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## The Experience of Learning: Early Adolescents in Organized Youth Programs

Jennifer A. Skuza

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*Although researchers and policymakers have focused on school as the critical place in which learning occurs, organized youth programs offer different environments in which early adolescents can learn. However, early adolescent learning in organized youth programs is an under-researched area of learning, which may limit the ability of youth development practitioners to respond appropriately to early adolescent learning needs. The purpose of this article is to describe the experience of learning in an organized youth program by finding meaning in early adolescents' lived experience through a phenomenological methodology. For youth in this study, learning in an organized program is an experience of discovering new ways of seeing themselves and others in their worlds. Learning is comprised of feelings of anxiety that are tempered with the comfort young people find within themselves. Learning is also a relational experience marked by an emerging sense of ownership that shapes one's sense of self. This study invites youth development practitioners to recognize the significant role they can play in cultivating early adolescent learning.*

**Keywords:** youth learning, early adolescence, youth development, education, phenomenology, 4-H, organizations, youth programs

### Introduction

Early adolescence is a period of life, typically between the ages of 10 and 14, in which youth undergo rapid physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes, as well as changes in the social environments where their daily lives unfold. Exercising their growing autonomy in school and organized programs, early adolescents learn about the world outside the household. They gauge themselves against the expectations of others, compare their performance with that of their peers, and develop ways of responding to challenges and learning opportunities. Through these years, they form an identity, a self-concept, and an orientation toward accomplishment that will play a significant role in shaping their experience in community, school, work, and life (Eccles, 1999).

Although researchers and policymakers have focused on school as the critical place in which learning occurs, organized youth programs offer different environments in which youth can learn about themselves and their worlds, find camaraderie, pursue interests, sort things out, and

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discover ways to flourish in their development (Skuzza, 2005). However, early adolescent learning in organized youth programs is an under-researched area of learning, which may limit the ability of youth development practitioners to respond appropriately to early adolescent learning needs (Blyth & Walker, 2006; Eccles, 1999).

The purpose of this article was to describe the experience of learning in an organized youth program by finding meaning in early adolescents' lived experience through the use of a phenomenological methodology. An organized youth program refers to activities that include structure, adult supervision, and an emphasis on skill-building (Mahoney et al., 2005). Phenomenology is the study of lived experience and asks for the very essence of a phenomenon to be described with language that shows the lived quality and significance of the experience (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Husserl, 1970; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; van Manen, 2016).

### **Literature Review**

Contrary to what many people believe, formal education is not the only place where learning occurs. Learning may occur anywhere at any time. For example, McLaughlin (2000) indicated that the most powerful learning environments are typically located in community-based, organized youth programs during non-school hours because they have the flexibility to respond to individual learning or developmental needs without the pressure of academic demands. The youth development work found in those programs has the potential to be a developmentally responsive practice that can respond to youth needs in real-time (Fusco, 2012). With responsive practice, youth development practitioners are uniquely positioned to understand the inner workings of youth learning and to help early adolescents receive the support they need to thrive.

Adults and youth have different orientations toward learning (Choy & Delahaye, 2005; Lew & Yong, 2005). However, adult learning principles predominately serve as the core guiding philosophy for most practitioners who are concerned with adolescent learning (Choy & Delahaye, 2005). Knowles (1980), a pioneer in the study of adult learning and whose research is still relevant today, observed that adults learn best when they understand (and agree with) why something is important to know or do. They prefer self-directed, practical, problem-centered, task-oriented learning and have years of experience upon which to draw (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013; Knowles et al., 2015; Merriam, 2001; Lew & Yong, 2005). Adolescents are often less interested in the immediate practical application that adults demand and can enjoy learning as long as it is relevant, guided by objectives, built on their experience, and engaging (Choy & Delahaye, 2007; Halpern et al., 2013). Furthermore, youth are quasi-dependent learners seeking out their identity while they mature toward becoming self-directed learners. Therefore, they desire support and guidance as they learn (Brown, 1997; Choy & Delahaye, 2003; Illeris, 2003; Kasworm, 1980; Labouvie-Vief, 1982; Lew & Yong, 2005).

Early adolescence is a distinct period of development that is different from late childhood and later adolescence (Eccles et al., 1996; Urdan & Klein, 1998). It is a period of tremendous change,

including the biological transformations of puberty, educational transitions from elementary to secondary school, and the emergence of sexuality (Eccles, 1999). Therefore, understanding learning requires special consideration of early adolescence as a stage of development (Caskey & Anfara, 2014).

Cognitively, the most significant characteristic of the early adolescent intellect is its transition between concrete and abstract thinking patterns (Eccles, 1999; Keating, 1990; Piaget & Inhelder, 1973). According to Eccles (1999) and Keating (1990), early adolescents' cognitive development is in a constant state of transition and fluctuation between those thinking patterns, sometimes drawing upon a combination of both. Those patterns show up in how early adolescents learn because they are in transition from a child's perspective, where their thinking is concrete, and they trustfully take in whatever adults offer, to a more selective stance as learners and abstract thinkers (Illeris, 2003).

