want to do if they work hard at it.

The recognition of the interdependency related to skills, employment and the economic success of employers based in Westchester was further revealed by the words of the private sector employer, who spoke about her own sector as needing to “step up to
the plate,” as well as stating that local colleges and universities should develop curricula to support local employers:

We run the risk of that pool running really, running dry. We run the risk of losing that talent, you know, that little talent that there is in that pipeline, to other communities. So I think also our local colleges and universities really need to develop curriculum to support their existing business community needs in their communities.

Three of those interviewed mentioned a new initiative in the region, Hudson Valley P-TECH (Pathways in Technology and Early College High School), as a hopeful and innovative approach that underscored both the interconnectedness of education, employment, and intentional pathways and partnerships between the sectors. A new state early college initiative, P-TECH involves education, industry, and workforce development. Both members of the private sector and the K-12 education leader described the grant as an exciting new opportunity for Westchester and the region. Modeled after a successful program in Brooklyn initially funded by IBM, New York State allocated funds in the state budget in 2012 for P-TECH to be created in each of NY State’s Economic Development zones as an incentive for collaboration between industry and education focused on career pathways. The new program, will serve 15 school districts in Rockland, Putnam, and Westchester Counties.

Leaders raised several issues related to interdependence of public, private, and nonprofit organizations. When discussing the implications of such a large estimated number of youth between 16 and 24 considered “disconnected” and not in school or
working in Westchester, the nonprofit leader reflected on the economic implications, as well as even acknowledging that it is a problem:

I mean if all 18,000 of those people did have jobs, or even if half of them have jobs, or get jobs every year, then what would that mean for businesses that could sell them products and services in Westchester and all these local businesses that could stand to benefit from that? …but you need to get people together and realizing that there’s a problem to acknowledge it, to talk about ways to solve it.

One entity isn’t just going to be able to step forward and say this is what I’m going to do, whatever else is you guys want to do cause there’s probably, there probably is like a perceived risk of either employing or offering training to people, whatever that kind of additional training would be specifically for youth whether they’re disconnected or not. I don’t know, that’s like the million dollar question, right?

The other nonprofit leader took a slightly different approach in her view of the interdependence and ripple effect of the issue:

I think there’s different people coming at it different ways. I mean I think the foster care system wants to hear about how we can better prepare our kids to transition back to their homes or back to independent living depending on their age. I think the mental health system wants to figure out ways to work better with youths so they understand the treatment that they’re getting and why they are getting it.

The youth agency leader stated much of what is represented in all the superordinate themes, using a simple metaphor.
It’s almost like a pie, right?...We have the ability to impact the whole community by having everybody as a part of that pie as opposed to having one serving of that pie. Sometimes what gets in our way is we look through our own prism whether we look at race or culture or economics, that’s one thing in that pie. We have to see the whole spectrum, what affects you, affects me.

Summary of Results

Seven interviews were conducted in early 2014 with high profile leaders. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using IPA as a methodology to understand the participants’ lived experiences and perspectives related to collaboration in Westchester County focused on disconnected youth. Participants worked in the public, nonprofit, government, business, education, and philanthropic sectors. Data revealed that how the leader defined the problem, how interconnections among the sectors were viewed, and how they described perceived interdependencies were major themes related to the issue of disconnected youth. Seven sub-themes were identified within those categories.

Participants provided meaningful and vivid descriptions of experiences, current observations and thoughtful responses to questions asked. The interview protocol sought to discover common themes, divergent interpretations and proposed opportunities for additional cross-sector collaboration to support young people who are between 16 and 24 not working, and not in school. The seven leaders’ responses provided their individual unique perspectives, and gave rich and detailed descriptions of their lived experiences related to the research topic. Chapter 5 will provide analysis of the findings and propose recommendations for further study.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was (a) to understand factors that contribute to successful cross-sector collaboration focused on disconnected youth in Westchester County and to, (b) assess the potential for more comprehensive and effective collaboration among the sectors in Westchester County that focuses on reconnecting the disconnected youth population. The issue of a significant number of youth not in school or working has major social, economic, and policy implications. Chapter 5 begins with discussion of the key findings and their relationship to current research. Findings are compared and connected to existing literature about cross-sector collaboration and disconnected youth, relating back to the research questions. Following that, implications and study limitations are discussed. To conclude, recommendations for future research and study and conclusions are presented. While Chapter 2 includes discussion of theories and conceptual models, this research did not seek to test theories or models.

