**Assignment Prompt:**

In this final course paper, you will be asked to integrate what you’ve learned in class into your service experiences, or vice versa. For instance, you might want to apply the contemporary theories on justice and civil society to an understanding and/or a solving of particular problems of the community (or work site) in which you have been engaged. Or, you might want to attempt to criticize, supplement, or ameliorate the theories that you’ve learned in light of your own site experiences. Either way, you should draw on your own experience (including journals); an interview (when possible) with your site supervisor; the assigned course reading; and at least three additional published sources (either books or periodicals) of direct relevance to your specific topic.

**Final Paper:**

**The Effect of Poverty on the Lives and Futures of Children**

Wearing shoes a size too small, shirts with holes in the sleeves, jackets that barely protect against the cold—these are just a few of the smallest problems that children living in poverty are faced with everyday. Sitting in the Youth Life Foundation of Richmond’s Delmont learning center, waiting for the children to come in from recess, time and time again I have thought about how my own childhood compares with that of these children. I grew up in a family that was extremely supportive. Having warm enough clothing and protective shoes that fit my feet, was not even a question. In many ways it was because of my wonderful childhood that I had the skills and academics required to be accepted to the University of Richmond. My childhood is the foundation that provided me with the primary tools that will lead to my success in life. The lives of the children I work with are vastly differing. Poverty affects more than just their lives today but also has serious implications for their futures. It was not their choice to be poor, but simply a life they were born into. Because of the negative ways that poverty affects these young children, upward mobility has become nearly impossible. Through mentoring at Youth Life, the effects of poverty through a weak education, fragile family structure, a forced sense of responsibility, and poor health are evident in the lives, actions, and personalities of the children.
that I mentor. Success is barely an option while failure and the vicious cycle of poverty seem inevitable.

In giving a brief synopsis of my time mentoring at the Youth Life Program’s Delmont learning center, I want to firstly express how truly enlightening this experience has been. In mentoring I have gotten to know three young girls particularly well. It is these three individuals that most of my references and experiences throughout this study will involve because they have taught me so much about their lifestyles and even about myself. The names of these girls are TayTay, Dar’Nasia, and Johnnay. TayTay is in seventh grade while Dar’Nasia and Johnnay are 5th graders. I served these girls and this program by mentoring with them each week. This means that I spent several hours assisting them on their homework, reading books with them, helping them write in their journals, and playing games with them as well. After a few weeks, the girls really opened up to me and let me have the joyful experience of getting to know who they really were.

The job of a mentor as outlined by Youth Life is to be an example of moral leadership and commitment to the children because this is something that many of their lives lack. Mentors are expected to exhibit excellence in all that they do at the learning center with the children. Youth Life has a three part vision which is to nurture the children, to strengthen the families, and to rebuild the community. The learning center is to be a safe haven where the children are to be trained and equipped to be leaders that are educationally, technically, and morally excellent. To keep this place of refuge operating successfully in the neighborhood it costs each child twenty dollars a month to attend the learning center. All of the students that attend Youth Life at the Delmont site are African American. There are about twenty students that are 3rd grade and under and about fifteen students that are 3rd grade and above. The center is a simple two room
building; one room is used to house the younger children and one room is used to instruct the older children. Because it is a Christian affiliated facility, the room is decorated with posters and wall hangings displaying bible verses as well as the artwork of many of the students. Outside of the center is a fenced in playground for the children to use freely. Overall, the facility is a shining beacon of hope in the dismal neighborhood and lives of these children.

Throughout the past, there are numerous studies that have proven that “poverty, especially poverty experienced over a longer period, decreases mental ability” in children (Alexander 204). In stating that, in 2008, 36.5 million Americans live in poverty and 12.8 million of these Americans are children (Census 1). Therefore, because poverty exists and our efforts to thwart poverty are meager, the mental ability and intelligence of our future is being reduced as we speak. As citizens of this country, we place “a heavy burden on public schools as the most important agents of poverty remediation” (Alexander 203). However, although public education is supposed to level the playing field for all students, it does not serve to help children out of poverty but forces them into an even deeper position of disparity. This has been studied in depth by Jonathan Kozol in his essay “Still Separate, Still Unequal.” In the classrooms of poor African American students, the expectations are far lower and the teachers do not demand excellence from their students. In a comparison of rich versus poor classrooms, Kozol laments at “how wide the distance has become between two very separate worlds of education” (Kozol 2). These students living in poverty are not given the opportunity to succeed nor are they challenged to rise above the low standards of society because their lives are wrought with inequality of opportunity from the day that they are born. Without the finances to go to daycare or preschool, the children are not nurtured in the same manner as those from financially stable households.
Even in the poor area of Delmont at the Youth Life center there is a gap in the education of the children that is caused by poverty. In my first few visits to Youth Life, I worked with a young girl named Amaria. Amaria had a lot of trouble staying focused and on task while she was at Youth Life. The area of her education which seemed to suffer the most was her literacy. She would often attempt to persuade me into reading her books because she was embarrassed by her poor reading ability. I was determined to help Amaria increase her reading ability and understanding of what she was reading. However, after two weeks, Amaria was unable to come to the learning center anymore because her mother could not afford to pay the twenty dollars for the month to be a part of the program. Just as Kozol wrote, even in the world of families in poverty there is a gap in opportunity. The other children at Youth Life were also from poor families yet their mothers and fathers were able to spare twenty dollars to put towards their children’s education and growth. Amaria has less opportunity than the rest of the children because of her family’s financial situation and her education is suffering because of it.