These cognitive changes can also affect early adolescents' self-concepts, thoughts about their future, and understanding of others (Eccles, 1999; Harter, 1998; Keating, 1990). According to Eccles (1999), Harter (1998), and Keating (1990), early adolescence is a time of change in the way youth view themselves, as they consider the current and future possibilities available to them and try to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others.

Understanding this period of transition and how it affects the learning experience is critical in an organized program (Eccles, 1999). Such programs typically have more autonomy than schools to design environments that support skill acquisition without emphasizing differences in children's abilities and talents. These programs can allow early adolescents to safely explore independence, peer and adult relationships, and leadership, while providing a buffer from stress brought forward from other areas of their lives (Eccles, 1999; Skuza, 2005).

### **Methodology**

A phenomenological approach was used in this study to reveal the phenomenon of learning in a youth program by asking early adolescents to describe their learning experience in their own words. Phenomenological philosophy is an essential element of the epistemology that provides a foundation for human science research (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Husserl, 1970). As a research methodology, phenomenology is the study of lived experience from the first-person point of view. It is used to study experience as humans live it and is guided by the researcher's openness to the phenomena of the everyday *lifeworld* (Dahlberg et al., 2001). Lifeworld refers to the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life (Dahlberg et al., 2001). Phenomenology asks for the very essence of a phenomenon to be described with language that shows the lived pre-reflective quality and significance of the experience (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Husserl, 1998; Merleau-Ponty, 2012; van Manen, 2016).

Phenomenology was used in this study to describe the essence of early adolescent learning within the context of how it is experienced in an organized youth program. I use first-person language in this section to clarify the researcher's role. First-person language is an authentic expression commonly used in the presentation of phenomenological research (Depraz, 2013).

This study openly approached the phenomenon of learning by inviting early adolescents to describe their experiences of learning in an organized youth program through writing short essays and participating in interviews. The youths participating in this study were enrolled in urban public schools in one north-central U.S. state and had participated in urban afterschool and summer programs offered through the University of Minnesota Extension 4-H Youth Development program. A positive youth development approach that encouraged thriving among youths guided the design and implementation of the programs. Hamilton et al. (2004) indicated that a youth development approach emphasizes the active support for the growing capacity of young people to thrive by building on their strengths. Features of settings that promote youth development include (1) physical and psychological safety, (2) appropriate structure, (3) supportive relationships, (4) opportunities to belong, (5) positive social norms, (6) support for efficacy and mattering, (7) opportunities for skill-building, and (8) integration of family, school, and/or community efforts (Konopka, 1973; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). This youth development approach was applied to the practices, activities, and program settings in this study.

The afterschool programs met weekly during the school year and provided educational activities guided by project-based curricula. Some programs also met on Saturdays. A typical day usually started with a snack and circle time, followed by an educational exercise and recreation. Educational themes would rotate throughout the program year and were often complemented by field trips. Youth were actively involved in making programmatic decisions and worked cooperatively toward a culminating public event where youth showcased their learning. The summer programs included day camp and residential camp experiences where early adolescents worked on projects, participated in recreational activities, conducted service activities, and showcased their learning among program participant peers and program staff members.

Phenomenological essays and interviews served as the primary data collection methods. The writing technique used in this study was honed by van Manen (2002). The youths were asked to write concrete descriptions of their experience of learning in the afterschool or summer program and to provide examples that illustrated their experience. I worked with a team of three program coordinators, who were youth development professionals employed by the University of Minnesota Extension, to collect the essays. I trained the program coordinators on how to conduct the essay writing process and complete the data collection. The program coordinators also worked directly with the youth programs of the study participants.

As a trained phenomenologist, I developed all question prompts and instructed the program coordinators to prompt participants with questions such as, *What were you doing? How were you feeling? What were you thinking? What was learning like?* These questions mirror the types commonly used in phenomenological studies designed to help participants pause and reflect on their lived experience (see van Manen, 2014). This study was approved by the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board.

Eighty youths in total participated in the programs, and all were invited to write essays about more than one experience or participate in an interview. The program coordinators identified the early adolescents from the youth programs who would be best matched up with each of the methods based on their working knowledge of each youth and helped assign each youth to a method. We gathered 71 essays written by youth ages 10 to 14 who were African American, Hmong American, Lao American, Latin American, and European American and included 35 boys and 36 girls living in urban neighborhoods. Six participants were selected for interviews. The youths who were interviewed were also 10-14 years old, and like the youth who wrote essays, they also lived in urban communities. They were African American, Hmong American, and European American. Three boys and three girls were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in English, the native language of the interviewees, and took place in mutually agreed-upon locations. I audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. I used both the essay and interview data collection techniques to accommodate diverse verbal and writing preferences and capabilities. All youth who participated in the study reported having had an experience of learning in the youth programs, were willing to talk or write about it, and met the age criterion. Three youths (of the 80) chose not to participate in the study.