This study used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, a qualitative research approach best suited for exploring how a person perceives a particular phenomenon. IPA was the most appropriate approach to address the research questions because it allows for detailed exploration of how participants make sense of a phenomenon, in this case collaboration across sectors related to disconnected youth. In-depth, semi-structured, in-
person interviews with high-level leaders in K-12 and higher education, and the private, public, and nonprofit sectors in Westchester County provided rich, descriptive data. While results only represent views of individual participants and are not intended to be generalized, the findings provide many meaningful perspectives that may lead to new ways of thinking about cross-sector collaboration focused on disconnected youth.

This study sought to answer the four research questions:

1. What are the similar and different perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs among public, private, and nonprofit sector leaders in Westchester County about collaboration focused on disconnected youth?

2. What do leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors who are concerned about disconnected youth believe to be the most important factors that contribute to successful collaboration that most effectively reconnects young people to school or work?

3. How do leaders representing the public, private, and nonprofit sectors engaged in supporting disconnected youth describe their experiences and views about collaboration across the sectors to support this target population?

4. What do leaders in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors see as areas of opportunity for future collaboration among the sectors focused on reconnecting youth to school, work, and opportunity?

The participants included seven influential leaders who worked in Westchester County in business, higher education, K-12 public education, nonprofit social services, nonprofit youth-services, municipal government, and philanthropy. Criteria for selection required knowledge of the topic of disconnected youth in Westchester, and most
importantly, their willingness to participate. IPA requires the investigator be actively engaged in interpreting the data collected from interviews which is an expression of the “double hermeneutic” that involves the researcher interpreting the interpretations of human participants concerning a specific phenomenon.

A social constructivist worldview informs the study which suggests that when seeking meaning, individuals “develop subjective meanings of their experiences” which are “varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories” (Creswell, 2013, p. 24). Emergent themes evolve based on participant perceptions. Qualitative data included seven hours of verbatim interview transcripts, field notes, and reflective writings. Aided by qualitative software, seven sub-themes are developed through descriptive and in vivo coding, and then further analyzed to develop three superordinate themes.

**Implications of Findings**

Study findings reveal that three major themes, problem definition, interconnectedness, and interdependency, are important factors that, in the view of participants, have a major influence on the success of cross-sector collaboration focused on disconnected youth in Westchester County. Within those superordinate themes, seven subthemes are present: (a) problem definition; (b) leader’s experiences; (c) systems; (d) transitions and linkages; (e) relationships, and interactions; (f) resource dependency, and (g) the political, social, and economic environment.

The results dispel the notion of collaboration being viewed as a straight line with distinct stages (Peterson, 1991), and illustrate a more fluid and ambiguous process that is highly dependent on linkages across systems (Hogue, 1993). Results also reveal how
leaders often adapt an integrated approach working with other sectors, recognizing that how value is defined and how relationships are managed are key (Austin, 2000). These findings suggest the process of helping disconnected youth is not simply about moving a needle from empty to full. The process suggests acknowledging the issue is an adaptive problem situated in a complex, ever-changing ecosystem that requires a model based on multiple perspectives and interpretations. The implications are discussed on a conceptual level in relation to each major theme, followed by recommendations for practice based on what was learned. Figure 5.1 represents major or superordinate themes that emerged from the analysis of the data from this study.

**Figure 5.1.** Illustration of themes.

**Theme 1- problem definition.** There is no consensus about who is included in or should be part of the population referred to as “disconnected youth.” Indeed, how the
population is described varies greatly. Participants use descriptors like “marginal and not sophisticated” and “rudderless without the skills to get a real job” and “young people of hope and promise.” Crosby and Bryson (2005) propose that the way a need is framed, named, and interpreted has tremendous influence on who will place it on the agenda, how it might be addressed, and the types of collaborating members of a partnership who might be engaged to solve the issue. A situation may be interpreted from many worldviews, presenting as different problems with many potential solutions. Foster-Fishman, Novell, and Yang (2007) state, “The goal of a change agent is to engage multiple stakeholder groups in a process where they each articulate their perception of the problem and then examine and negotiate the similarities and differences across these worldviews” (p. 203). The data reveal there is not one single shared view of what the concept of disconnected youth means.

Indeed, study findings support research that contends youth between the ages of 16 and 24 not in school or working, represent exceedingly dissimilar subgroups. In addition, reasons given in the literature for disconnection are varied, complicated, and often not readily apparent. Heightened interest exists in creating systems that acknowledge the heterogeneity of youth considered at greatest risk for disconnection, and for providing options as well as acknowledging different educational, employment, and personal needs (Bloom, Thompson, & Ivry, 2010). Data from the study corroborate this heterogeneity. Included in their categorization of the population are references to high school non-completers, those who have been in the criminal justice system, youth who have aged out of foster care, teen parents, and youth who may be working toward a General Equivalency Diploma. Still others describe disconnected youth as those who may
not have entered a career but have graduated college. Finally, several conversations focus on those not yet disconnected, but deemed at risk for becoming disconnected.

