

Community Explorations: Middle School Learners Making a Difference

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Dedication

This imaginary thesis is dedicated to Diego

Abstract

Middle school learners navigate their lives at a unique time of their adolescent development. They are experiencing many social, emotional, physical and intellectual changes. Middle schools therefore, need to be responsive to these changes, by creating opportunities in schools where adolescent learners can engage in ways to meet their full potential, and have supports in place when this is a challenge. Community Explorations was created with the developmental characteristics of adolescents in mind. It was created to support a group of students who were not always engaged, by having them participate in community volunteer experiences, in which they would have the chance to experience a different kind of learning, while broadening the perception of themselves as learners. Using a qualitative research method with a narrative inquiry approach, my research describes the experiences of these students, and how working in and with the community, made a difference to their learning.

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Community Explorations: Middle School Learners Making a Difference

Chapter 1 Background**Introduction**

For the last three years I have entered a special world – the middle school world. It is a world where adolescents are experiencing important and unique developments in their physical, emotional and social being. For me personally, I see it as a dynamic, exhilarating, energetic and challenging world to be in for students and educators.

Middle schools educate learners at a critical stage of their physical, emotional and social development. This stage is often characterized as a time when adolescents are developing a stronger sense of self-awareness, a desire to belong to a peer group, and beginning to explore a world more independently. At times, some of these characteristics seem to push against each other. They want to be who they are, yet are motivated to fit in to a group. Independence is important, but there is a silent comfort in maintaining strong ties to family. At some point during their middle school years, they will undergo some of the most exciting times of their adolescent years, and some of the most challenging.

In my first year at Southgate Middle School, I was a grade 6/7 teacher and for the last two years its vice-principal. Being a vice-principal has given me the opportunity to see this world with a different lens. No longer are my interactions limited to one class. My day is a mosaic of daily connections, conversations, visioning and problem solving with all staff, parents, and students.

However, quickly I learned that the perception was the vice-principal also played a vital role in “disciplining” students. As students were “sent to the office” for various issues that took

place during class time and out, some patterns began to emerge for me. Over time, there was a group of students who were consistently sent my way. Spending time sorting through their behaviors over quiet conversations allowed me the privilege to dig a little deeper. Quite often, I began to realize that what was on the outside a “discipline” problem, was at the root a social and/or emotional problem. Being consistently late for class, chronic absenteeism, acting out in anger or sadness, showing apathy towards learning, seemed a result of how they felt about themselves and school, versus how they felt about others. So how does a vice-principal go from giving consequences, to changing attitudes and school experiences for certain students? I knew I could not do it alone. I was fearful that our middle school world had too many cracks, and some students were slipping through. I believed it would take a team approach, and some creativity to catch those students before they fell through those cracks.

I believe that in middle school, the social, emotional and intellectual domains are intertwined for learners. I would argue that at this stage, when a child feels a certain level of comfort, safety and competency socially and emotionally, there is a better chance for them to develop a stronger engagement to school, so their learning journey continues.

Schools do their best to be safe places for students, emotionally and socially. Teachers take the time to build strong connections with students, and find ways to support a safe classroom environment for everyone. Many develop vision statements that add accountability for safe and inclusive environments. One-on-one, peer, and adult relationships are nurtured. School dances and spirit days fill the calendar year. Parents and teachers provide opportunities for extra-curricular activities. Although there may be variations among schools, there are resources and specialists to provide targeted support for students who struggle academically, socially or emotionally.

School counselors, support workers, educational assistants, resource teachers, district support teams, are some examples of educators outside the classroom that offer a time to connect with students who struggle and need specific skills and strategies. Class reviews, school based team meetings, informal conversations, and parent/teacher interviews are some structures for reviewing and assessing a struggling learner's needs, then planning and suggesting ways to implement adaptations, modifications and allocate resources to support him/her.

At Southgate Middle School we have those people and structures in place. For many struggling students, without those resources, school would be even a more difficult place to be. Careful and thoughtful interventions can make a difference. I have noticed first-hand and indirectly, how students benefit from them.

Yet last year, I wondered if what we were offering was enough. There were still many students who seemed disengaged from the school community and learning, students who were at risk of "falling through the cracks". The signs were clear. Showing signs of disengagement such as a lack of connections to adults and peers, poor attendance and apathy towards school, and displaying a lack of self esteem, and/ or a level of emotional distress, our concern was that they would stop coming to school. What could we do for these learners? What other support could we provide, that would help them find ways to share their gifts and strengths, connect them to school, while building their social and emotional competence? Would these experiences provide a means for each one to learn more about themselves as learners? We felt a need to respond quickly and purposefully.

In collaboration with our school counselor, Aboriginal Support Worker, Youth Care Worker, principal, and one of our district's Instructional Support Teachers, a plan was put in place to create opportunities for the students to volunteer in the community for several reasons.

Each of us in some way had direct or indirect experience knowing the positive outcomes of building community connections. We agreed that experiential, hands-on learning provides a way of students sharing strengths, learning skills, and creating attitudes unique to their existing classroom experiences. Also, volunteering in the community can provide an authentic sense of purpose to learning. Our district's Instructional Support Teacher had extensive experience teaching disengaged students and developing partnerships with them and community programs and resources. Lastly, learners taking leadership in the community could be a positive example for our whole school, causing a ripple effect for the future. My assignment as vice-principal required an instructional piece. Every Friday, I taught a grade 6/7 class. Yet I was also directly involved in the team approach to piloting Community Explorations.

Six students (five in Grade 8 and one in Grade 7) were involved in what was named Community Explorations. This small but dedicated group volunteered in a kindergarten class, a long-term care facility, a homeless shelter, and for a brief period of time gardening at a women's transition house. It began in November and finished late May, and the volunteering happened one afternoon a week. For a couple of students, we created a part time schedule in which some classes were attended at Southgate, and the work was followed through at home. By the end of the year they showed more interest in learning, and their confidence was a stronger. Community Explorations was an important connection to school. Also importantly, they gained a clearer picture of the community in which they lived, and made a difference. They did not fall through the cracks. They stayed in school to some degree, where we could work with them, and support them. It was successful, in different ways and to different degrees for each one of those six learners, and included the support of each family. What the students' and parents' reflections shared in common was the feeling that Community Explorations gave the students something to

look forward to and a meaningful reason to come to school and a meaningful way of discovering new strengths.