The phenomenological interview technique used in this study was informed by Dahlberg et al. (2001) and Kvale (1996). I interviewed six youths individually with an informal, interactive, and open-ended format. The phenomenological method in human science recommends that one uses at least three participants, obviously not because the number three corresponds with a statistical analysis but because a minimum of three participants would allow the researcher to identify the essential features of the phenomenon at hand across participants' descriptions (Giorgi, 2009). As Giorgi (2009) pointed out, "Research based upon depth strategies should not be confused with research based upon sampling strategies" (pp. 198-199). Dahlberg et al. (2001) indicated that six is an appropriate maximum number of interviews for a phenomenological study because of the large amount of text generated in each interview.

As indicated earlier, each young person was individually interviewed. Five interviews lasted approximately one hour, and one interview lasted approximately two hours. The youth with the longer interview was especially talkative, taking more time than the others. These youths were different from the young people who wrote the essays. As noted earlier, phenomenology asks for the very essence of a phenomenon to be described with language that shows the lived pre-reflective quality and significance of the experience (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Husserl, 1998;

Merleau-Ponty, 2012; van Manen, 2016). Youths who had not completed the essay were selected for the interviews because those who had completed essays had already reflected on their learning experiences when writing. Youths who participated in the interviews would have had a fresh opportunity to talk about their learning experiences pre-reflectively.

The open-ended interview format is a dynamic pattern comprised of the request for reflection followed by support of disclosure rather than a planned interview protocol. The interview sequence had two parts. Part one was interviewer-initiated in which the interviewee's attention was directed toward the phenomenon to be considered, in this case, the experience of learning in a youth program. Dahlberg et al. (2001) asserted that phenomenology, as a research methodology, does not call for a prescribed set of predetermined questions to be asked during an interview. Instead, the interview is a sequence of two parts facilitated by a skilled interviewer who asks questions that arise during the interview in a way that allows the interviewee to describe their lived experience of the phenomenon of focus. For instance, I began by asking questions such as, *In general, how is learning for you?* to direct attention to learning as the phenomenon of focus. During the interview, contexts of experience began to emerge. Then, I asked questions such as, *What is it like to learn [in that context]?* I crafted all of the interview questions.

Part two of the interview sequence delved into the sub-areas of the experience, gradually shifting toward being interviewee-initiated, whereby the interviewer followed the interviewee's lead while offering support for disclosure. Here, I asked clarifying questions about what the interviewee shared during the first part of the interview and invited the interviewee to expand or deepen their description of the experience. I also checked for intersubjectivity so that I fully understood the experience as it was being described by the interviewee and as a way to prevent researcher bias. Intersubjectivity is a term used in phenomenology to refer to agreement between people (Dahlberg et al., 2001). For instance, there is intersubjectivity between people if they agree on the meaning of an experience.

### **Data Analysis**

I served as the sole researcher and analyzed the data using a rigorous method epistemologically designed for phenomenological research studies. The data analysis in this study was guided by Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method, a five-step system of research that holds Husserlian phenomenology as its philosophical foundation. The first step in Giorgi's method is to assume the phenomenological attitude in which the researcher brackets their everyday knowledge to take a fresh look at the data. Bracketing is most commonly attributed to Husserlian phenomenology (Dahlberg et al., 2001). It is a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that calls for putting aside one's own belief about the phenomenon under investigation or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation as a way to prevent researcher bias (Carpenter, 2007; Chan et al., 2013). The

second step in the data analysis requires the researcher to read the description to get a sense of the whole experience without critical reflection. The third step in the data analysis is the demarcation of meaning units within the narrative so that the data can be handled in manageable portions. The fourth step is translating the meaning units into disciplinary language that expresses the essence of the phenomenon. The researcher uses their disciplinary background (in my case, youth development) to translate the participants' everyday language into the researcher's narrower disciplinary language. Giorgi (2009) emphasized that this step does not require any interpretation but is purely a matter of describing the meaning units with words relevant to the discipline of study. The fifth step is to synthesize the general structure of the whole experience based on the constituent parts of the experience (Giorgi, 2009). The general meaning structure of the experience is a descriptive paragraph that lays out the essence of the whole lived experience; it is an abstraction from the constituents. The constituents are the essential parts of the experience and are concrete expressions understood in the larger context of that structure. As noted earlier, in this study, the general meaning structure captures the essence of the whole experience of early adolescent learning, while the constituents represent the experience's parts of meaning in more concrete terms and are supported by a discussion of the text excerpts.