The term “opportunity youth” appears in more recent literature as an alternative to the term “disconnected youth” (Aspen Institute, 2013; Belfield & Levin, 2012, Bridgeland & Milano; 2012, White House Council on Community Solutions, 2012). This may suggest an attempt to reposition the issue. Frequently, this population is referred to as vulnerable, disadvantaged, or at-risk. This reframing appears to encourage thinking of this group with an asset-based versus deficit orientation. Study findings reveal both positive and negative words and phrases when referring to what one considers part of this population of youth.

Related to this framing, leaders’ experiences and carefully chosen language gave clues to their views of the issue. The experiences and events participants shared from earlier in their lives seemed to have influenced how they currently approach their work with youth. Whether observing racial and class inequity as a teen, working with incarcerated youth, interacting with youth at a summer program, or teaching in the inner city, these vignettes are revealing. This suggests leaders should be given the opportunity to reflect on early experiences and share stories about their previous work with disconnected youth as part of a process to gain a better understanding of another’s perspectives and leverage their own. The leaders’ experiences also seem to provide them with a sense of empathy when discussing youth that made the issue personal to several leaders. Empathy is an important factor related to effective leadership (Goleman, 2006).

**Theme 2 – interconnectedness.** Interconnectedness is defined as the quality of being mutually joined or related (Merriam-Webster, 2014b). Findings indicate a changed
job market requires the private sector be more connected to higher education and K-12 education in order to expose and motivate students to learn about and work toward certain career paths, in particular in fields related to science, technology, engineering, and math. STEM is a major topic important to both private sector leaders, the municipal youth leader, and K-12 education leaders. They all spoke of the important role STEM plays to connecting education to employment based on current employment trends and industry needs in Westchester. Preparing students for jobs in STEM fields was one focus area leaders from different sectors, or systems, seemed to understand and support.

Systems were, in fact, mentioned 77 times in the data. However, leaders from the nonprofit sector mentioned systems more than twice as many times as all the other participants combined. References to systems are both negative and positive, but predominantly negative. For example, phrases like “disconnected,” “broken,” “disparate” and “underperforming” denote negative views of systems, yet phrases like “system of care that really supports” also convey positive aspects of the concept. According to the literature, overlapping groups of youth from different systems risk disconnection the most: youth with learning disabilities or mental health challenges; youth involved in the justice system; youth aging out of foster care; older immigrant youth, and young mothers (Wycoff, Cooney, Koram-Djakovic, & McClanahan, 2008).

Research describes numerous systems these youth are navigating, often simultaneously, including the education system, juvenile justice, social services, mental health and foster care, and workforce development. That contributes to the challenges of addressing such a wide and diverse population segment. All participants advocated using adult mentors or persons with an interest in their future success as critical to preventing
disconnection. Anecdotes of participants’ personal involvement portray the importance of engagement with youth to help keep them on track.

Participants spoke of systems in terms of foster care, public schools, mental health provider, transportation, social services, juvenile justice, workforce development, county government. The findings reveal systems are misaligned at critical junctures. For example, the private sector leader described gaps in how employers and educators work together to develop programs and curriculum relevant to employer needs. Another example was how the transportation system, a critical component to support disconnected youth related to after-school programs, summer employment, or internships, is sometimes not aligned to the needs of disconnected youth, preventing them from opportunities to work or gain experience.

Six of the seven participants spoke of the importance of relationships, in several contexts. Sturgis and Hoye (2005) noted in some regions school districts have developed mutually beneficial relationships with child welfare, juvenile justice, and other key public systems in support of reconnecting youth to education. Numerous references in the literature suggest the importance of relationships in cross sector collaboration, in particular related to the issue of disconnected youth. Indeed, in this study the municipal leader mentioned “relationships” 14 times. He described the positive influence strong relationships with elected officials and public school leaders have had on youth outcomes. He credited strong relationships for creating a unique synergy that led to his agency being given free space in the public schools to offer youth programming. The higher education leader spoke of his synergistic relationship with public school districts. He brought college services to high school. He also took high school youth to his
campus, which was often their first exposure to a college campus, as he sought to show them what could be possible. The private sector employer spoke of strong relationships with county government, nonprofits, and public school districts, based on intersecting interests aligned to support education to employment, which she perceived as benefiting all.