Justification and Purpose of the Study

Middle schools try to be responsive to the characteristics of adolescents and play an important role in nurturing their development. These characteristics are grouped into physical, cognitive-intellectual, moral, psychological and social-emotional domains (Scales & Leffert, 2004). It would be negligent to not consider these characteristics when building the foundations of a school's culture, learning experiences and support systems. As stated by Scales and Leffert:

Ultimately, healthy adolescent development is not only about ensuring that the developmental pathways adolescents take help them become self-sufficient adults who have positive and responsible family and social relationships, and who are good citizens. It is not just about becoming, it is also about being. Adults have the responsibility to create the conditions under which adolescents, while they are adolescents, can be healthy, productive, caring and happy. (p. 42)

Therefore, the way we intervene with and for middle school students who require support to engage more in school, should consider the characteristics of these students in their adolescent years.

Peter Scales and Nancy Leffert have sorted these developmental characteristics into forty assets that they assert are “the building blocks that all youth need to be healthy, caring, principled and productive” (2004, p. 30). These assets are grouped into “external” and “internal” factors. External assets are subdivided into the following key components: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal frameworks

use the following components: commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity.

Community Explorations is designed to support two developmental assets in particular. One of them is the sense of “empowerment” and the other is “positive identity” (Scales & Leffert 2004). Empowerment is about adolescents feeling safe and valued. They can feel valued by being given meaningful roles in the community and providing a service. Positive Identify refers to how adolescents see themselves. As Scales and Leffert state, “ Without a positive sense of who they are, youth may feel powerless, without a sense of initiative and direction” (p.32).

Our own B.C. Education Plan acknowledges that:

Another major change stems from our deeper understanding of how children and adolescents actually learn. There is a large and growing body of scientific research on learning and brain development that challenges us to re-think many of our assumptions and routines ” (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 3).

Also, our district, School District 72, supports the idea of community partnerships as an opportunity for student engagement and success. One of the objectives in its Strategic Plan 2014-2018 is to, “ Draw upon the strengths and skills within our community to open multiple pathways and develop a variety of skills within our students” and “ Build upon environmental efforts through continued work with community partnerships” (Campbell River School District, 2014, p. 11).

Past experience, a growing understanding of middle school adolescent developmental characteristics, and the acknowledgement of the value of community partnerships by our province and school district, embrace the rationale and spirit of Community Explorations. It is my goal as an educator to thoughtfully consider the developmental stage of adolescents in middle

school, and find ways that will support their engagement to school, give them a better sense of empowerment and encourage a more positive self-identity as to how they view themselves as learner.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of my research was to observe if participating in community service partnerships would support students who showed signs of disengagement by giving them the opportunity to learn more about themselves as learners, and in a meaningful and positive way, help develop their sense of empowerment and positive self-identity. This led to the essential questions of my research: *What are the experiences of middle school students who exhibit some degree of disengagement from school, as they participate in community volunteer activities? Will their experiences in the community broaden their conception of learning and their capabilities as learners?* I provided a variety of opportunities for Community Explorations students to work in the community on a regular basis. Through informal conversations and interviews, personal journals and my field notes, I gained insight into how these experiences impacted each of them. I looked forward to collaborating with them, and providing opportunities to hear their voices and thoughts as we embarked on this journey together.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Introduction

My research focus is on observing the experience of a select group of middle school students who exhibit signs of disengagement from school, and will explore if their participation in Community Explorations will broaden their conception of learning and their capabilities as learners, thus opening a path for them to be more engaged. Community Explorations is an indirect approach to service-learning, and reflects and supports the idea that participating in community partnerships is one means of connecting learning to the characteristics of adolescent development. I could not find literature or research that measured indirect service learning as an interventionist support model for disengaged adolescent learners in middle schools. Therefore, to consider this model, one needs to ask:

- 1) What are the developmental characteristics of adolescents in middle school and how does that guide our planning for their learning experiences through support interventions?
- 2) If we are describing students as disengaged, what does that look like? What is the opposite of engagement?
- 3) How does indirect service learning contribute to more engaged learning?

The following review hopes to address these questions as way of connecting the research to my essential research question: *What are the experiences of middle school students who exhibit some degree of disengagement from school, as they participate in community volunteer activities? Will their experiences in the community broaden their conception of learning and their capabilities as learners?*

Adolescent Development

Middle schools are purposefully organized to respond to the social, emotional and intellectual needs of adolescent learners. The culture of middle schools should strive to create experiences that work “with” the unique characteristics of an adolescent learner, instead of providing experiences in which the learners works “in” a set system. The implications are important when it comes to making decisions that will help each adolescent experience success, not only in their middle school years, but high school as well. It is not only about designing learning experiences, but designing experiences in which learning integrates academics, physical and mental health, and social and emotional self-regulation.

The Association for Middle Level Education, based in the United States, wrote a position paper titled *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* describing a vision for successful middle schools (National Middle School Association 2010). The paper outlines the characteristics of young adolescents which influences the goals of middle school, the essential attributes and characteristics of middle school, and how that should be reflected in curriculum, instruction and assessment. It also describes the leadership, organization, culture and community characteristics. The position is that:

During these transitional years, students change significantly – physically, intellectually, morally, psychologically, and social-emotionally. The academic growth and personal development experienced during these important years significantly impact their futures. In the middle grades, the stage will be set for success in high school and beyond, or for disengagement and the likelihood of becoming a high school drop out (National Middle School Association 2010, p. 1).

The work of Peter Scales and Nancy Leffert on the characteristics of adolescents was a vital influence for this publication. It was essential research behind the *This We Believe* publication, and in fact Dr. Scales authored the last chapter on “Characteristics of Young Adolescents”. Their findings serve as a compass for any organization that needs direction for supporting adolescents in a thriving middle school environment (2004).

Peter C. Scales and Nancy Leffert (2004) summarized and described the adolescent characteristics that are the foundation from which middle school educators could build a thriving school community, and defined them as “developmental assets”. As they describe them, “Developmental assets are the building blocks that all youth need to be healthy, caring, principled, and productive” (p.30). Their work, consisted of the analyses of surveys completed by more than 217, 000 American students in more than 300 communities during the 1999-2000 school year. Of the total, 47 % were in grades six to eight, while 53 % were in grades nine to twelve. Geographically, 58 % lived in small to medium size towns and cities, and 26 % came from major metropolitan areas. These grade six to twelve students were given a 156 item survey about attributes and behaviors of adolescents.