Using Giorgi's (2009) five-step method provided the systematic rigor of science. My goal was to describe the general structure of the phenomenon of learning and its constituent parts so that it could be understood in a deeper, holistic, and more comprehensive way than other methods can provide.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

Findings are presented in two ways. First, the general meaning structure captures the essence of the whole experience of early adolescent learning. Second, the constituents represent the experience's parts of meaning in more concrete terms and are supported by a discussion of the text excerpts. The text excerpts that correspond with each constituent serve as evidence to support both the general meaning structure and the parts. The study participants are referenced as girl, boy, or youth with corresponding preferred pronouns. These were preferred terms identified by the youths who participated in the study.

#### **The General Meaning Structure of the Experience of Learning for Early Adolescents**

This study's findings revealed that learning is a personal experience that occurs within each young person's unique world. These unique worlds are laced with flexible boundaries that expand as insight, experience, and knowledge accumulate. Learning is a form of discovery that facilitates a process of seeing oneself in new ways. It is also accompanied by anxiety that manifests in the type of self-consciousness that comes with insecurities or fears found in first-time experiences. That anxiety is eventually tempered by the comfort that youth find within themselves. Learning is also a relational experience where youth find value in learning with



others and incorporating their life experiences. Learning is treasured like a valuable possession but is intangible ownership of something that shapes one's sense of self.

Constituent parts supported by the evidence of text excerpts are presented next.

### **Constituent 1: Discovering New Ways of Seeing Themselves and Others in Their Worlds**

Young people live in youth worlds that are unique to their everyday experience. For the youths in this study, learning was a discovery of new ways of thinking and seeing their worlds, which illustrates their experience of learning in afterschool and summer programs. Example excerpts from the interviews and essays are provided to illustrate this interpretation.

As one young person wrote after completing an annual program cycle of an afterschool program, "I actually like learning now." Earlier, this youth had described learning as boring, so the shift that she made in her view of her learning was significant.

In an interview, one boy talked about his experience of learning in a program:

My learning experience is like being on a hiking path. It goes in all sorts of directions, and I see something new every time I am on it. I don't know...but when I think about my learning, I feel accomplished. I feel smart. Learning can be hard sometimes, but it is best when I don't even realize that I am learning, like when I fix things or figure stuff out. I guess I have learned a lot about myself and about other people. Maybe that is what learning is.

This boy likened his learning in the program to hiking on a path where he learned about himself, how he learns best, and about other people in his life.

Another youth wrote about how her experience of learning was represented by her changed view of younger children:

I learned to listen to what the children had to say. It is good to listen to them because it makes them feel important. One time I was talking to a camper, and she told me about a pet she had. It was actually very interesting. Most of the time before this experience, I thought it was boring to listen to the kids. You can tell by their facial expression that they really like it when you listen to them.

This youth's learning experience was marked by developing an empathetic view of and a relationship with younger children. Not only did this youth view children differently, but she also saw herself as tuned in to the needs, strengths, and interests of a group she had at one time dismissed. Other youths echoed similar experiences in their essays and interviews. For instance, one boy said, "I used to think that little kids were annoying. You know, like my brother. But the really little kids were actually pretty cool. Maybe I am annoying."

Another youth wrote about how her views of peers changed:

I liked when everyone was talking about changing the community. Because I did not know that so many girls wanted to change the community, I thought I would be the only one who wanted it to change. I learned that everyone wanted our community to change and, if we all work together, we all can make a big difference.

This excerpt suggests that this young person was feeling alone in her interest to improve her community. Yet, by having a shared learning experience in the program, she realized that most of her peers shared the same desire. She then began to dream of what they could do collectively to improve the community. Her experience was one of empowerment fueled by collective motivation. She now has a different view of her peers and what she can accomplish with them. Similarly, one girl said, "I really want to do important things like make our neighborhood safer and help elect good leaders. I think it can happen if [we] work together." Another girl said, "I didn't know the kids in this program very well in the beginning when I started. I thought they would never be my friends. But now, it's like WOW. We're like family. We have big plans to make our community better."

Lastly, one youth wrote about how she saw herself differently:

[I] can be a leader in any way [I] want, and I learned that almost every day, you reach a goal. But you have some barriers, so you can't feel down because if you put your mind to it, you can achieve anything.

To this youth, the realization that she could reach everyday goals was a crystallizing moment in which she recognized her self-efficacy and the meaning that it had in how she leads her life. Other youths participating in the study noted similar types of transformational experiences of discovery. For example, one boy said, "I see myself as a learner and a teacher. I never thought about myself that way before." A girl said, "I thought I was a quitter. I used to not finish stuff. But now, I finish the things that I want to finish. I don't give up so easily."