Within the superordinate theme of interconnectedness, this study also develops support for the critical importance of data to begin building an accurate reflection of what the issue means, in human, financial, and economic terms. Evidence-based decision-making calls for the rigorous use of data. Knowing what to measure, and what metrics across systems and sectors can be tracked and shared, are critical components of initiatives across the country seeking to address the challenge of disconnected youth. Indeed, while organizations, including the Westchester Children’s Association, are focusing on providing data that can be interactive and tailored to the needs of policy and decision makers in Westchester (Westchester Children’s Association, 2012), during the study, difficulty in accessing data related to youth employment, funding streams, and other metrics presented a challenge in getting a total picture of the issue, and is referenced as a study limitation.

Theme 3 – interdependency. The Oxford Dictionary defines interdependency as “two or more people or things dependent on each other” (oxforddictionaries.com, 2014). Study findings disclose many different factors contribute to perceived interdependency across sectors. Examples of factors contributing to interdependency include funding to run programs, relevant training, and education to develop current and future employees, and access to internships and work experience. Findings indicate the belief that politics
has a major influence on youth outcomes in the county, whether through allocations, policy, mandates, or appointments of individuals to boards that make funding decisions.

Resources are a major issue raised by participants, mentioned by six of seven participants. Selsky and Parker (2005) propose resource-dependency as a major platform used to make sense of context and interactions among those collaborating across sector boundaries. Resources are among six main factors deemed important for effective collaboration (Mattessich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001). Financial resources are listed as one of the four major requirements for establishing an effective collective impact initiative (Corcoran, Hanleybrown, Steinberg, & Tallant, 2012; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Similarly, Bridgeland and Milano (2012) asserted both private and public resources are required to provide opportunities for disconnected youth.

Results also support existing literature regarding transition points where youth may disconnect. The Strive approach (Kania & Kramer, 2011) recognizes the drop-off points where youth disengage and presents a continuum model from Pre-K through career, illustrating those transitions. Findings from this study indicate perceptions that transitions from K-12 to postsecondary education are sometimes weak links. For example, youth are often inadequately prepared for college-level work, which makes the transition to college difficult, requiring remedial work, which in turn depletes their financial aid, resulting in non-completion. The transition from education to employment is also a critical juncture where youth often disconnect, as shown by numerous recent studies (Moussed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011). Indeed, “career readiness” was a theme mentioned by all participants, and each one emphasized how the job market has changed, requiring a new approach, as youth may get
lost in the maze of trying to secure their first job. Those without connections, a caring adult, dependable transportation, and many other resources may be even at a bigger disadvantage than others.

Researchers estimate that disconnected youth represent a loss of $93 billion per year to the American public (Belfield, Levin, & Rosen, 2012). Much of that cost, including the cost of social services and loss of property taxes, occurs at the local level. Not only do disconnected youth encounter reduced economic prospects, they also pose a tremendous cost to society from lost earnings, lower tax revenue, and higher government spending associated with health, public safety, and welfare assistance (Venture Philanthropy Partners and Child Trends, 2012). Belfield, Levin, and Rosen (2012) found that each disconnected 16-year old youth on average, when compared with other youth, inflicts a taxpayer burden of $13,900 per year and social burden of $37,450 per year. Extending this logic they argued that, a 16-year-old disconnected youth will cost taxpayers $258,240 over his or her lifetime and impose a total lifetime social burden of $755,900.

All of the participants reported they serve on numerous boards, task forces, commissions and are part of external networks. One of the findings of this study is the importance of “being at the table” when collaborating. Several participants reference a former organization that no longer exists, The Westchester Education Coalition, which they believe played a critical role in convening leaders across sectors to discuss education, employment, and youth issues.

Another conclusion from the study is that leaders follow effective examples of collaboration in the county and have an interest in learning from these initiatives, even if
Participants mentioned several current county initiatives described as innovative approaches to improving outcomes for youth at greater risk of disconnection. Foster care affects many social issues, including homelessness, and the analysis indicated a widespread belief the county has taken a lead in this by securing a grant, “Building Futures,” one of only a few communities nationwide awarded funding to develop an approach to preventing homelessness for foster care youth aging out to the system. In addition, Hudson Valley P-TECH, was mentioned as a positive force throughout the state that is also occurring in Westchester. Furthermore, the county’s focus on STEM is mentioned as a critical component to provide a bridge between education and employment in the county. Along those lines, the Yonkers’s Strive initiative is held up as a model to watch, and several leaders interviewed for this study mentioned interest in considering the possibility of a countywide Strive initiative. The approach has been initiated in communities in 37 states and the District of Columbia. Several initiatives are countywide, including Adams County, MD, Berrien County, MI, Broward County, FL, and Clinton County, NY.

