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## Adolescents' Accounts of Growth Experiences in Youth Activities<sup>1</sup>

Jodi B. Dworkin,<sup>2</sup> Reed Larson,<sup>3</sup> and David Hansen<sup>4</sup>

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Little theory and research exists on the developmental processes that occur during adolescents' participation in extracurricular and community based-activities. As a step in that direction, we conducted 10 focus groups aimed at getting high school students' descriptions of their "growth experiences" in these activities. The youth reported both personal and interpersonal processes of development. The personal experiences included experimentation and identity work, development of initiative skills such as learning to set goals and manage time, and learning strategies for emotional regulation. The interpersonal experiences included acquiring new peer relationships and knowledge, developing group social skills such as taking responsibility and how to work together as a team, and developing valuable connections to adults. Across domains, adolescents described themselves as the agents of their own development and change. Youth activities appear to be a context in which adolescents are active producers of development.

**KEY WORDS:** growth; identity; initiative; emotional regulation; team work; social capital; adolescence; youth activities; after school activities; extracurricular activities.

### INTRODUCTION

For over a century proponents have argued that youth activities, such as sports, arts groups, and organizations, provide a rich context for positive development. Research

is beginning to substantiate this claim, showing relationships between adolescents' participation and positive outcomes in controlled longitudinal studies (Eccles and Barber, 1999; Larson, 2000). What is missing, however, is research on the processes whereby development occurs in these activities (Benson and Saito, 2000; Roth *et al.*, 1998). Information on processes is ultimately critical to science-based practice: to the design of programs that are fitted to individuals and effectively facilitate development for all participants (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001).

Youth activities, it has been proposed, are a context in which adolescents are particularly likely to be producers of their own development (Larson, 2000; Silbereisen *et al.*, 1986). Prior research finds that youth activities stand out from other domains of adolescents' daily lives as a unique setting in which they consistently report experiencing both high motivation and high concentration (Larson, 2000). This indicates that teens are both emotionally and cognitively engaged in ways they are not in other parts of their lives, and thus suggests that they are likely to be involved in actively constructing personal change.

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Because we conceptualized youth activities as a context of self-directed development, we wanted to get adolescents' own phenomenological descriptions of their change processes. Our objective was to discover what types of developmental changes were salient for them in youth activities and capture their own concepts and language for thinking and talking about these changes. Using more colloquial terminology, we were interested in what we called their "growth experiences." In order to access adolescents' accounts of these experiences, we employed focus group methodology, an approach suited to facilitating open discussion of participants' phenomenological worlds.

### Background

Past scholarship provides a starting point for speculating on what developmental processes might occur in youth activities. First, it has been proposed that youth activities provide adolescents with opportunities for exploration, which are used to facilitate *identity work*. Youniss, Yates, and their colleagues argue that participation in service activities can provide "reflective material" that adolescents use in their process of identity exploration and identity development (Youniss *et al.*, 1999; Youniss and Yates, 1997). Waterman (1984) suggested that adolescents try out different youth activities as part of their process of identity exploration, and that these activities are a primary source of material for identity exploration. This deliberate use of youth activities for identity work is suggested by findings that many adolescents mention their involvement in sports or another youth activity when they are asked to describe their personal strengths (Benson, 1991; Williams and McGee, 1991). However, accounts from youth are needed to obtain a better sense of how they use experiences in activities in an active process of identity work.

Second, it has been proposed that youth activities are a context in which adolescents *develop initiative*, which Larson (2000) defines as the capacity to direct attention and effort over time toward a challenging goal. Larson suggests that teens in youth activities learn about how to make plans, overcome obstacles, and achieve desired ends. Heath (1999) discovered that "work" was a central metaphor for adolescents' participation in the youth activities she studied. She found through observation that young people acquired a language of agency that included increased use of what-if questions, conditional sentences, constructing scenarios, and other linguistic tools for identifying problems, solving them, and achieving goals. Separate from this literature is a burgeoning area of social psychological research concerned with goal-directed behavior among adults (Gollwitzer, 1999; Gollwitzer and Bargh, 1996), and Larson (2000) asserts that youth activ-

ities may be an important context for the development of the requisite skills. An important step to evaluating this assertion is to determine if youth report this type of learning experience and, if so, to identify the language and concepts they use to describe these experiences.