Similarly, a girl talked about how she changed her view of herself:

I always hated school. I thought I was dumb and couldn't get things as fast as everyone else. It always seemed like everybody else was so much smarter than me. But here I get to teach kids about teamwork and plan day camps. I love it. I think I am kind of good at it.

### **Constituent 1 Conclusions**

These excerpts show how learning in these organized youth programs give early adolescents the space to discover new ways of seeing themselves and others in their lives. The learning that takes place in these environments may even impact how young people view their education and/or

paths of lifelong learning. This point underscores the importance of understanding youth learning experiences during this transitional time of early adolescence. Especially for youths who are not thriving, an understanding of their experiences can position adults to help them reach their educational potential now and well into adulthood.

### **Constituent 2: Feeling Anxiety and Comfort with Self**

Anxiety is a feeling of worry or unease that can show up in different ways. For instance, a youth could feel nervous about speaking in front of others or be worried that peers may judge them. In the context of this study, responses from the youths indicated that anxiety often showed itself as self-consciousness born from the insecurities or fears that accompany first-time experiences. Those moments were critical thresholds for youths to cross before finding the comfort they needed within themselves. Example excerpts from the interviews and essays are provided to illustrate this interpretation.

One girl talked about her anxiety and comfort in a summer youth program:

It was like I was the new kid in the program....I felt like I was the only kid....It was very uncomfortable because it felt like everyone was looking at me or waiting for me to say something. It was probably all in my head....That is how I felt....I misunderstood the teacher once on the first day. I brought some cookies to class the next day. I thought she asked us to bring a snack to share with everyone. I later figured out that she was telling us about how we'd be on a schedule to bring snacks. Anyway. I was so embarrassed for bringing the cookies, and the teacher knew I brought them. But she ignored me or was ignoring the cookies or something. I was so embarrassed....I did not want to be there. I feel it in my skin now [the girl touched her skin]. That memory sticks with me. That is what I remember when you ask me to describe my experience of learning. Later I felt better about being there and liked some of the stuff we did. But to me, the cookies are what I remember the most.

The girl's experience was marked by her feeling overly conspicuous in the program, and this carried over into how she experienced learning. When attempting to understand the experience of learning for early adolescents, it is critical to account for the self-consciousness they may feel in a learning environment and recognize its influence on shaping the learning experience itself.

Following is a series of essay excerpts that point to emotions related to learning something for the first time. One boy wrote about his experience at a camp:

Only two of us were pitching the tent at river camp on the hike, and I was the only one who knew how to do it. So, I ended up doing it by myself. I was nervous, but it was cool because it didn't fall over, and that was my first time.

In a similar outdoor context, another youth wrote about his first time canoeing: “When we went canoeing, I learned how to paddle and stuff. I hadn’t been canoeing before. At first, it was scary, and then it was kind of relaxing. I was hoping I wouldn’t fall.”

In another example, a girl wrote about speaking up in front of others:

When I answered the questions, I felt pretty good about the ways to answer these questions and thought about what this means to us. It was kind of fun because I was standing by myself, and I was able to answer. Wow.

### **Constituent 2 Conclusions**

At first glance, these excerpts may appear as everyday examples of personal growth. But with a deeper examination, they point to those critical moments in one’s life that could have an accumulating effect on the development of an early adolescent’s sense of self. Feeling comfortable with oneself is a significant achievement. Anxiety in the form of self-consciousness could serve as a barrier to learning, but when young people persevere through those critical moments, they may rise to a new level of comfort within themselves.

Self-consciousness is widely understood as a part of everyday life for early adolescents—as is developing a self-concept (Caissy, 1994). However, this study reveals that self-consciousness is a part of the learning experience itself and demonstrates an inner growth that occurs as early adolescents feel more comfortable with self. The common stereotype of adolescents as awkward, insecure, or overly emotional has the power to put real distance between youth and adults, keeping adults from understanding or even relating to early adolescents. A conclusion from the results of this study is that it is important to look more deeply at the anxiety that youth may experience in their learning environments and help them navigate through those times to find comfort with self.

### **Constituent 3: A Relational Experience**

In this study, the relational aspect of learning was experienced in two forms by the youths: (a) socially, by learning with others whereby shared learning experiences reinforced a sense of belonging and made the learning enjoyable, and (b) personally, by incorporating their life experiences and/or prior knowledge into the learning at hand. Evidence of this relational aspect is provided in the following excerpts from participant essays and interviews.

In the following excerpt from her essay, one youth expressed both relational forms as she described an educational group trip to Washington, DC:

This experience has honestly changed my life. I will go out and change my community, country, and world. It wasn’t the tours that changed my life; it was talking with other people on the trip. We shared personal stories that some have never told before. That

helped us know that we all have a history that can affect others. These stories showed me how strong I already am and how I can become stronger...and with this new-found strength, I will impact the world with understanding, life, and love. This has showed me my life as I never thought possible.