Another past model mentioned by participants was the concept of a regional high school, which served the districts of Greenburgh, Irvington and Harrison. Students were admitted by lottery, and it was located on the campus of Manhattanville College. It was funded for three years by a $2 million federal grant from the Magnet Schools Assistance Program, (Rosenberg, 2004) and although deemed extremely successful in achieving academic success, based on 100% of student participants receiving a Regents diploma, after grant monies ended, one of the districts chose not to continue funding it through its
district’s funds, and it ended. There may be an opportunity to revisit a regional approach that leverages partnerships with higher education to serve youth.

Based on the beliefs of participants in this study, leaders’ exposure, experiences, and engagement with other sectors are critical components necessary to understand and address the issue of disconnected youth as a social platform in Westchester County. This influence is in addition to the powerful influence personal experiences with youth had on a leader’s ability to envision and initiate positive change. Examining issues beyond one’s own sector allows for more synergy, as “traditional sector solutions cannot address certain challenges and therefore must be enhanced by learning and borrowing from organizations in other sectors” (Selsky & Parker, 2005, p. 853). Using this paradigm, the issue of disconnected youth can provide the platform for intersector boundary crossing. Figure 5.2 offers an illustration of how leader perceptions, experiences, and engagement contribute to cross-sector social platform development.
Figure 5.2. A framework for how leader perception, experience and engagement contributes to cross-sector social platform development.

Recommendations

The youth-serving ecosystem in Westchester is comprehensive, complex, and frequently convoluted. Perceptions from leaders interviewed for this study strongly supported the idea that the interconnectedness and interdependencies between different sectors present both challenges and opportunities related to connecting youth back to education or to employment. Perceptions also supported the belief that prevention is a more cost-effective strategy than intervention. Findings also highlighted the need for greater career awareness and planning for youth starting as early as middle school. Findings also underscored the imperative to engage leaders from every sector in collaboration that is mindful, meaningful, and motivational. Stratton et al. (2012) believe the strategic investment of people, expertise and funding from the private, public, and philanthropic sectors is essential to collaboration. They also call for the active engagement and leadership of youth and young adults in developing those strategic investments.

Selsky and Parker (2005) asserted that research on how partners overcome or leverage sector differences to learn about the issue, to learn from each other, or to encourage stakeholder learning would be valuable. As already noted in several places, the findings also reveal the power that personal experiences interacting with this population had on leaders in a position to effect change. To build upon this knowledge and provide a framework for learning, as suggested by Selsky and Parker (2005), a possible framework is described below and illustrated in Figure 5.3.
Figure 5.3. Process for collaborative cross-sector influence development.

Convening table. One very strong theme that emerged from the findings was how important a convening table is. Here, the term table is used to indicate a regular and convenient setting that allows for conversation, negotiation, and innovation. Indeed, there are many convening tables in the county, some formal, mandated, or appointed, and others driven by common threads pulled together by funding opportunities or recruitment needs. All participants mentioned the importance of a shared agenda in order to realize collective progress. Before arriving at a common agenda, findings show the importance of having a table for discussing an issue that extends beyond one’s organizational affiliation or sector. There was a view among participants that those who have the power to invite or exclude others from such tables have a perceived advantage. This was sometimes referred to as an example of how “politics” can play a role in who is at the table with the result that the table has less credibility, in particular related to allocations.
of government funding. Such a table in Westchester County would therefore need to be open, accepting, and encouraging of broad and diverse participation.

“Tables” represent a face-to-face opportunity to build trust, a key factor influencing collaboration (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Tables also represent communication forums for dialogue. Open invitation tables may also signify greater transparency. Other communities have created initiatives that started such tables with a convening group. Creating a multi-sector convening mechanism around the topic of disconnected youth could serve as a way to more clearly define, describe, and demystify the population.

Common threads. Common threads refer to issues related to disconnected youth that span sector boundaries and offer starting points for dialogue among leaders from different sectors. These shared interests can open the door for deeper discussions. The commonalities might be on the micro level, yet clearly relate to the interests of multiple sectors. For example, STEM is an area with great potential for tying together sectors because it has implications for curriculum development, after-school programming, and majors of study, workforce readiness, and employability. Indeed, the exposure of youth to science, math, technology, and engineering at an earlier age has long-term implications to communities seeking to attract a workforce for the employers in the region seeking to grow and expand. Another common thread may be the suspension polices of schools that result in unintended consequences of disconnecting youth at greatest risk of dropping out. If a shared interest is to raise high school graduation rates, the issue of suspension rates has the potential to bring together often unlikely coalitions to collaborate in a way that impacts disconnected youth.
In addition, on a micro-level, a common thread may be policies about employment of youth in summer jobs. The public sector, private sector and social service sector view this as an important imperative that allows youth to gain valuable experience. If indeed moving youth into first employment experience is part of the interests of multiple parties, this may be used as a rallying point to rethink how this common interest can create greater alignment with county policies regarding employment, transportation and relationship building with social sector agencies.