Through the analysis of these surveys, Scales and Leffert created their assertions about the developmental assets of adolescents. The assets are organized into two main categories: external assets and internal assets. External assets are supported by outside resources such as the community, school and family, and are listed as Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations and Constructive Use of Time. Internal assets are developed from within and are listed as Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies and Positive Identity.

In my point of view, the assets are interconnected. I believe the internal assets can be nurtured by outside resources such as community, school and family. In a sense, each of these

“building blocks” can be the foundation for another, partnering in a symbiotic type relationship. Of particular interest to me is the relationship between the goals behind the external asset of Empowerment and the goals of Positive Identity, an internal asset.

Empowerment is creating opportunities for youth to contribute to society in authentic and meaningful ways, and for the community to develop a more appreciative lens of youth (Scales & Leffert, 2004). It creates a mutual vision of respect and appreciation between youth and community, giving youth specific service roles with a serious commitment to time and purpose. A partnership between youth and community could give youth a sense of empowerment, acknowledging their experiences as making a difference.

Positive Identity focuses on a young person’s view of him or herself in terms of self-worth and purpose. Without this, there is a risk that youth will feel powerless “without a sense of initiative and direction” (p.4). A person with a positive identity has a healthy view of self worth, purpose, direction, self-esteem and an optimistic view of the future and the possibilities it could provide.

When combined, therefore, having the opportunity to feel empowered, could influence a youth’s positive identity. An opportunity to provide service in the community in a meaningful, authentic and sustainable manner, could contribute to shaping one’s identity in a more positive way. Therefore, the empowerment could be a building block for positive identity. Participating in community partnerships may broaden and strengthen an adolescent’s conception of him or herself as a learner and perhaps influence their engagement to school and learning.

Although all of the developmental assets that are attributed to an adolescent’s success in school are important, as I work with a group of disengaged learners exploring service learning in the community, the relationship between these two assets is the most important.

Engagement

At this point it is important to explore the attributes of an “engaged” learner. As educators, it can be challenging to hold complete objectivity when assessing the attributes of an engaged learner, as we may be influenced by our own experiences, cultural backgrounds and personal values when assessing an engaged learner. Having said that, in the following section I will share some of the research that helps develop a common understanding, and also show how the definition of engagement is evolving.

The term “engagement” has been widely used to describe not only how we want our learners to behave, but also as a goal unto itself. It is not about learners being engaged to reach success, but to realize that engagement *is* success. It has forced educators to reflect deeply on classroom and school experiences that will transfer to positive life experiences. The literature I reviewed discussed how the concept and measures of student engagement are broadening.

The concept of engagement seems to have widened from simply describing what learners are *doing* in school to include how they are *feeling* and *being*. Attendance, homework completion and compliance with tasks are some indicators of student engagement, but in some of the literature, researchers are also noting the importance of indicators such as connection to peers and adults, social interactions, self-regulation and self-esteem.

In their concept paper *What Did You do in School Today? Exploring the Concept of Student Engagement and its Implications for Teaching and Learning in Canada*, Dunleavy and Milton reviewed the national initiative put forward by the Canadian Education Association in 2007 (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009) and use it to describe the different types of engagement, drawing attention to ways that a multidimensional understanding of engagement could lead to more equity when seeking student success. The purpose of the research project titled *What did*

you do in school today? was to collect information from adolescents in the form of an on-line survey, that would serve to inform and transform our classrooms and schools in ways that would engage more students in their learning. Throughout eighteen school districts in Canada, 63,000 students from grades four to twelve completed the on-line survey.

Dunleavy and Milton explain how empirical studies over the last twenty years focus on academic and social engagement. Academic engagement involves a learner acquiring the knowledge, skills and attitude to fulfill academic performance. The measurement for this is time on task behavior, attending, participating, and homework and assignment completion. Social engagement is defined as a student's connection to school, the feeling of having a sense of belonging, and healthy relationships with peers and adults. However, Dunleavy and Milton argue that even when all of these measures are met, students still expressed feelings of boredom and a disinterest in learning. They agree with the CEA's assertion that:

Intellectual engagement is a vital component of students feeling a more vested interest in their learning. The *What did you do in school today?* initiative proposes that adding the more recent focus on intellectual engagement (serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning) to the social and academic dimensions of student engagement provides a more complete foundation for understanding the concept (p.11).

In the summary of the First National Report on the CEA's initiative, Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009) succinctly describe intellectual engagement as a thinking behavior that features "a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge" (p.7).

Finn and Zimmer, in the literature review titled *Student Engagement: What Is It? Why Does it Matter?* (2012) give an overview of how the concept and considerations for student engagement have changed over time since the 1980s and synthesize the ideas of many empirical studies. They argue that while even the most current studies differ in the number of engagement models, there are four consistent themes. “Although different terminology makes comparison difficult, four dimensions appear repeatedly” (p.102). These dimensions are academic, social, cognitive and affective engagement. Academic engagement “refers to behaviors related directly to the learning process” (p. 102) and includes indicators such as task and homework completion, and paying attention in class. Social engagement “refers to the extent to which a student follows written and unwritten classroom rules of behavior” (p.102) and includes measures such as coming to school and class on time, appropriate interactions with peers and adults, and being cooperative with adults and peers. Cognitive engagement “is the expenditure of thoughtful energy needed to comprehend complex ideas in order to go beyond minimal requirements” (p. 102). Some examples of cognitive engagement are asking clarifying questions, persisting with challenging tasks, using self-regulation to guide learning, and a tendency to be driven to learn more than what is required. The way students feel about school and themselves in school, is termed affective engagement. “Affectively engaged students feel included in the school community and that school is a significant part of their own lives (belonging), and that school provides for out-of-school accomplishments (valuing)” (p.103).

Even though the characteristics of engagement may be categorized slightly differently, there seems to be an understanding about the “doing” of school versus the “being” and “feeling” about school and oneself in school. Although the information can be categorized, I would argue that the different ways students could engage in school can not be separated as they have the

potential to interact and influence one another. Engagement is multi-faceted. All students benefit and have more of a chance for a successful school experience when they are engaged in many ways. In a review of the current literature on engagement Parsons and Taylor (2011) note “ Perhaps the most interesting is the growing shift from utilizing student engagement as a means for improving student achievement and attendance to utilizing student engagement as a means to improve the learners’ capabilities to learn” (p.9).