For this youth, her trip to Washington, DC, was a shared unscripted learning experience and allowed her to build upon what she already knew. Because she was learning with others, this girl was able to reach greater depth in her thinking and learning than she would have achieved alone.

Other youths in this study noted similar examples. Repeatedly, youths described how they learned with others, built upon their own ideas, or related a topic to their everyday lives.

For example, a boy who talked about his experience in a summer program said,

I really wanted to play soccer during our free time [in this program]. I would play it every day if I could. But, in this group, I learned to play other games like dungeons and dragons. I even tried Jenga. It was hilarious...so yeah, otherwise, I would just play soccer all the time.

Similarly, a girl wrote about doing homework during an afterschool program:

I felt better doing my math homework herein a group. We worked on problems together like algebra and stuff. I can do math now, and it doesn't scare me so much now. Not as much, at least. At home, though, it is not so easy.

One youth wrote about the teamwork and camaraderie he experienced as a part of his learning in his afterschool program:

We had fun playing games like Dinoball. It was a lot of fun playing that because everyone came together as one team...and everyone got together [and] helped each other. I was thinking that I never seen this many people work together. Everyone became friends and had a lot of fun together.

He was surprised by the kind of togetherness that could result from learning with others and was able to find learning about teamwork in his play.

Another particularly shy boy described his learning in the context of a sense of belonging. "I felt like I was learning something as part of the group...so I felt like I really belonged in the group."

### **Constituent 3 Conclusions**

Most early adolescents want to matter to others around them. This is especially the case in learning situations. Whether making new friends or strengthening old connections with peers or

adults, youth often learn best when they feel they are a part of something. This sense of belonging can be a powerful part of a youth's learning experience. Working in groups in organized youth programs can also help early adolescents stretch their perspectives and deepen their knowledge by personally relating prior knowledge to the learning at hand. The learning that takes place in these environments may be a place where youth are experiencing the joy of learning, which is especially important for young people who are not experiencing success in schools. This constituent underscores the importance of recognizing the value of learning environments found in organized programs and helping young people reflect on their learning experiences to make meaning of them.

#### **Constituent 4: An Emerging Sense of Ownership**

In the essays and interviews, youths expressed how they became more actively involved in their learning over time, meaning they were more than just participants, spectators, or consumers. They also began to take on ownership of their educational experiences.

For example, one boy wrote about how he planned to arrange his room and materials to support his learning through his hobby:

Since I got my first science stuff, I wanted to know if I had the right chemicals. I think science could be my hobby. My dad said we are going to rearrange a room and build a science table once we get more science stuff.

In another instance, one girl who had a passive approach to her educational future wrote about her new mindset and plans to overcome challenges that could get in the way of her educational pursuits:

The part of the program that I liked would be *Moving Past Barriers*. It helped me understand what kind of tools I need to be what I want to be. I need like people and money to go to college because if I want to be a singer, I need to learn music notes, and I need people to help me and push me to the right place. It helped me also see how I can also help other people move past their barriers.

Another girl wrote about how her learning is marked by her cultural sense of self:

Every Saturday, I come here to practice dance. I learn every time. I feel good about being here. It helps me learn different types of Lao dance. When we perform, we wear these unique costumes to dance with. It looks so nice. Even though I am born in the U.S., dancing makes me a part of a Lao tradition. I was thinking this is what I want to do; this is where I want to be.

The excerpt demonstrates the depth of the girl's learning experience as she embraced her Lao culture through dance. It points to her unique form of self-possession and an internal drive she

has for her learning. It also shows how youth can experience a stream of satisfaction by owning their learning rather than passively receiving education.

Lastly, one boy described his experience of learning:

I don't know. It is kind of hard to describe. But it is mine. No one can take what I have learned away from me. Every day, I learn more and more. It is like I get bigger on the inside. It's what I know.

This excerpt shows another version of how a young person possesses his learning. He does not merely evaluate his learning as good or bad as a consumer of learning. Rather, he views learning as part of him.

### **Constituent 4 Conclusions**

The youths in this study described how they experienced an emerging sense of ownership for their learning. For some, this was a significant breakthrough, especially for those who were not otherwise thriving in their learning or believed they had no educational future. Unlike how one possesses material items, this type of ownership came from the youth reaping unquantifiable rewards from learning. The phenomenological angle of this study allowed for this unique meaning to be revealed and showed how youth experience learning in organized programs. It gives us a view into the everyday lifeworlds of youth and shows how this ownership of learning can shape one's sense of self.

Through their concrete expressions, early adolescents illustrated what the experience of learning is like for them in an organized youth program. Together the structure and constituents describe the meaning of the experience of learning for this set of youth.