By exploring what threads exist that tie together players within the cause of youth, overlapping value propositions can begin to emerge. A greater understanding of the common threads among K-12 education, higher education, workforce development, youth-serving agencies, county transportation systems and other youth-focused entities would potentially allow for even greater impact. These threads may be identified through a survey of organizations serving components of disconnected youth, as well as an analysis of how each is connected to other entities, either by funding streams, providing services or priority goals.

**Overlapping value propositions.** Austin (2000) asserts that value creation is a key driver for cross sector collaboration. Gold (2012) argues there are “formation catalysts” (p. 12), or reasons leaders come together to collaborate. Catalysts may include enlightened self-interest, a key opportunity, a crisis event, or increased awareness of a problem that has the power to mobilize cross-sector players to come together. This certainly seems to be the case based on the findings of this study. Value propositions identified in the study include a skilled workforce to support economic growth, youth ready to work and learn, and leveraging taxpayer dollars for results that benefit the entire
community. An example of an overlapping value proposition is evident in how the municipal agency leader receives free space in school buildings, in exchange, the district receives services for its students, and taxpayers save by not having to build or pay rent elsewhere for the service. Thinking in terms of how value is defined may be an area of opportunity that would lead to opportunities to expand the definition of resources beyond finances, and what training, skills, and services are determined as most relevant to connect youth back to education or employment.

Interlocking goals. Concepts such as pipelines, feeder systems, bridge programs, and youth workforce initiatives involve goals that can interlock, or link, two or more sectors. Agreements and relationships between K-12 public schools and nonprofits serving youth can allow for better outcomes for youth. Partnerships between higher education and K-12 public schools aimed at supporting at-risk youth by identifying their strengths and areas in need of improvement prior to their graduation from high school can be an interlocking goal between systems. If interlocking goals among sectors can be identified and leveraged, there is greater potential to achieve outcomes that are more effective. Without interlocking goals, often the focus may be on “outputs” like the number of youth attending a job fair, or the number of students enrolled in an afterschool program. Outcomes reflect substantive changes, for example, youth choosing a career path, earning certification and being hired full time. Grant opportunities can also interlock goals that address disconnected youth. Funding may lead to greater alignment of interconnected systems if resources are used strategically to realize exponential versus incremental results.
A good example of an interlocking goal approach focused on disconnected youth is the work of Creating Unlimited Possibilities, CUPS, a nonprofit coffeehouse in Baltimore that combines basic job and life skills in a workplace setting where at-risk youth gain real experience. They learn leadership, financial, and career-related skills, which include resume writing, interviewing, conflict resolution, and customer service, and are given the chance to earn ServSafe Food Manager certification (Sparks, 2013). Innovative program models like this combine workforce development, private enterprise, job experience and skills, certification, and experiential opportunities.

Thus, one of the implications of the results of this study is that convening a “table” is necessary to begin the dialogue necessary to identify commonalities, or “common threads” among leaders in different sectors. This would be is an important step in understanding the complex challenges related to disconnected youth. Hopefully, the foundation laid would then lead to the identification of overlapping value propositions which are necessary to the development of interlocking goals.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. This study addressed a particular county and what was learned may or may not apply to other regions. Westchester County is not an average county, and findings cannot be generalized without considering many factors. A second limitation was the difficulty in obtaining and confirming data from certain sources. There is no central clearinghouse where data on funding and programs for disconnected youth is made readily available to the public. In addition, certain data could not be triangulated to confirm the accuracy of the information.
An additional limitation recognizes the fact that there are many important groups and agencies serving disconnected youth, including juvenile justice, mental health, community colleges, and program-specific nonprofits. IPA methodology was followed which recommends a very small study population, so expanding the number of participants to other meaningful groups was consciously not done, but the absence of perspectives from sectors not represented in the seven participants is a limitation.

Recommendations for Future Research

One of the major challenges encountered during the study was the difficulty in obtaining data or metrics about the population of disconnected youth. The White House Council on Community Solutions mentioned the importance of data. To allow for “needle moving” change, one needs to know where the needle is starting. Defining what data is needed to track this population by system and across systems would be an important continuation of this research.