With all the ways students can demonstrate engagement, it follows that there are various ways that students can demonstrate disengagement as well. As with the habits and attributes of engagement, the habits and attributes of disengagement could also possibly interconnect and influence one another. Consider the following summary by Finn and Zimmer (2102), “Disengaged students are those who do not participate actively in class and school activities, do not become cognitively involved in learning, do not fully develop or maintain a sense of school belonging, and/or exhibit inappropriate or counterproductive behavior” (p. 99).

So where is the starting point with disengaged students, especially those with chronic attitudes and behaviors that could put them at risk at reaching their full potential? That depends on a careful look at each student individually, which is only complicated by the fact that each student’s attitude and behavior is probably also influenced by past school experiences, and personal and family relationships and situations at home. However, I would agree that finding a responsive and supportive approach to how they are “feeling” about school and are “being” in school, concentrating on experiences that empower them and improve their positive identity by building a better connection and sense of belonging for middle school adolescent learners is key.

As I consider the importance of students feeling engaged on a social and emotional level, and supporting the developmental assets of feeling empowered and owning a positive self

identity, finding learning models in middle school that provide for growth in these areas is essential. Service-learning is one such model.

Service-Learning

Service-learning is an experiential approach to learning that relies on a partnership between learners and their community, which can be local or global in nature. The community becomes the resource for learning, and also benefits from the learners' learning experience. Therefore, an essential element to service learning is that there is a mutual benefit, a positive reliance between students and the community (Furco 2010, Deeley 2010). Another essential criteria for service-learning is that the experience is in some way tied directly to curriculum. As Andrew Furco explains, " At its most basic level, academic service-learning is an experiential learning pedagogy in which education is delivered by engaging students in community service that is integrated with the learning objectives of core academic curricula" (2010, p. 228). It is a way of combining volunteer service with academic work, allowing students to make connections between what they are doing in the community with what they are learning at school (Deeley 2010). The lines are blurred between their experiences outside of the classroom and within the classroom because one depends on the other. Students are involved in authentic, real-time learning, which in turn, provides real-time growth.

Service-learning can be organized around a community- based project, volunteering within an organization, or it can support global initiatives. The service can be direct, for example working with elders in a long-term extended facility, or indirect, such as creating posters for advertising the Pioneer Olympics. Apart from the criteria of being tied to curriculum and having mutual benefits, service- learning experiences are as diverse as the learners, the community and

the community members involved. Therefore the purpose and the outcomes for students participating in service learning are diverse as well.

Furco (2010) completed a review of 67 American service learning studies describing the impact on primary and secondary students spanning from 1987 to 2007. Of those reviewed, the initial studies tried to measure the impact of service learning on academic achievement. Even among these studies however, were findings of other positive achievements that supported academic improvement, but were also influential on their own. These achievements were in areas such as better motivation for learning, improved attendance, fewer discipline problems in the classroom and an overall stronger engagement and interest in school. Other studies explicitly focused on non-academic indicators, such as the extent to which service learning improves leadership capacity, a stronger sense of respect towards self and others, self-esteem, and a sense of caring and altruism.

The research literature that is available implies that the outcomes for service-learning are positive. According to Furco (2010), academic improvement, developing a positive attitude towards others, an increase in self-confidence, creating a deeper sense of belonging to school and the community, and a rise in social and personal responsibility are consistent themes from some of the most current research.

Given some of the characteristics of adolescent development, service learning can have a profound affect on adolescent learners, as it provides a way of learning that matches some of their developmental characteristics. Scales et. al (2005) provide important reasons for this; at a time when for many adolescents middle school can be a challenge because of their critical views around learning and their personal competencies, with service learning, learners are given “meaningful roles that help build in them a sense of being valuable, competent and connected to

others” (p.333). Therefore, they assert, “to the extent that service-learning might fit well with the developmental need of young adolescents, it might be a potential means of maintaining or enhancing students’ engagement and confidence” (p.333). Another important consideration is the extent to which service-learning may support a particular group of learners in that:

Previous research has reported that both high-achieving and under-achieving students, but especially vulnerable and underachieving students, benefit from restructured, more authentic curricula that, among other goals, attempt to connect students’ school experience more with the real world, a key attribute of service-learning programs. (p. 334)

The intent of this research project is to explore whether or not community partnerships open a path of discovery for a group of adolescent middle school learners, about learning, and about themselves as learners. It will confirm in some way and to some extent, if and how the connections to indirect service learning, engagement, and the developmental assets of empowerment and positive identity work together to improve their learning experiences, and serves as a way of opening up their perceptions of themselves as learners. The connection of the research behind my literature review has provided a deeper understanding of what needs to be explored and described in my data analysis. By developing a more thorough understanding of the needs and assets of adolescent development, investigating the role and attributes of service learning, and exploring the multiple layers of engagement, I believe that Community Explorations can support some of the key ideas by creating meaningful learning experiences that provide adolescent learners with a sense of purpose and self-worth.

Chapter 3 Research Method and Methodology

Introduction

Community Explorations is an opportunity to connect disengaged students with the community as part of their school experience. My research observed the impact these experiences had on each student's engagement to school. I collected data that demonstrated to what affect, if any, involvement in community partnerships enhanced each student's perception of themselves as learners. The community partnerships were a long-term care residence, a kindergarten class, and a nature stewardship society.

In order to get a sense of complex ideas such as "experience", "impact", "affect" and "perceptions" I used qualitative research and narrative methodology as I believe each supports a vital component for my research – the students' voices.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research requires the researcher to use tools of a more personal nature, such as journals, photos, interviews, anecdotal observations, that allow for personal viewpoints to be shared within a particular social context over time. In fact, research participants are "insiders" that lend an important perspective to the research. When the researcher has an "insider" perspective, the answer to a probing, inquiry based research question can be constructed collaboratively with the researcher and the participants. As Lapan, Quartaroli, MaryLynn and Riemer (2011) explain, "Whereas quantitative researchers seek to find what works best or which variables best explain a particular result, qualitative investigators strive to thoroughly explore day-to-day interactions, how things transpire, and the individual meanings of these events for the people involved" (p. 8). Using a qualitative research approach provided my students the tools to become insiders and created a venue in which their voices were heard.