Adding to the inequality of educational opportunity between the rich and the poor, the children’s live are also hugely affected by their deteriorating family structures and lack of support. A child’s family situation affects their lives in many ways. Firstly, lack of family support can be highly detrimental to a child’s education. In a study of the effects of poverty on children’s brains, researchers found that children of poor homes have much higher stress levels, less stimulation, and less emphasis placed on the importance of language and learning (Monastersky 1). Because their parents are so busy trying to make an income, they are not always there to read to the children or interact with them in an academic manner. It must also be acknowledged that not all of the children’s parents are working to make a living. Some neglect their children simply because life has torn them down and they are loaded with disappointment.
and unhappiness. When I asked a child that I mentor if her mother ever reads with her, she said that because her father isn’t around right now, her mother is too busy. It is no wonder that these children are struggling to be proficient in their studies. Their education also suffers as a result of this neglect because the mothers and fathers of the children do not push the children to go to school. If the child feels like skipping school on any given day, the parents often do not care. When I was a child, skipping school was unacceptable.

Secondly, one way in which poor family situations can lead children astray is because of behaviors that neglect can illicit from the children. It has been proven in studies that “the impact of insecurities, fragmentation, and poor relationships in childhood, not only appears to make children vulnerable to maltreatment, but also independently contributes to the long-term adjustment of adults” (Higgins 11). Therefore, those children living in a family where the parents are not always around and barely give the child attention has great potential for leading to insecurities and adjustment issues within the child. It has been a common belief throughout history that children that have rough home lives are often the children that act out in their social environments. This is the stereotype that society has presented and it is important to note that there are exceptions to this belief. The week before Thanksgiving, Youth Life held a dinner in celebration of the holiday and invited all of the families and mentors to come. As I sat there looking around, I noticed that out of the forty or so families, only about three families had the father figures present. It was all mothers in attendance, spending time with their children. If either one of my parents had not been present in my life, I cannot imagine the sense of abandonment and neglect that I would feel.

The third way in which a rough family life greatly affects the lives of the impoverished children is through the lack of strong examples and role models. At the Youth Life Delmont site,
many of the children’s parents did not graduate high school. Over half of the children live in a single – parent home. Many of their mothers are extremely young, having gotten pregnant as a young, unwed teenager. Often whenever I arrive at the learning center, all of the fathers and older men are standing around outside of the complexes where they live. They are just standing in circles in the middle of the day doing absolutely nothing. How will the children and families ever rise from poverty if the parental figures do not take responsibility for their lives? Likewise, many of the youth at the learning center have parents who are in jail. One of the girls that I work with, Dar’Nasia, who is only 10 years old, showed me a letter to her father that she had written the other day. I began reading the letter and was caught off guard when in the third line of the letter I read, “I can’t wait till you get out of jail daddy, I miss you a lot.” After I had finished the letter, Dar’Nasia began talking to me about how much she missed her father and that she couldn’t wait to see him and her stepmom. Dar’Nasia regarded the fact that her father was in jail as a very typical, insignificant issue beyond missing him.

The other young girl that I work with, TayTay, who is 13 years old, has two little sisters that attend the learning center as well. However, only two of the girls have the same father. With parents that have not completed high school, parents that are incarcerated, and parents that do not exemplify high morals, these children do not have any role models to look up to. “Family values and the work ethos espoused in the home are more important than family income in determining a child's future success in life” (Koch 1). If this statement is true, then many of these children’s futures are doomed. In a sense, they have no reason to want to change their lifestyle because in their minds it is not abnormal. Almost every child at the Youth Life center has a half sibling or comes from a single parent home. The lives of these children are a great example of what Shipler is talking about when he claims, “since childhood feeds into adulthood,
resonating and repeating themes, a youngster’s experience of neglect and cruelty can eventually shape the way she raises her own child; the injury may be passed down through the generations” (Shipler 154). Based on this theory, the chance of these girls repeating the actions and lives of their parents is unfortunately very likely. Additionally, children living in lone – parent households are four times more likely to live in poverty as adults.