Related to this, is a most fundamental question, what population in Westchester County should be defined as disconnected youth? Would creating subcategories based on other demographic factors allow for more effective strategies, and if so what would they be? Research addressing those questions would be valuable and would build upon this study.

In addition, fiscal mapping, or conducting research that captures the complex funding streams and formulas targeted to this populations in one consolidated place that is easy to access, and understandable to the general public would be useful. Related, a resource map that overlays where the disconnected youth live in relation to higher education, training centers, employers of youth, internship opportunities, and off-site
nonprofits providing services to disconnected youth, along with transportation systems and schedules would be a useful resource that builds upon this research. Furthermore, youth were not among the population studied in this research, but a subsequent IPA study on the views and experiences of youth who are disconnected would provide additional insights.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explores perceptions and attitudes of leaders from the private, public, nonprofit, education, and philanthropic sectors in Westchester County, New York about cross-sector collaboration and disconnected youth. Also known as opportunity youth, disconnected youth are defined as individuals aged 16 to 24 who are not in school, not working, and not on-track to a successful transition to economic security and adult independence (Bridgeland & Milano, 2012). The study analyzed how leaders from the public, private, nonprofit, and educational sectors view the complex and challenging issue of off-track youth who live in a major suburban county in the New York metropolitan region.

Disconnected youth pose a daunting challenge to communities throughout the US, which are wrestling with how to address the issue collectively. Scholars and practitioners agree disconnected youth are an extremely heterogeneous population, making a collective strategy to address the issue even more difficult to develop and deploy. Young people disengage from education or employment for many reasons and at different junctures or transition points. Even defining challenges that impede such a vast and diverse population proves difficult. Furthermore, identifying the often-invisible population of
young people who have dropped out of systems or are “under the radar” brings to the
surface issues that cut across organizational and sectoral boundaries.

Westchester County, New York was the study site, chosen because, as an
urban/suburban community just north of New York City, the county faces many similar
challenges affecting other suburban and urban communities dealing with changing
demographics and economic dynamics. Its complex jurisdictional divisions include
many overlapping cities, towns, villages, school districts, and census tracts. It also is a
county of extremes. Its public education system represents some of the highest
performing school districts in the state, as well as some of the lowest. A county rich in
tradition of collaboration for many issues over the years, the county provided an excellent
study site to explore how leaders view and interpret cross-sector collaboration focused on
an issue that spans sectors.

Numerous youth policy groups, economists, and educators have analyzed the
topic of disconnected youth from societal, educational, and economic perspectives.
According to one study, the estimated 6.7 million disconnected youth in the US represent
a $93 billion loss each year. Most of the costs are realized at the local level, estimated at
$13,900 per year per disconnected youth, or $258,000 over their lifetime.

The study used Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its methodology
to explore, examine and interpret the lived experiences and views of leaders from the
public, nonprofit, private, and educational sectors. In-depth, semi-structured, in-person
interviews with seven study participants treated as individual case studies provide rich
data in response to questions that uncovered similarities and differences in their
perspectives and attitudes about collaborating across sectors to address the issue of
disconnected youth in the county. In addition, a cross-case synthesis explores how participant views intersect and captures the factors they consider most important to cross-sector collaboration. Study results offer vivid descriptions of personal experiences in the voices of individual participants, tied together by three major themes developed through the IPA process.

Findings reveal problem definition, interconnectedness, and interdependency are superordinate themes. Problem definition represents how the participant defines, describes and has come to understand disconnected youth. Leaders’ experiences and exposure to youth heavily influence their perspectives about how to work on behalf of youth. Interconnectedness signifies perceptions of being mutually joined or related. Systems, relationships, and transitions are part of this theme. Both positive and negative examples were given illustrating how leaders perceive interconnectedness as either supportive of their work on behalf of disconnected youth or how it is a challenge to their effectiveness. Concepts such as pipelines, feeder systems, and bridge programs are also included within this theme. Finally, interdependency refers to perceptions of how two or more sectors are dependent on each other. This includes funding, clients, space, skills, talent, training, and access. It also reflects dependency created by political, economic and social systems that wield power and influence.

Findings of the study suggest a process for collaborative cross-sector influence development includes (a) creating a convening table for sharing leader experiences, intentionally engaging leaders from the private, public and educational sectors to create dialogue and understand each other’s context; (b) actively seeking common threads among sectors related to disconnected youth as a target population in order to develop
stronger relationships, trust, and communication; (c) identifying overlapping value propositions by examining how each sector defines value; and (d) developing interlocking goals that provide more incentives for collaboration across the sectors.