As my students and I explored the experiences of participating in three community projects the sources of data were my field notes, the students' journals and interviews.

Narrative Methodology

Field notes, journals, and interviews were the qualitative tools used to collect the voices of my students on their community volunteer experiences. These tools helped me weave a narrative of how those experiences may have influenced their connection to school, to learning, and to their understanding of themselves as learners. The narrative approach was the partner that brought the qualitative research to life. As Connelly and Clandinin describe, "Because of its focus on experience and the qualities of life and education, narrative is situated in a matrix of qualitative research" (1990, p.3). Narrative methodology validates the spirit of the "personal" through journals, field notes and interviews. They go on to explain:

The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are story telling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. The study of narrative, therefore, is the study of ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories. (1990, p.2)

There are cautions to be addressed in using this approach. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) highlight two in particular. The researcher as writer and in some cases an active-participant, privileged-active or passive observer (Mills 2014), needs to be cognizant of not falling into a false truth that veils what is really happening. As Connelly and Clandinin warn, "Not only may one "fake the data" and write a fiction but one may also use the data to tell a

deception as easily as a truth” (p.10). Another caution is that of “the Hollywood plot, the plot where everything works out well in the end” (p. 10).

Therefore, for my project the narrative approach is a framework that will attempt to craft the data with accuracy and truth in a meaningful way. In order to do this I selected quotes from student journals and interviews without any editing. My field notes communicated some of my own thoughts, descriptions and questions during these experiences which I included when I felt they could lend some context, or a different context from a researcher/participant’s point of view. Because I was directly involved in the community partnerships, my story as a participant and observer could lend some context. It would reflect my voice, and in no way change or influence the voices of the students.

Research Instruments and Procedures: Journals, Interviews and Field Notes

Community Explorations required my participation as a teacher and researcher. That is why I will explain how personal journals, student interviews and my field notes were used at the end of the school year as tools for collecting research data, and I will also describe how the journals were used throughout the year, not as research data, but as means of providing ongoing assessment of the learning experiences of the students, so I could respond to their needs appropriately and support them.

Journals

After most volunteer experiences, we would sit together as a group, and each student was given approximately ten to fifteen minutes to reflect in a personal journal. There were guiding questions along the way that students could refer to, with the understanding that anything they had to contribute was valuable. There was no particular order, and they were free to reflect on one, some, all, or none in the form of words and or pictures. These questions were: 1) *How did*

you make a difference today? 2) What learning happened for you today? 3) What was your experience like today? 4) How is it going for you? and 5) What are you looking forward to? In retrospect, these questions were important so that students could reflect a little deeper, without falling into the trap of simply logging a list of everything they did that day. To include all students in the process regardless of their writing ability, they had the choice of writing, using webs, or drawing pictures.

In my teacher role, their reflections allowed me to make adaptations to the program for an individual or the group. For example, when I discovered that one student was particularly excited about working with younger children, I was able to offer her more time in the kindergarten classroom as a buddy reader. Another student wasn't quite comfortable assisting seniors in wheelchairs, so that student was not responsible for transporting the seniors from their rooms to the activity room and back. The on-going feedback I received was important to shape and adapt experiences.

In my researcher role, at the end of the school year, the journal reflections became a source of data for my research in which I could analyze the experiences more closely. I intentionally crafted journal questions that would not only provide input on how to possibly improve the volunteer experiences throughout the school year, but also provide insight into their self-assessment of the experiences and their learning at the end of the year. The journals, as data, allowed me to analyze whether their participation broadened their conception of learning and their capabilities as learners, which is at the heart of my research study. For the purpose of my research, I only used the journals for which I had permission from the participants and their parents/guardians. Therefore, I used journal data from six students.

Student Interviews

At the end of the school year, I sat with each student and conducted an interview for the purpose of my research. As formal as that sounds, I created a comfortable atmosphere in which a conversation could take place. The word interview has sense of decorum and procedure, but in fact, it was the starting place for an authentic conversation. It was essential to allow them another opportunity to share their learning, in a way most students appreciate, and that is through conversation.

The interviews were a summative assessment of their experiences and the program in general. These questions were: *1) What did you like about Community Explorations? 2) Can you tell me about a favourite time or moment or experience? Tell me a little story about it 3) What was hard about it? Tell me a story about that 4) If I had to make it better next year, what should I do? 5) What are some things you have learned? It can be anything. It can be something about other people, yourself or places we've been to 6) How did Community Explorations impact how you feel about school, and 7) Would you like to do this again next year if you could?*

As a teacher I used read the journals throughout the course of the year as formative assessment and on-going feedback. The interviews, more of a summative assessment, also provided important feedback in which I can use to prepare for next year's Community Explorations program. The data from that collection was analyzed for my study: *What are the experiences of middle school students who exhibit some degree of disengagement from school, as they participate in community volunteer activities? Will the experiences in Community Explorations broaden their conception of learning and their capabilities as learners?*

Although I had permission to interview and audio record the interviews from the same six students from which I used journal data, one student was away. Therefore a total of five student interviews took place.

Field Notes

As a researcher it was important for me to use field notes. My field notes were a varied collection of observations and “wonder” questions, that surfaced and were recorded during our work in the community, and/or afterwards back at school, at the same time students were reflecting in their own journals. At times my observations were factual, while at other times I recorded my perceptions and interpretations about the students and their accomplishments and/or frustrations. My field notes were only used to lend another perspective to my research.

Analyzing the Data

Both journal and interview questions guided students to reflect on their experiences, their learning, and themselves as learners. They also provided insight into the role that empowerment and self-identity played which will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Before describing how I analyzed the data, I would like to share an important element of the questions which influenced how I coded the data. The following chart is a summary of how the journal and interview questions related to the three aspects of my research. It is displayed in this way to show that even though some questions were aimed to help students identify a particular aspect, others were intended to be more open ended, to possibly address more than one aspect, especially in the areas labeled The Learning and The Learners.

The Experience	
Journals	Interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How did you make a difference today? ➤ What was your experience like today? ➤ How is it going for you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What did you like about Community Explorations? ➤ Can you tell me about a favourite time, moment or experience? Tell me a story about that. ➤ What was hard about it?
The Learning	
Journals	Interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What learning happened for you today? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are some things you have learned? It can be anything. It can be something about other people, yourself, or the places we've been to. ➤ How did Community Explorations impact how you feel about school?
The Learners	
Journals	Interview
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What learning happened for you today? ➤ How is it going for you? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What are some things you have learned? It can be anything. It can be something about other people, yourself, or the places we've been to.