A third domain of possible growth, which has received less discussion, is *learning emotional competencies*. Catalano *et al.* (1999) report that development of abilities such as managing feelings, controlling impulses, and reducing stress is a frequent objective of prevention and positive youth development programs and they report finding that some programs appear to increase emotional skills. But we do not know whether this type of learning is salient in the wider domain of sports, arts, and other activities organized in schools and communities.

Thus far, we have listed processes that are primarily internal, but it is also important to consider developmental processes that are social and interpersonal. Prior research suggests that, fourthly, youth activities may be an important arena for *forming new connections with and learning about peers*. When a teen joins a team, club, or activity group, other participants often become part of that teen's peer friendship network (Brown, 1990). In an interview study with 41 adolescents, Patrick *et al.* (1999) found that over half reported making new friends, including friends from different grades, as a result of participation in a youth activity. Youth activities appear to be a context for adolescents to meet and learn about peers who are different from them in ethnicity, race, and social class (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). Research is needed to uncover the peer knowledge and meanings that adolescents attribute to these relationships.

Fifth, youth activities are often promoted as providing youth opportunities to *develop social skills*, including learning to work with others, developing leadership skills, and developing social competencies (Catalano *et al.*, 1999; Dubas and Snider, 1993). Rogoff *et al.* (2001) propose that learning occurs through collaborative participation in activities of shared interest. Learning cooperation and teamwork has been described as part of the hidden curriculum of youth activities (Jarrett, 1998). In the process of coming together around achievement of a goal, it is believed that youth learn to work with each other, handle each other's emotions, divide responsibilities, and give and take feedback. They often gain social skills and confidence in relating to peers (Patrick *et al.*, 1999). It is important to determine whether adolescents experience this as a significant domain of growth and, if so, what types of learning experiences are salient for them.

A sixth developmental process that has been attributed to youth activities is *acquiring social capital*: the formation of valuable relationships with adult leaders and

others in the community. Leaders of youth activities are often named when youth are asked about adults who are significant to them (Blyth *et al.*, 1982). Other researchers have described how adolescents in some youth activities develop valuable connections to community members (Jarrett, 1995; McLaughlin *et al.*, 1994; Youniss *et al.*, 1997). These various connections can become sources of emotional support. They can also provide social and cultural capital in the form of knowledge (Dubas and Snider, 1993) and help youth in gaining access to jobs (McLaughlin, 2000). It would be useful to know if these connections to adults are salient to adolescents and whether they perceive them as valuable.

### This Research

The present investigation was designed to gain a better understanding of whether and how adolescents experience these 6 and other domains of growth experiences. A phenomenological perspective, concerned with understanding what individuals experience and how they interpret the world, guided our data collection and analysis (Patton, 1990; van Manen, 1984). Phenomenology is based on the premise that the most meaningful reality is what a person perceives it to be; a phenomenological perspective works towards appreciating social phenomenon from the individuals' perspective (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Thus, to best understand adolescents' construction of their experiences in youth activities, we must ask them to describe their experiences, using their own words (Jones, 1985).

To achieve this, the present investigation utilized focus groups. Focus groups are one approach to group interviews that make use of group dynamics to elicit information on specific topics (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Focus group methodology is designed to create a non-threatening environment that encourages self-disclosure and allows participants to build off each other. The decision to use focus groups, rather than individual interviews, stemmed in part from our concern that some youth might have difficulty articulating complex psychological change processes on their own. Although, the group setting potentially creates a social desirability bias (Krueger, 1988), past research suggests that young people's experience and learning in youth activities often emerge through interactions with others (Patrick *et al.*, 1999; Rogoff *et al.*, 1995). Thus, focus groups may be well suited to tapping growth experiences in this context.

Although we went into this research with some preconceptions of what types of developmental experiences we expected to find—based on the 6 processes just described—we recognize that this list of growth experi-

ences is not comprehensive. For instance, learning physical skills is a central objective of most youth activities in sports and the arts (Csikszentmihalyi *et al.*, 1993). Therefore, we made deliberate efforts to be open to descriptions that would revise, alter, or add to this list of processes.