Systems, organizations and individual decision-makers influence outcomes related to disconnected youth. Young people can become disconnected when they leave the education system before graduating or become immobilized and are unable to enter the workforce. Previous studies contend this experience may have a lifetime impact, not only on a person’s self-efficacy, but also on his or her ability to become financially independent and contribute to the economy in the long-term. Whether youth and young adults fitting the broad definition of “disconnected youth” used in this study hail from poverty, foster care, juvenile justice, alternative schools, or from traditional homes in top-ranking school districts, the one commonality is Westchester County is their home. Leaders from multiple sectors painted pictures of youth from all of these backgrounds.

The diversity of the population, complexity of the issue, challenges youth may encounter and changing trends noted by leaders who contributed meaningful, personal perspectives, highlight opportunities to consider new approaches to collaboration across sectors. By understanding the reflections of leaders about their experiences, findings of this study reveal both a big-picture, “30,000 feet from above” examination of the issue, as well as on-the ground, up-close and personal anecdotes. Both views are necessary to understand leader perceptions of youth, whether positioned as an asset to be tapped, or a problem to be solved.

The results also reveal divergent leader roles, mandates, and missions that influence how participants interpret another sector’s motivations, capabilities, and needs.
For example, views expressed by the social sector leader disclosed a belief that the private sector is purely profit driven when working with nonprofits. The nonprofit leader perceived misguided actions by the public sector affecting youth in obtaining and traveling to summer employment. The private sector employer shared thoughts about how higher education needs to be more responsive to employers when designing curricula that address relevant skills.

The word “collaborate” is derived from the Latin word *collaborare*, which means to labor together (Merriam-Webster, 2014a). Laboring together among similar, like-minded people is often difficult. Adding potential differences derived from life experiences, professional backgrounds, diverse expectations, and sectoral differences sometimes creates bigger challenges. The study reveals participants saw many complex interconnections and interdependencies among public, private, nonprofit, and education sector leaders in Westchester County related to collaboration and disconnected youth. These observations present both challenges and opportunities, depending on the viewpoints and vantage points of study participants.


Appendix A

Westchester County, New York

Westchester County Funded Programs for Youth

Map Produced by the Westchester County Department of Planning July 2013
Appendix B
Interview Protocol

1. How did you become involved in this issue? What experiences related to reconnecting youth back to education or training or career opportunity might you share that are most meaningful to you?

2. Where is the potential for greater collaboration among the sectors to connect or reconnect “off-track” or disconnected youth in Westchester?

3. What would it look like?

4. Who needs to be involved?

5. What are the greatest successes you have been involved in that have made a difference in the lives of disconnected young people?

6. What are the two or three biggest roadblocks to success in this area?

7. It is clear the world has changed. Business as usual is not successful. What can we do differently to get better results? Can you describe what that might mean for Westchester youth?
Appendix C
Letter of Introduction to Participants

INTRODUCTION
As background, I am a doctoral student enrolled in Saint John Fisher College’s Doctoral Program in Executive Leadership. I am designing research for a dissertation that will seek to develop a better understanding of leader views of cross-sector collaboration focused on Westchester’s youth who are not working or not in school, often referred to as disconnected youth.

BACKGROUND
My goal is to conduct research about how leaders view collaboration focused on disconnected youth, or young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not working or not in school, on a path to self-sufficiency and independence.

STUDY DESIGN
The study will explore cross-sector collaboration focused on disconnected youth through the conducting of several in-depth interviews.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
The Institutional Review board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this research. By participating in this study, you will add to the existing knowledge base that would help better understand collaboration factors that contribute to more effective results for disconnected youth Westchester County.

Marian Gryzlo
Doctoral Candidate
St. John Fisher College
Doctoral Program in Executive Leadership mg04885@sjfc.edu
Appendix D

Informed Consent for Doctoral Research Interview
St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research to support my doctoral studies in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College. Your participation is an important part of my research.

Title of Study: Connecting Opportunity: Leaders’ Perceptions of Cross-Sector Collaboration Focused on Disconnected Youth in Westchester County, New York, An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
Name of Researcher: Marian Gryzlo.
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Jerry Willis
Purpose of Study: Doctoral Dissertation
Study Procedures: In Person Interviews
Approval of Study: This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).
Place of Study: Westchester County, New York
Length of Participation: Interviews to occur over the course of three months
Risks and Benefits: Not Applicable
Method for Protecting Confidentiality/Privacy: Data will be kept confidential and secure for four years then destroyed

As a research participant, you have the right to:
1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.
I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

Print name (Participant) _____________ Signature ______________ Date ___________

Print name (Investigator) Marian Gryzlo Signature ______________ Date ___________

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above for appropriate referrals. E-mail contact: mg04885@sjfc.edu