Let's use the maintenance of a walking trail as an example of how a student can learn something her/himself as a learner, while learning new knowledge and skills through a different style of learning. A student will need to learn which plant species are invasive and need to be

dug out, and which species are native to our environment and should be left to thrive. In the process that student will learn what role native plant species play, and how the plants interconnect with the survival of animals. That learning will take place in the walking trail, and that student will physically need to do the work. In the process, he/she might learn that they have an interest in working outdoors, and an appreciation for the physical working in nature that is personally invigorating and stimulating. Therefore, the question *What learning happened for you today?* could reflect on a new skill or piece of knowledge that was learned (e.g. invasive versus native plant species) or, reflect a new discovery about one's self as a learner (e.g. an interest for working in nature and an aptitude for hands-on learning).

As a result, because of the open-ended nature of some questions, and the ability of some questions to provide data for multiple aspects of my research, it was vital that each journal entry and transcription be read with a different lens, very carefully, many times. One lens identifying data that described the experiences with our community partners in some way, another lens identifying data that pertained to the learning process, and the lens that captured data suggesting their perceptions of themselves as learners. It was essential to uncover all the data in this way, and not to assume that one particular journal entry or one particular interview question would target a specific area of my research question. The following procedure was used to organize and code the data from the original journals and transcribed interviews.

- 1) Categorized the data from the journals and transcripts under the headings
Experience, Learning and Learners in a word document
- 2) For each category, read through each journal multiple times transcribing ideas, opinions and descriptions that fit under each category. Each piece of data was also coded to signify the student (the initial of the pseudonym)

- 3) With the completed transcripts from each interview, I first collated the answers for each question, from each student, using a word document format. Each answer was transcribed word for word. Each piece of data was also coded to signify the student (the initial of the pseudonym)
- 4) Having all the answers collated, I then colour coded the answers, once again using three different lenses. First I read all the compiled answers multiple times looking for evidence that described the community experiences, then repeated the step with the other two categories. The highlighted answers were sorted word for word onto the word document that was used for the journal entry data
- 5) I read through my field notes to identify any of my own descriptions, opinions or reflections. These were colour coded, and initialed to make them distinguishable from those of the students'

As I was coding and organizing the data, I paid attention to general themes or patterns that were common within and/or among the categories. I also was careful to take notes of any relevant data that was important to my research, but did not necessarily reflect the three categories. This will be shared in the following chapter.

Participants in the Research

Each participant attended Southgate Middle School. Ten students began Community Explorations in October, with two more joining the group in January. Of the ten, seven were in grade eight, three females and four males. The other three were in grade seven, two male and one female. The two students who started later were in grade seven and male. Three were also a part of our Skills for Life Program. By January of the new school year, two students had dropped out of Southgate to attend an alternate program. One of the students continued to join us Friday mornings for Community Explorations, while the other did so, but only up until March.

I did not want there to be a defined entry and exit point to Community Explorations. Signs of disengagement can show themselves at any time in the school year, therefore, the program was designed to be flexible and include students when needed. At the same time, there may be reasons for a student not to continue. For example, one student began to settle into school much better, and although she enjoyed the volunteer experiences, being in the classroom as much as possible with her new friends was more important for her. While two students continued with us even though they enrolled in our district's alternate school part way through the year, one stopped coming to Community Explorations by Spring Break as she needed to attend family counseling sessions on Fridays. Because of the responsive nature of Community Explorations, the number of participants could increase or decrease at any time.

Our Community Partners

I would like to introduce our community partners. Sharing the setting and some of the characters will give more dimension to the experiences and the learning that unfolded. I had to balance the need to provide a variety of experiences, with the opportunity to get involved with community partnerships that were sustainable, so that the students could sense what long term commitment was about. Being in a partnership means being in a relationship. I hoped my students would develop a "relationship" with parts of our community.

For the first part of the year we spent eleven mornings at a long-term-care facility, working with the elderly. The volunteer coordinator came to our school, to explain what the expectations of our roles would be. From then on, our visits occurred Friday mornings on Games Day, which meant students were responsible for setting up, participating in, and cleaning up a variety of indoor games. The games included bingo, bocce, bowling and hockey. The interactive games allowed for the students to be leaders and participants. One of the best lessons

for the students was challenging their idea of how hockey and bowling are usually played. They learned how adapting a tried and true game could be done so that almost any age or physical ability can participate. You could see the wheels turning! The students began to share many suggestions on how to adapt and modify other games. I distinctly remember being part of a conversation in the cafeteria one day, in which two of the grade eight students were convincing me they could adapt a game of cricket. On the spot they started challenging each other's ideas with "What about the ones in wheel chairs? How could we get them to a park? Maybe there's room in the garden?" Unfortunately, our time with this partnership came to an end before we could try out their ideas.

Besides the games, they were there to support the residents, and help in any way they could. That could mean helping them lift a piece of equipment, taking them back to their room, or making sure they got all the numbers covered on the Bingo card. And they were always cheer leaders! At the beginning, they needed many instructions to become familiar with the routines and expectations, and some encouragement as you could sense that for some students, they were worried that they would do something wrong. It took one student three visits before feeling confident enough to collect residents in wheel chairs from their rooms, assured he would remember to put the brakes on. As time went on it was rewarding to see how each student gained confidence in the role he/she played. In fact, at times it seemed other than being around for those "just in case" situations, the students took ownership of their responsibilities and the adult volunteer workers and myself looked on with confidence and pride.

I would like to add the contribution that made me smile the most. Quite quickly, students learned the greatest contribution was walking into the activity room and greeting as many residents as they could by their first names. It was important to the students. So important in

fact, it turned into a little contest to see who could remember the most names. I remember one morning in particular, as we assembled back at school and met in a classroom to start our journals, I fell behind a little while I took a call at the office. When I got to the classroom, without prompting, the students were having team competitions at the whiteboard challenging each other as to who could write down the most names. For me, this was a sign of how at times Community “Relationships” would describe the program better.

We settled into our next experience in January, working with one of our feeder school’s kindergarten class. There was a lot of excitement building up around this partnership, and quite a bit of responsibility as well. I think part of the excitement for some of the students was the chance to go back to their elementary schools as a leader, perhaps a role some of them were not ready for in their intermediate grades.