## METHOD

### Sample

We conducted 10 focus groups with 4–9 adolescents in each. A total of 55 adolescents (23 boys and 32 girls) took part. Six focus groups were conducted in the high school of an ethnically diverse midsized Midwestern town. School counselors selected participants for these groups who were active in extracurricular activities and whom they thought would be articulate. Additional focus groups were formed from volunteers at a university high school, and from members of 3 community-based organizations: a Future Farmers of America (FFA) group, a community-based arts program, and a service-learning, leadership organization for high school women, primarily African American, sponsored by a university sorority. The focus groups formed in high schools were conducted during school hours in the school building. The focus groups formed from community-based organizations were conducted during the groups' regular meeting time, either at their regular meeting location or in the researchers' lab. Whenever not restricted by the demographics of the recruitment pool (e.g., for the community groups), the focus groups were of mixed gender, age, and race. These youth had a mean age of 16 years (range 14–18). Just over half (56%) of the participants identified themselves as White, 22% as African American, 4% as Asian, and 18% as biracial.

### Procedures

Prior to participating in the focus group, youth completed a brief background questionnaire. This asked for information on their age, gender, and the activities they were involved in and how often they participated in each. Youth activities were defined to include school-based extracurricular activities, community-based youth organizations, and all activities and programs for youth that are both voluntary and structured (Larson, 2000). These youth were highly involved in youth activities; 72% were involved in sports, 60% were involved in performance or fine arts, and 83% were involved in a club or organization.

Each focus group was conducted by one of the coauthors. The moderator of each focus group followed a semi-structured "rolling interview guide" (Morgan, 1997),

aimed at getting adolescents to describe their specific growth experiences in youth activities in their own words. As a way of getting started and establishing rapport, we began with open-ended, descriptive questions (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Engaging each participant helps break the ice, makes it easier for participants to speak again, and provides a common base for sharing (Krueger, 1988). We asked each participant to choose one youth activity that they enjoy participating in and describe their experiences when they were "caught up in the activity," roughly following the "flow interview" used by Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984). The moderator then asked participants to describe the types of growth experiences they had had in this or other youth activities. Growth experiences were defined as, "experiences that teach you something or expand you in some way, that give you new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of interacting with others." This use of an open-ended question allowed the adolescents to identify which experiences they found salient and put their own words on those experiences. The group was encouraged to talk as long as they wanted, describing different experiences. This typically lasted 10–15 min.

Once the students stopped volunteering examples of growth experiences, we asked probe questions about experiences that had not spontaneously emerged. Probes were developed from the 6 types of learning experiences that were suggested by the review of the literature described above. It should be emphasized that although these probes directed participants' attention to certain types of processes, in many cases the youth described experiences that went beyond the probes or dealt with processes outside the intended focus of the probe. During the latter part of the focus group session, youth were asked about their negative experiences in youth activities, why they joined the activity, and why they remain involved in the activity; however their reports on these topics are not presented here. The focus group sessions lasted approximately 45–60 min. The sessions were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

### Data Analysis

The transcripts of the focus group discussions were coded to identify recurrent themes and categories of developmental processes and change (Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). We used Ethnograph, a code-and-retrieve computer software program, to assist with the coding and sorting of the data (Seidel and Clark, 1984). The process of coding entailed 2 steps. The 1st involved identification of overarching domains of growth experiences and the 2nd involved identification of themes within these domains.

In the 1st step of analysis, the first author read the transcripts several times, looking for similar patterns and concepts. Open coding was used to identify the general conceptual domains of learning or growth described. Codes were developed from the transcripts (Charmaz, 1988). She then coded and sorted each account into these conceptual domains (Charmaz, 1988; Taylor and Bogdan, 1998). Following this process, the second and third authors read through the sorted list of learning experiences and, when they disagreed with the initial coding, discussions were held with the first author and final decisions about coding and the placement of specific experiences were arrived at by consensus. Although the interview and coding process were designed to allow new categories of development to emerge, none did. The 6 processes described above—with some refinement—provided an adequate categorization of the students' reported growth experiences, and thus the 6 domains provide the overarching domains.

Second, axial coding was performed within each of the 6 domains to identify the themes in each. Axial coding is a more intense form of coding, used to identify properties and subcomponents of domains that have already been identified (Strauss, 1987). Axial coding allowed us to focus on each domain and generate themes within each that provided more specificity in describing its content. Again, the first author performed the initial coding, and the second and third authors verified the codes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 6 domains, and particularly the themes identified within each domain, allowed us to identify the types of growth experiences that were phenomenologically salient for these youth, and describe them using the language and concepts that they used.

### Exploration and Identity Work

The 1st domain was exploration and identity work. Youth in our focus groups described how this process of self-exploration occurs in a range of youth activities. Their descriptions suggest how these processes of identity development might operate.

