



Adolescent Experiences from Participating in Extracurricular and Community-based Activities¹

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There is little debate remaining in the field of youth development that participation in extracurricular and community-based youth activities (sports, school and community organizations, arts groups, etc.) provides a rich context for positive youth development. Research has found that structured youth activities encourage positive youth development. Now we need to examine critically why and how as well as what types of developmental changes occur within the context of youth activities (Benson & Saito; 2000; Roth et al., 1998; Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003).

So far, we know that activities provide a unique setting for adolescents and that they consistently report experiencing high concentration and both high and low motivation (youth activity developers are faced with the challenge of finding out what motivates youth to participate) as well as indicating emotional and cognitive engagement. Since in all likelihood, adolescents are actively involved in constructing their own personal growth, they are likely to be producers of their own development within the context of activities (Larson, 2000; Silbereisen et al., 1986).

Research has identified six developmental processes that may occur during youth activities:

1. Identity work. By trying out different youth activities, adolescents are using these activities to explore their identity (Youniss et al., 1999).

2. Initiative development. Youth identify and acquire skills that will help them direct their attention and effort over time toward a challenging goal (Larson, 2000).

3. Emotional competency. The development of emotional skills such as controlling impulses, managing feelings and reducing stress have been identified as objectives for prevention in positive youth development programs (Catalano et al., 1999).

4. Forming new social connections and learning about peers. By joining a new team, club, or activity, adolescents are adding to their peer friendship network (Brown, 1990).

5. Development of social skills. Youth activities provide opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills, learn to work with others, and increase their social competencies (Catalano et al., 1999).

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6. Acquiring social capital. Relationships with adult leaders provide social capital such as knowledge (Dubas & Snider, 1993), career awareness and access to jobs (McLaughlin, 2000), and valuable connections to community members (Jarrett, 1995). For example, students who had parents that expected high achievement and talked with their children had higher 8th grade test scores, larger gains on test scores from grades 8 to 12, and were less likely to drop out of school (Israel and Beaulieu, 2003). Adult leaders can provide missing connections for youth as well as support for personal growth.

A recent study utilized focus groups to explore whether and how adolescents experience these six developmental processes and other domains of growth experiences (Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003). Ten high school focus groups were conducted with 55 adolescent participants who were identified by school counselors as being articulate as well as active in extracurricular activities. The mean age was 16 (range 14-18) and 56% were self-identified as White, 22% as African American, 4% as Asian and 18% as biracial. Participants identified the types of activities they were involved in as: 72% sports, 60% performance or fine arts, and 83% clubs or organizations. Participants engaged in a discussion of the types of growth experiences (those that taught them something or expanded them in some way) that they had in one youth activity of their choice.

What Adolescents Had to Say about Growth Experiences in Activities

In nearly all their personal accounts, the adolescents described processes in which growth evolved from their own thoughts and actions as well as from making choices based on what adults tried to teach them. As the processes of growth were clearly described, they emerged in the self-portrayal as agents of their own development.

1. Identity work

Youth reported the following processes in activities:

- trying new things,

- gaining self-knowledge, and
- learning limits.

These responses suggest that activities can provide them with material and experiences that allow them to reflect on who they are.

2. Initiative development

Adolescents provided four themes that suggest different types of learning processes in this domain:

- learning to set realistic goals,
- learning effort and perseverance,
- learning to manage time, and
- taking responsibility for oneself.

3. Emotional competency

Adolescents, particularly girls, reported learning experiences in this domain. These included:

- learning to control anger and anxiety,
- preventing emotions from interfering with attention and performance,
- acquiring strategies for managing stress, and
- learning to use positive emotions constructively.

4. Forming new connections and learning about peers

Adolescents reported three themes related to new peer relationships and developing a deeper understanding of peers:

- interacting with peers who would normally be outside their existing network,
- experiencing increased empathy and understanding, and
- coming to experience loyalty to and intimacy with peers.

5. Development of social skills

Adolescents described four themes of developing the processes of social skills:

- learning to work together as a group or team,
- learning about leadership and responsibility,
- learning to take and give feedback, and
- learning communication skills.

6. Acquiring social capital

These experiences were described in personal accounts and included:

- learning about the community and how it operates, and
- experiencing support from leaders and community members.

Implications for Youth Activity Leaders

- **Help youth teach themselves by providing youth-centered programs in which adolescents can take responsibility.** This will empower the youth to take full advantage of the six developmental processes that may occur in youth activities.
- **Be responsive and provide activities with appropriate structure, challenge, and support.** This will allow the youth to enhance certain developmental processes, such as initiative development, social skills, and identity work. And will culminate in enhanced identity development and the acquisition of social capital.
- **Design programs to help youth grow from their experiences in these activities.** All of the developmental processes may be tapped if youth programs are designed to encourage youth to become actively involved in constructing their own personal growth.

By finding out from adolescents what they have gained from youth activities, youth development professionals, extension agents, parents, and program developers can truly tap the six developmental processes and expand the opportunities made available for youth to experience personal growth in all these areas.

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