The kindergarten teacher came to visit us ahead of time and explained the role the students would have; modeling good behavior, showing patience, leading numeracy and literacy activities, and trying to differentiate the activity if needed. This was not just going to be about sharing recess time. During our nine visits, each student guided a group of three to four kindergarten children in math and alphabet games. To begin, we would all sit together in a community circle, and the kindergarten teacher would ask a question each of us would answer. Then we would all watch carefully as she explained the numeracy or literacy game. And yes, before heading back to our school, there was an opportunity to play with the kids and remember what it was like to be in kindergarten.

The experience with the kindergarten class was eye opening for my students. In fact, while walking back from our first visit, a couple of my students seemed to have eyes that were glazed over. They were somewhat at a loss as to how a group of three kindergarten students

could seem like ten. When we got back, I shared some insight into how to best redirect a kindergarten student that was unfocused. However, I knew that a little pre-loading would make difference. So the kindergarten teacher was invited back, and gave some tips on how to refocus students if they needed to.

Once again, the advantage of making multiple visits to the class was extremely beneficial, and soon the comfort level for everyone increased. Ideas for other numeracy and literacy games were being offered. Even the idea of making play-doh and cookies to bring as gifts was a goal. Once again, relationships started to build.

Our last experience was with Greenways Land Trust, a conservation organization committed to restoring and protecting our community's ecological habitats. We collaborated on projects together starting in November but devoted most of our time in the spring with approximately eleven visits. With the expertise and guidance of three of its volunteer members, our responsibilities included eliminating invasive species at the Willow Creek trails, and participating in a restoration project of the Willow Creek Millennium Park, along with two other classes from our school. The restoration project included not only extracting the invasive plant species but planting native ones as well. Students weren't simply cutting and digging holes, however. The Greenways volunteers had a wealth of knowledge to share with the students. Their passion for taking care of our environment meant that they took the time to explain why we were doing the things we were doing, and willing to answer the students' questions. Greenways Land Trust was committed to the students' learning, so that they in turn could teach others.

Chapter 4 The Findings

Introduction

A group of students can be doing the same activity, at the same place, at the same time, and each take away a personal, unique learning experience. I wanted to honour each student's voice through their journals and in their conversations during the interviews. Guided by my research inquiry, my commitment was paying attention to the quality of the experiences as each worked in the community, the type of learning he/she discovered, and the perceptions of him/herself as a learner. However, as I read over the data, it struck me that those individual voices also sounded like a chorus. Clearly, there were common themes that bound those voices together. I've represented the data around the common themes within the three areas of my inquiry, which will be brought to life in more detail as we hear from each of the participants. When quoting their reflections directly in the next section, I made no distinctions as to if they were a part of their journals or the interviews.

Appreciation for Authentic Learning, Making a Difference, Learning About Others and Oneself and Learning More About Our Natural Surroundings were four prominent themes.

An Appreciation for Authentic Learning

I wanted to uncover the attitude, energy, and value around the learning these community partnerships offered.. More precisely, I was curious to know if these community partnerships were a good fit for these students, if they felt there was a purpose in heading out into the community every Friday morning, and whether these experiences were enjoyable. I hoped that being able to identify a sense of purpose while doing something relevant for the community and having fun doing it, would lay the foundation for a richer learning experience.

Each community partnership had a different quality to it. What each had in common was the chance to embark outside of the classroom to explore parts of our community and give something back to it. That is probably why there was an appreciation for the chance to be “out of the class” and breaking the routine. Most students I have taught over my career, from grade three to nine, have been filled with excitement each time we left school to engage in learning, so I was not surprised that there would be a celebratory feel to leaving the school grounds to work in the community. What I did not expect along with the appreciation of being out of class, were observations on the nature of the learning, the authenticity of it all, inherent when learning is in real time with real people. There was a sense that they were embedded “in” learning. In a way, it could be labeled “learning immersion”. It became clear to me through their observations that the “type” of learning was so integral to the value of their experiences. They did not hold back making comparisons to learning that happens outside versus in the classroom.

***Stacey:** Well I guess like you're learning in it, so it kind of helps me learn. And you're getting out of the class so you're not in the class all the time. It kind of gets you out and you learn more.*

***Lisa:** It got me out the class a bit more and I learned more outside of the class than in class. I learned more about the community, things to do, and things around.*

***Trenton:** I'm learning more than I'm learning in class. For example I learn more outside than learning inside.*

***Lance:** It was nice just getting out of the classroom and helping and doing stuff like that.*

***Nick:** Well first of all there is learning in class, which has no experience outside unless you are doing something outside. But then there is learning outside where you are learning from almost... like the masters who are outside like Chuck. He knows a lot about what's outside. It's easier for us to learn when Chuck does it 'cause he knows all of it. And it's a better learning experience when you're learning about things that are not in class. And we're not just sitting down all the time.*

Tom: I am enjoying learning this way and being out of the classes. They are boring. It makes learning in a different way a lot better than being in classes. Being in this program is going well. I like this way of learning.

Apart from being authentic, the learning was also “fun”, which is not to be taken lightly. The reality is, these are adolescent teen-agers. Yes, they were mature enough to take their responsibilities in the community seriously, however I wanted them to also have fun in the process. Finding them at the door to my office every Friday morning before the bell even rang, then feeling the energy as we walked to the portable together to start prepping for our volunteer work, was evidence that for the most part things were going well. Still, I had to smile at how many times while analyzing the data I read the word “fun” or “enjoy”. Of course, some experiences resonated with the students more than others, which is why providing some diversity is important. I needed to find community partnerships that would be a good fit for these students. I know at times there were challenges, which will be shared later on in the chapter, yet, in general each student was able to identify a joyful experience.

Stacey: It was really fun today. I met and learned some people's names and some more people. They were really nice. We played Bingo which was cool. I got to spin the bingo wheel. I can't wait to go again.

Stacey: Today I worked with three little kids. I had so much fun. I love to work with little kids. They are my favourite. They're always so happy. I love going there. And yes, half the time they are trying to tear me apart and keep me there but it's so much fun either if we're outside playing or learning and doing math in class. It's always fun. I wish I could go there every day.