First, youth reported *trying new things*, such as trying a new baseball swing, or trying a new position when a teammate was hurt. One girl said, "There's lots of places where you can experiment and some work and some don't and you really learn how to take the failures and benefit from them." Another girl said, "I think that it's better to take on a lot of things and then end up dropping some of them than to not experience new things because you're afraid you won't have enough time or something."

Opportunities to try new things allow youth to discover how these fit or do not fit into their developing identity.

This leads to the 2nd theme, *gaining self-knowledge*. For example, one youth recognized that, "I can still keep on doing something even if I don't enjoy it." A related subtheme, was *learning your limits*. One girl said, "You learn when it's too much and usually you learn that the hard way." A boy said, "One thing I learned is not to sell myself short but to know my limits as well. Like, just know where you are, how good your abilities are." These exemplify both a systematic process of trial and error and an often unintentional process of learning from mistakes that teach youth to identify their threshold in different situations. As one youth said, "I think that even if you accidentally just run into it, either way you learn a lesson. Everything you do you learn a lesson."

Waterman (1984) proposed that identification of talents and abilities is a primary source through which identity is discovered. Consistent with his assertion, these youths' reports suggest that participation in youth activities, more specifically trying new things and learning about themselves in the process, is a principal component of an active process of identity work for adolescents.

Although the majority of experiences described were everyday exploration activities, rather than deep thought about the self, a few youth described a process of using these experiences as reflective material in an active, more penetrating process of identity work. One girl said:

I think FCA [Fellowship of Christian Athletes] really shows you . . . like if you go to a meeting, they just make you think about so many things, and you get to think about like what kind of people you really want to be around, what you want to do in the future, and how you should live your life according to your beliefs and stuff like that.

This and a few other responses in this category suggest that youth activities, at least sometimes, provide youth with material and experiences for deeper reflection on who they are, similar to what Youniss *et al.* (1999) describe in service activities.

### Development of Initiative

We defined initiative as the capacity to direct attention and effort over time toward a challenging goal. The participants provided numerous accounts of growth experiences that fit within this domain. We identified 4 themes that suggest different types of learning processes of this nature.

One theme was *learning to set realistic goals*. A boy reported discovering that he had been "bad at setting goals," but in his activity had learned through "lots

of goal setting and failure." A girl said, "I think if you set too high of goals, you get discouraged." Another girl reporting on her experiences in track said, "I notice that if I set a goal and if I'm honest with myself about it, then I will ultimately achieve it." Research indicates that lack of realism, particularly exaggerated expectations, is a frequent obstacle to adults' achievement of goals they set in everyday life (Kruglanski, 1996). Our data suggest that youth activities are a context in which some youth learn to set goals that are achievable.

Of course, setting goals is not enough, there is the question of how one gets to those goals. Based on the writing of Larson (2000) and Heath (1999), we had expected the students to talk about strategies they had gained for planning and creative problem solving. Instead they talked most about *learning effort and perseverance*. A common theme was learning to push oneself, trying harder, being disciplined, staying focused, and that "you have to really concentrate if you want to be able to do something." Describing her learning experience in ballet, a girl said, "It sounds really cliché, but if you work hard at something you can always get it done." A girl describing her experiences in softball said, "It teaches us you have to be stronger mentally to know what you have to do, instead of trying to just overcome it with muscle or whatever." We suspect that parents and teachers often enjoin young people about the value of effort and having a work ethic. Youth activities appear to be a context in which they learn that this is not just a cliché, it represents critical knowledge about how one achieves a goal.

In order to devote effort to an activity, students reported *learning to manage time*. Many of these youth described being extremely busy with schoolwork, multiple activities, family obligations, and sometimes jobs—to the point of making them feel stressed. But, because of this pressure, they also described learning to get their homework done, say "no" to social opportunities, and set priorities. A girl said, "You have all these opportunities that present themselves and you have to decide which ones you're going to do." Another girl said, "The more stuff I do, the more I learn how to budget my time and figure out when I can do stuff and how much of the stuff I can actually get finished." One boy even described learning to coordinate with his *parents'* busy schedules, indicating that he was learning how time management is not just a solitary enterprise but also an interpersonal one. Some social commentators have worried that youth are over-burdened with too many activities, even suggesting that parents should intervene to limit their involvement (Elkind, 1981). But what these students report is that—because participation in activities is a choice they make for themselves—they learn on their own to manage their time.