### **Discussion of Implications for Youth Development Practice**

Youth development practitioners can play an important role in cultivating early adolescent learning. It starts with practitioners understanding the learning experience of early adolescents and recognizing that they could be one of those pivotal persons who can positively influence the trajectory of a young person's life and position them for greater learning.

For the youths in this study, learning is about discovering new ways of seeing themselves and others in their worlds. Experiential learning, which is valued in the field of youth development (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, 1996), is an ongoing process of discovery that begins by performing a task, sharing and analyzing the results with others, connecting them with other events in life, and then applying the results to new situations. The types of discovery are often viewed as intellectual (i.e., new ideas or knowledge) or as forms of self-awareness (e.g., developing interests, talents, strengths). This study, however, shows a different side of discovery by examining learning as an experience and attempting to see what

the experience is like for early adolescents in an organized program. This study shows that learning alters the way one sees and experiences one's world. It also punctuates the role learning experiences can play in the lives of youth as one that transforms their perspective and shapes their worldview. Practitioners need to recognize the magnitude of the learning that can take place in programs and work with young people to intentionally design a learning environment that is developmentally enhancing.

Learning environments that early adolescents enter need to be responsive to their developmental stage. To accomplish this, practitioners can work with early adolescents to co-create learning environments that help them thrive. The act of co-creation demonstrates that the practitioner respects early adolescents and recognizes their increasing maturity. It also models a reciprocal relationship whereby youth and adults work together as partners (Hart, 1992).

That way of working together also opens up opportunities for early adolescents to discover new perspectives, express their individuality, master new skills, and seek emotional support from non-familial adults and peers. The learning activities in organized programs need to be developmentally responsive. For instance, practitioners could plan sequences of increasingly challenging activities that balance youths' levels of readiness with the right amount of challenge in ways that promote discovery and emotional stability.

Emotional stability is a critical part of learning. However, in early adolescence, social-emotional maturity often lags behind physical and intellectual development (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). The youths in this study described how they felt anxiety in learning environments until they crossed a threshold where they felt good about themselves. Practitioners need to be sensitive to the anxiety that early adolescents may experience in organized youth programs and build nurturing learning environments that offer youth time and space to find comfort with themselves. Anxiety is a powerful emotion that can shut down learning if early adolescents do not have the skills to persevere or reach out for help. Equipping youth with social-emotional learning skills can help center the mind and body (Durlak et al., 2015). It can also reduce emotional tension that early adolescents experience in learning environments and help them progress in their learning pathways.

Techniques to incorporate social-emotional learning into youth development practice may include (a) implementing regular program sessions for youth and adults to talk freely about feelings, ideas, issues, challenges, and other matters; (b) having protocol that young people can use to guide discussions about handling disagreements and interpersonal conflict in positive ways; (c) building social capital within self (as practitioners) by seeking positive collegial relationships, striking an emotional balance within everyday life and caring for personal needs; and (d) cultivating social capital within early adolescents by using interactions with them as opportunities to be supportive.



Early adolescence is, in part, characterized by a young person's drive for autonomy paired with a continuing need for close, trusting relationships with adults and supportive peers. But early adolescents may need help building those relationships. Young adolescents have a strong need to belong to a group—with peer approval becoming more important and adult approval less so (Scales, 2010). Practitioners could uniquely position themselves to help early adolescents build social networks with trusting adults and supportive peers while working with them to co-create learning environments that help them thrive and find joy in learning (Search Institute, 2013).

It is also important for practitioners to use methods that help early adolescents critically reflect upon their knowledge and experience in ways that allow them to take stock in what they know and how they know it while maintaining openness to new perspectives and insights. For example, interpersonal conversations, rap sessions, and forms of artistic expression could give youth opportunities to discuss issues that concern them while allowing adults and peers to learn about their lives.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article is to describe the experience of learning in an organized youth program by finding meaning in early adolescents' lived experience through the use of a phenomenological methodology. Knowing more about this under-researched area of learning can help strengthen the ability of practitioners to respond appropriately to early adolescent learning needs. Youth development practitioners can be those pivotal people that help early adolescents thrive in their learning by building a reciprocal relationship with youth, employing appropriate teaching or facilitation practices, and co-creating suitable learning environments with youth.

For the youths in this study, learning is an experience of discovering new ways of seeing themselves and others in their worlds. The learning that takes place in organized programs may even impact how young people view their education and/or paths of lifelong learning. This underscores the importance of understanding youth learning experiences during this transitional time of early adolescence. Especially for youth who are not thriving, an understanding of their experiences can position adults to help early adolescents reach their educational potential now and well into adulthood.

For the youths in this study, learning is also comprised of feelings of anxiety that are tempered with the comfort they found within themselves. As noted earlier, anxiety in the form of self-consciousness could serve as a barrier to learning, but when young people persevere through those critical moments, they may rise to a new level of comfort within themselves. Practitioners need to look more deeply at the anxiety that young people may experience in organized programs and help them navigate through those times to find comfort with self.