In connection with the family structures and situations of impoverished children, comes the idea of forced responsibility on the children. Because many families living below the poverty line are single – parent families, the oldest child often feels the weight of responsibility on their shoulders. Younger siblings look up to their older brother or sister as an authority figure. In many ways, this oldest sibling is the stand-in mother or father figure when the parents are not present. This forces this individual to take responsibility for their family and adds pressure to their life. An example of this through my volunteer experience is in my interactions with TayTay. As the oldest daughter in a family of three girls, she is responsible for her younger sisters. Often if either of her sisters is crying, they will turn to TayTay as a means for comfort. TayTay almost always knows the right thing to say to get the girls to calm down and to listen to their mentor. Because TayTay is one of the oldest, if not the oldest student at the learning center, it is not only her sisters who look up to her. Last week I was assisting TayTay in a school project when one of the younger boys, who was probably about 5 years old, came over and told TayTay that his mother said she had to walk him home because it was dark and he couldn’t walk alone. This exemplifies that even the other mothers besides her own often give TayTay the added responsibility of taking care of their children. TayTay walked the young boy home without any complaint and did not even seem to worry that she herself, a teenage female, would be walking back to the learning center in the dark, in a dangerous neighborhood. Living in poverty, having
to worry about the younger children of the neighborhood and being a symbol of help and assurance, TayTay has been forced out of her youth early.

In thinking about childhood, one often thinks about days filled with fun and games. Childhood is typically a time of innocence and naivety in a person’s life. This may be so for children living in middle and high class society. Once again, children living in poverty get the short end of the stick. As stated in previous sections of this glance at childhood poverty, the lives of these children are plagued with a stark view of reality and an understanding of things way beyond their years. Teenage pregnancy, parents in jail, and dropping out of high school are just a few of the problems are existent in their daily lives. At the age of 10, even younger than this age, most children are capable of walking alone in their neighborhood in the day or at night. For many impoverished children this is not so. "Low income may lead to residence in extremely poor neighborhoods characterized by social disorder (crime, many unemployed adults, neighbors not monitoring the behavior of adolescents)” (Brooks – Gunn 13). Even being able to walk home by themselves at night is not a possibility for these children. One of my mentees, Johnnay, has often expressed her fear of walking home alone and frequently requests that I accompany her. In our days at the learning center and in conversations with my three students, it never ceases to shock me at how nonchalantly they speak about these issues. It is equally as shocking when I’m outside on the playground with the children and I hear a young boy behind me, who is probably only 5 years old, cursing up a storm. When I was their ages, the idea of a teenager being pregnant or even having sexual relations would have completely stunned me and if I ever heard a curse word I most likely would have cried to my parents. Poverty has caused these children to take on a hardness where they lack vulnerability and are surprised by nothing. I find
it incredibly sad that they have been corrupted so early in their life and have lost the joys of youth.

The last area of a child’s life that I have witnessed the effect of poverty through my work at Youth Life is in the arena of health. As single mothers working minimum wage jobs, the families do not have the resources to secure proficient healthcare. “People with low incomes have poorer health and less access to health care than their wealthier neighbors” (Scott 4). Often malnourished and without the necessities to protect their children from disease and illness, poor individuals, especially children, are more susceptible to sicknesses. Children that grow up in a poor setting often experience “increased weights of low birth weight, anemia, reoccurring ear infections, and elevated lead blood levels when compared with non-poor children” (Brooks – Gunn 10). Health problems such as these and others are also one reason that impoverished children struggle with school. As a result of their vulnerability to sickness, these children are absent from school more often than non-poor children. The idea of poor health in impoverished children has directly affected my volunteering at Youth Life because it is the reason that I have had three different mentees. I typically rotate between TayTay, Johnnay, and Dar’Nasia depending on who is sick on the day that I volunteer.

In conducting these observations throughout this semester at Youth Life, I have become emotionally involved with the issue of poverty in the lives of children. The idea that most concerns me is the seemingly impossible idea of upward mobility. Because of the vicious cycle that poverty typically plays within a family, it seems impossible that children born into a family of poverty will ever be able to breakout and live a life of comfort. How can America claim the slogan “rags to riches” if it is such an impossible task? The climb from poverty to wealth is not the norm but the rarity. By claiming to be a land of equal opportunity and upward mobility yet
not following through with these statements, our society is essentially built upon a foundation of lies. If I venture back to Youth Life in ten years, will I see TayTay sitting outside smoking a cigarette? Will Johnnay have two kids already and a third on the way? Will Dar’Nasia follow the footsteps of her father and be locked in a cold, bland jail cell? I’d like to think otherwise, but if the trend continues, the future looks eerily predictable.

The effects of poverty on the lives of children are evident through their poor education, their frail family structure, their forced sense of responsibility, and their vulnerable health to name just a few. The future of children that have been born into a life of poverty looks bleak and frightening. As an optimist, it is my hope that America can join hands and work to reclaim our title as a fair, just, mobile society. For the sake of TayTay, Johnnay, and Dar’Nasia, I will forage onward in attempting to fulfill my civil duties and fight on for issues of poverty. Said simply, this experience has changed my life. In doing so, it has changed my entire outlook on how I live my life and how I help others. There is a great possibility that it may have even changed my career path. The Youth Life Program is a special organization that I believe has truly made a difference in lives of many, both the impoverished and the affluent.