The 4th theme, which integrates the others, is *taking responsibility for oneself*. One girl said, "I've learned how to depend on myself more and also how to make decisions, lots of decisions." Another youth reported learning that, "For a lot of things you just really have to rely on yourself, and rely on your own judgment. I think people's opinions matter, but in the end, it's really up to you." It has been argued that children in Western society carry little personal responsibility, they engage in few productive activities that are not directed by parents or teachers (Benedict, 1938; Schlegel and Barry, 1991). Youth activities appear to be a context where, as adolescents, they learn to carry the weight of autonomous decision-making and action. They learn to set goals, allocate time, devote concerted effort, and take responsibility for achieving their goals.

### Emotional Self-Regulation

Quite a number of adolescents, particularly girls, reported learning experiences that had to do with regulation of their emotions. One theme was *learning to control anger and anxiety*. A youth said, "I have learned that I have to control my temper. Also I learned *how to control my temper*." Others described gaining abilities to confront and overcome their anxiety and fear. For example, a girl involved in theater said:

I am just terrified of getting up in front of people, but like when you're up there, you don't really think about who's out there. And every year that you do it, you become more sure of yourself, and so you're able to overcome that.

A related theme was *preventing emotions from interfering with attention and performance*. One youth said, "I have learned how to block out negative things." Another said, "I have learned how to ignore the positive so that my focus stays even." An important insight in emotional development is that emotions can disrupt and interfere with ongoing attention (Harris *et al.*, 1981); and youth activities, which typically involve goal directed behavior, may provide a particularly valuable context for developing competencies for limiting the disruptive effect of emotions.

Some youth described similar learning experiences using the language of stress management. They described *acquiring strategies for managing stress*. One girl said, "When things don't work out and you're really upset and completely bummed, you just have to remind yourself that it's not the end of the world; it's not like you are going to die or something." A basketball player said she had learned to be less competitive, because it created stress and interfered with keeping focused.

A 4th theme, mentioned by only two youth involved *learning to use positive emotions constructively*. One girl said:

I learned extracurricular activities for me are just a chance to relax, and, when I do extracurricular activities, I do it with the goal to not think about school and not think about what I have to do for next Monday. I mean, I fail often, but I always have to make myself relax. Otherwise, I'm just going to be drained the next day.

She had learned to deliberately use the experience of relaxation in youth activities to counteract the stress she experienced in her school life. Another girl spoke of the feelings she experienced when running cross-country, and said running had "taught me to release my emotion and it really helped me to think; it really helped me to process my thoughts." Fredrickson (2001) theorizes that positive emotions can serve to "broaden and build" personal resources, and that might describe what these girls were learning to do. The literature on emotional intelligence suggests that positive emotions, like enjoyment and interest, can be utilized to arouse, direct, and sustain activity (Salovey and Mayer, 1989-90). Given that these activities generate high levels of interest and enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi *et al.*, 1993), we expected youth to report learning to use these positive emotions to enhance participation, but it was not mentioned.

### Developing Peer Relationships and Knowledge

Youth reported experiences of forming new peer relationships, and in the process, developing a deeper understanding of their peers. Comments were grouped around three themes.

The most consistent theme was their experience of *interacting with peers who would normally be outside their existing network*. These peers could be youth within the participant's environment, but who were previously unknown. Commenting on his experiences in football, a boy said that he interacted with peers he normally would not have: "There's a lot of people on the team, so you make friends with them and talk to people you never thought you'd talk to before." A girl said, "You broaden your horizons through meeting new people and associating with different types of people. If you don't do that, if you stick to one kind, you don't broaden your horizons at all." This confirms earlier research showing that youth activities expand peer networks (Brown, 1990; Patrick *et al.*, 1999). One boy talked about socializing with peers of a different race,

I'm not saying we're like racist at this school, but a lot of times the Blacks go with their people and the Whites

go with their people. During basketball they'd go out together. The Black people and the White people would go out after the game and hang out together and stuff, and I thought that was really neat.

Experiences of interethnic affiliation, however, were mentioned by few youth in this sample. We do not know whether this is because they were rare, or because they were not highly salient when they occurred.

Not only did they meet new peers but they also reported *experiencing increased empathy and understanding* of them. One boy commented, "You learn interests that other people have, their goals and stuff." One girl recognized,

You learn not to judge people because, like, they could've been having a bad day and that's why they got really upset about something or like that's why they're not working as hard that day. You don't know where they're coming from.