The youths in this study also described learning as a relational experience in social and personal terms. They shared how learning in an organized program promoted their sense of belonging to

groups and helped them experience the joy of learning with others. As individuals, they related new learning to prior knowledge and experience. The learning that takes place in these environments may be the very place where early adolescents experience the joy that can come from learning, which is especially important for youths who are not experiencing success in schools. This underscores the importance of recognizing the value of learning environments found in organized programs and helping youth reflect on their learning experiences to make meaning of them.

This study also showed that when youth are learning, they possess an emerging sense of ownership that helps shape self. This point is important because when young people take ownership of their learning, they have the potential to tap an endless stream of satisfaction that comes from driving their learning. Yet, in this second decade of life, many youth face barriers that hinder their learning and miss opportunities to own their learning. For instance, some youth have little support, guidance, or resources for their learning. Others have had poor experiences and have resorted to avoiding learning because of the humiliation and exposure that came with it in the past. Those barriers can create chasms between early adolescents and their learning that can devastate their futures. Youth development practitioners can work with early adolescents to help them follow their curiosity, explore new topics, and immerse themselves in subjects that interest them most. The learning environments found in organized programs can be prime spaces for youth to thrive in their learning. The learning environments could also help early adolescents become the drivers of their learning. These environments are especially important for young people that have not found their intrinsic motivation for learning.

This study sought to find meaning in the phenomenon by going to youth themselves and asking them about it. The words of early adolescents served as the window to the meaning of learning in organized youth programs as it is lived in their lifeworlds.

### **Limitations**

A limitation of this study is its focus on one geographic area. Drawing participants from more geographic locations could increase the generalizability of this study's findings. Another limitation is that one person analyzed the data in this study. Inviting a second person to review the data could have served as a check to see if the youths' learning experiences were described accurately.

In addition, questions commonly arise about data saturation in qualitative research designs (Saunders et al., 2018). Therefore, it is important to discuss saturation here as it relates to this phenomenological study because it may be viewed as a limitation. Saturation means that a point has been reached in a study where no additional data are being found (Saunders et al., 2018). So, the amount of data collected in a phenomenological study needs to be carefully considered to ensure saturation is reached. The design of this study included six interviews and 71 essays.

As previously indicated in the methodology section of this article, a range of three to six interviews allows the researcher to identify the essential features of the phenomenon at hand across participants' descriptions (Dahlberg et al., 2001; Giorgi, 2009). The number of interviews in this study is within that range. In interviews, when the researcher begins to hear similar types of comments again and again, it is an indication that data saturation may have been reached (Grady, 1998). For instance, after my fifth interview, no new major themes of data were generated from the interviews. So, I continued data collection for one more interview to confirm that there were no new data emerging.

The decision to use both methods, interviews and essays, accommodated the youths' diverse verbal and writing preferences and capabilities and helped to gather as much data as possible from a broad array of youth. The combination of methods strengthened this study's design by exhausting the need for more data to fully understand the experience of learning as described by youth. Questions of saturation may still be a limitation of this study; however, I felt it was important to discuss how saturation was considered in this study's design. It is also important to discuss the concept of generalizability as it relates to phenomenology. It is common in qualitative research to state that generalizability is a limitation (Merriam et al., 2001). For instance, Smith (2005) went so far as to claim that "the phenomenological method makes no claims of generalizability" (p. 215). Other phenomenological researchers have maintained that phenomenological results are generalizable to all who have shared what they consider to be a common lived experience, not just to the study participants (Giorgi, 2008; Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Giorgi (2008) indicated that the phenomenological search for and recognition of essences within lived experience separates phenomenology from other research methodologies and makes the findings within phenomenological research applicable to audiences wider than the participant groups from which they are drawn. I do not intend to resolve this disagreement on views of generalizability with this study; however, it is my intention to acknowledge epistemological differences in opinion.

### **Future Research**

A single study cannot answer every question about a complex phenomenon like learning. More knowledge about this under-researched area of learning is needed. I encourage other researchers to replicate this study with other 4-H Youth Development afterschool and summer programs in other geographic areas to see if there are differences or commonalities among urban, suburban, rural, or tribal youth. I also encourage researchers to replicate this study with youth involved in other youth-serving organizations to see if there are commonalities or differences associated with programs offered by different organizations. I also encourage greater research on the topic of early adolescent learning with the use of different research methodologies, such as ethnography, narrative qualitative research, hermeneutic phenomenology, or other methods designed to elucidate meaning in lived experience. Additional studies using other forms of qualitative

research could help expand and deepen our understanding of early adolescent learning while advancing the use of such methodologies in human science research.

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