For some youth in this study, experiences with peers led to a deeper understanding. Past research indicates that interaction with peers can be an important context for the development of empathy and understanding the viewpoints of others (Youniss, 1980). These findings suggest that youth activities are a setting in which this is particularly likely to occur.

Finally, several participants described *coming to experience loyalty to and intimacy with peers* in their activity. One boy commented, "I'd stick up for anyone in here, if not anyone in FFA." This same individual also said that the peers in his group were like a "huge family." A girl commented that after being on a trip during which there were extended conversations, she had become very close to the other group members. This substantiates speculation that youth activities are an important context for developing valuable peer bonds (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001).

### Teamwork and Social Skills

Four themes emerged from the focus groups that elucidate different processes of developing social skills. A consistent theme described by many youth concerned the dynamics of *learning to work together as a group or team*. One girl recognized that, "one person's not going to win, one person's not going to lose. Everybody has to work together and put in their fair share." Issues of respect for leaders, getting along with those different than you, learning how different individuals and their personalities affect the group, and the benefits of working together were mentioned as important dimensions of their experiences in activities. Youth were clearly not only

aware of these numerous aspects of group dynamics, but also how these dynamics impacted the operation or accomplishments of the group. For example, an adolescent commented, "If you want to win, you have to learn to get along, even if you don't necessarily get along during the day or any other time." These examples highlight the process of collaborative learning discussed by Rogoff *et al.* (1995). Learning in youth activities is a product of working with others who are just as invested in the activity as you are.

A 2nd theme was *learning about leadership and responsibility*. Youth mentioned that everyone in a group or on a team had a certain level of responsibility, but that those in a leadership role carried greater responsibility. One boy said,

By being a captain, you have to represent your whole team. If you do something stupid, it looks like your whole team is doing it . . . I think you don't realize it, but a lot of people look up to you and they follow in your example. Like if you start clapping because somebody gets hurt and they walk off the field, everybody will do it. You just have to be the good example.

Learning to delegate, being cautious about what one said, taking blame for someone else's mistakes, and asking for help were some of the other examples of leadership that youth mentioned. An interesting paradox was noted. On the one hand, youth said that being in a leadership role meant that one had to take the lead because one couldn't always rely on another member to make sure a task gets done. On the other hand, youth also noted that being in a leadership role meant learning to rely on others around you. Clearly, part of learning about leading is discovering when taking charge and when relying on others is appropriate. One boy said,

You gotta pick up somebody else's mistakes a lot. Somebody won't do something that's supposed to be done, then you gotta pick that up. You gotta take charge and be a leader and get them under your feet and pick them up, get them going.

When youth are put in a leadership role, they learn to take others into account when making decisions and choices (Conrad and Hedin, 1982; Patrick *et al.*, 1999). Our findings suggest that youth activities are a context in which this often occurs.

A 3rd theme was *learning to take and give feedback*. Participants distinguished between good and bad feedback or, "constructive criticism" and "negative criticism." Some said, "you never get used to taking feedback," although others described learning to be more receptive to it. One girl noted that feedback in her group was generally positive and well received because each member



recognized her dependence on the other members. While youth reported responding differently to feedback, overall they recognized its value. "If you're doing something and you don't really realize you're doing it wrong . . . They're trying to help you and so you have to listen to them and then . . . fix it."

The 4th theme was *learning communication skills*. Youth mentioned that they learned how to communicate with others because of the activity they were in, and they learned how to listen. One student said, "I think communication skills is a big thing. You learn how to talk with people . . . You learn how to deal with a bunch of different situations . . . You learn how to deal with other people's feelings beside yourself." While this was not a dominant theme, youth described how learning communication skills were part of developing social skills and enabled them to work with others. A girl also mentioned that the communication skills she learned could be useful in a future job. This is consistent with the findings of Scales (1991) who suggests that youth activities provide opportunities for youth to practice roles that will be relevant to a future career.

These youth clearly articulated using youth activities to learn about teamwork and develop social skills. What was most striking was their ability to recognize themselves—both individually and collaboratively—as the agents of this learning. They described themselves as active contributors to the development of their own teamwork and social skills.

### Adults Networks and Social Capital

Participants provided accounts of experiences that reflect the acquisition of social capital. First, they articulated a process of *learning about the community and how it operates*. One boy in FFA described learning about the importance of a good reputation for conducting business, "A lot of these adults you do business with. So, it's important they have a good impression of the chapter if you want their support. You basically need to have good relationships with about everybody in town." Other youth reported gaining more general knowledge about the community. Learning about the community helps equip youth with the information and skills they will need to be positive contributors to the larger adult community in the future. Consistent with previous research, these activities provide youth with experiences that enhance their ability to navigate the adult world around them (McLaughlin *et al.*, 1994).

A 2nd theme was *experiencing support from leaders and community members*. A boy in football said, "I learned

that some of those people [adults in the community] really care about us." Youth also reported that leaders were a source of advice and support. Speaking of group leaders, a girl said, "They have more wisdom. You know, if you have something you are going through that you've never been through, then you can go to them and ask. They can give you advice." Another girl said,

I saw my soccer coach for two hours everyday and I learned that I really did respect him, he was helping me, and . . . I chose to take what he was telling me and apply it to my life. But I've had experiences with other coaches that I have learned that I don't really respect them and I don't believe what they're telling me. I've learned that I don't have to listen to them, and I can . . . while still being respectful and polite, I can take what I want out of it.

Our data suggest that in youth activities, adolescents experience and develop connections to adults and the community and that these linkages are used as a source of support (Dubas and Snider, 1993).

### CONCLUSIONS

Consistent with our expectations, in nearly all accounts, adolescents portrayed themselves as the agents of their own development. Whether they were recounting processes of identity work, emotional growth, learning teamwork skills, or making connections with adults in the community, they described processes in which growth emanated from their own thoughts and actions, and from picking and choosing from what adults try to teach them. These processes were sometimes individual and sometimes collaborative, involving peers, leaders, and occasionally parents; many of their descriptions were consistent with Baker-Sennett *et al.*'s contention that development is coconstructed (Baker-Sennett *et al.*, 1993). But, what is important is that these youth situated themselves as the agents of these processes. In many cases agency took the form of deliberate exploration, or involved trial and error—teaching oneself from mistakes and evaluation of how things could have gone better. Sometimes learning also involved unexpected discoveries, for example, that strong positive emotions can disrupt one's focus or that community members are a useful resource.

This central finding, that adolescents see themselves as the agents of their own development in this context, is a critical one for leaders of these activities. It suggests that, at least at the high school age, leaders' focus might be better directed, not at teaching youth, but helping them teach themselves. Research on parenting and classroom learning suggests that the most effective

adults in adolescents' lives are not overdirective, but rather are responsive and provide appropriate structure, challenge, and support (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde, 1998; Eccles *et al.*, 1998; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2001). These findings support the conclusions of McLaughlin (2000) that effective programs for youth are youth-centered, and provide a context in which adolescents take responsibility.

We think that future research on youth activities can fruitfully expand on this view of adolescents as producers of their development. The limited size of our sample did not allow us to determine how often the different categories of growth were experienced across boys and girls, youth in different types of communities, and across different types of activities. More systematic surveying of random samples of adolescents is needed to provide this type of information. In addition, our methodology obtained accounts of experiences at only one point in time, not permitting us to examine actual processes of change and development. It would be useful to follow individual adolescents over the course of their participation in an activity to investigate how these processes occur over the "temporal arc" of goal setting, self-monitoring, feedback, and personal change (Larson, 2000). Can processes of growth be described in terms of adolescents' progressive engagement with challenge, as conceptualized by Csikszentmihalyi (1990)?

Furthermore, it is possible that the focus group methodology, while successful in getting youth to be talkative about their experiences, may have inhibited some students from describing experiences that were more personal or that they perceived would be socially undesirable to their peers or to the moderator (Krueger, 1988). Reliance on a self-report methodology also may not be the best method for surfacing information on processes that are less conscious. For example, the process of internalizing norms of the group, described by Eccles and Barber (1999), and even the process of acquiring a language of agency, described by Heath (1999), may represent important changes occurring through these activities, and may have been less likely to come up in the focus group discussions. We certainly would not conclude that the 6 domains of learning described here, nor the themes within them, are comprehensive.

In sum, there is much room for further research on developmental processes in the context of youth activities, employing a range of methods, diverse samples, and differing designs. We believe that a fuller body of research on these processes can make important contributions to the training of youth leaders and to the design of programs to better assist youth in growing through their experiences in these activities.

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