Trenton: I really enjoy being in this group. Thank you for making me join this group. I enjoy going places and meeting new people. Like how we went to Yucalta Lodge and we met all the seniors that lived there then we went to help at that place by the ocean. And we went to Penfield too.

Lance: I am enjoying it a lot. I didn't think I would like it this much but I've been almost every Friday.

Nick: I liked working with the kindergarteners because they are always ready and eager to learn new things with us and even though some are violently aggressive and dysfunctional they are always fun to work with and I hope they are learning lots.

Tom: I had lots of fun. Also I am happy to be out of French. And I feel happy working with younger students.

I wanted to highlight the theme of authentic learning first, because the “realness” they acknowledged, the excitement it bred in the students, and the joyful spirit it created, I believe, is what made it possible for them to discover more about themselves, and the difference it made to others.

Making a Difference

Making a difference either to the community as a whole, a group, or an individual was also a dominant theme. There was a collective awareness of helping others and the community, and along with that a sense of pride in their contributions. They witnessed and felt how their actions had purpose and meaning not just for themselves, but for others. I should explain that I did purposefully offer a guiding question in their journals that explicitly asked “ How did you make a difference today?” because as a member of Community Explorations I was clear from the beginning that although they would be gaining from these experiences, the community would benefit too. The question was directed to find out if and how each student would describe her/his contribution. There was no expectation that they would be able to articulate their individual contributions, yet their responses demonstrated that each student could target the difference that he/she made, whether it was describing a general interpretation, or a specific interaction.

Stacey: I felt like I made a difference by helping them learning the alphabet or learning to count money and learn their numbers.

Lisa: When I brought Mary to her room at the end she wanted some coffee and a biscuit and I sat with her for five minutes. She seemed really happy about that and it was kind and nice of her to let me do that. I could tell she was happy about that and I would like to do it again.

Trenton: At my first day in this group I learned that the people (the long-term care residents) like being called by their name. And they loved us being there. Today I met this new guy. He was a nice guy and I helped him a lot.

Trenton: What I learned is helping makes people feel happier than they think. Like it makes everybody happy.

Lance: I believe that I made a difference at Yucalta Lodge by maybe helping and encouraging somebody to come and get out of their room and have fun. Also I try to be myself. And by getting the kids (kindergarten students) excited to see us and helping out.

Nick: We are helping the community by doing some things like cutting down plants that are invading native species of plants, helping seniors or giving the kindergarten teacher a break.

Nick: People think Ms. Panziera is just taking kids out of class but we are learning to do things we don't do at school.

Tom: I made someone happy. It made a difference to me to help the younger children enjoy a game.

Tom: I realized that other people need help.

Making a contribution was the essence of Community Explorations. In my opinion a big reason each student thrived in some way in the program was because they felt and observed first-hand the result of selfless acts.

Learning Through Others and About Oneself

I wanted to get to the heart of this inquiry, which was if these experiences not only transform their idea about learning, but also is find out if volunteering in the community would affect their idea about learning, and in the process change how they might see themselves as learners. There were two specific questions to guide their thinking on this.

The first was an open-ended question they could refer to for their journal entries: *What learning happened for you today?* Providing an open-ended question invited a variety of individual responses. It was essential that there were no restrictions to the possibility of what is being learned, because for me, that is part of what personalized learning is about.

What I was pleasantly surprised at were a group of comments about learning that were more interpersonal, probably as a result of volunteer work that depended on building relationships with others and our environment. Without “them”, there was no learning for “us”, so to speak. This selection of reflections also infers that the students didn’t just learn about themselves, they learned about others. This theme is more difficult to explain, but there is a sense of that our partners and community benefited from our work and relationships with them.

Stacey: They (Yucalta Lodge Residents) tell us about themselves which is really cool. Cool stories too. Learning about elders and calling them elders instead of old people is better for them.

Stacey: By helping them (kindergarten students) learn the alphabet or learning to count money and learn their numbers. Maybe they are getting better now.

Lisa: The one place I think impacted me the most is Yucalta Lodge. I learned we should do things for people who don’t have the opportunity. There are lots of friendly people when we’re there. For sure they are happy to see us. And that old people are really fun, I mean the elders are really really fun.

Lisa: I also like Greenways Land Trust because I think that we need to give back to the earth and not take all the things it has.

Trenton: What I learned today is helping makes people feel happier than they think. Like it makes everybody happy/

Trenton: Helping people, talking to people, learning names helped them.

Trenton: Kindergarteners are harder to teach than I thought

Tom: I realized that other people need help.

The second question integral to learning was asked at the end of the year, during the interview: *What are some things you have learned? It can be anything. It can be learning about other people, yourself, or places we've been to.* Although the interview question did offer the possibility of students reflecting on themselves as learners, I included other options because I did not want to force an answer. I was curious to discover what kind of learning impacted them the most. Besides, the places and people were needed for the possibility of any kind of transformative learning about oneself to be realized. What is noteworthy about this group of reflections, is that even with the invitation to address the places and people with whom we partnered, most students reflected on themselves as learners in the process. One student found it difficult to answer, but he did allude to learning about himself in other sections, while another was not present for the interviews.

Stacey: Well I just kind of learned about myself that I am comfortable with some things and not comfortable with other things cause we went to the elderly, Yucalta Lodge the only thing I didn't like was going to get them cause I didn't feel comfortable with that, so I felt like I knew my what I don't want to do and what I do want to do.

Lisa: I think it is helping me with staying focused in school and making new friends. It is fun to help people. This group is helping me get closer to the community.

Lisa: So today I learned that I am not scared of talking to people in a group. Next time I want to learn more names.

Lisa: In my opinion I think it (Community Explorations) has me think more about making a good choice. And it has brought out a side of me I did not know, like I thought I would not get a B in English but I did cause I had to work hard to be able to go (to Community Explorations). I think it has made me take my time and think about what I am going to do in life and help me make that happen I hope.

Lisa: I'm a little more outgoing. I have more confidence in things like that. And before CE (Community Explorations) I thought I was trying my hardest at work but then during it I had to try a little harder to catch up to make sure that I could go on Fridays.

Nick: I cannot be like anybody else. I can be myself. I can inspire people to do things.

Trenton: If there is something I don't like to do I do it anyway cause Ms. P told me to. Sometimes I don't like what we have to do but we are there to do a job and we have to finish it. I'm not always like that.

Lance: It really helps when you are having a bad day. It definitely helped me. You know, getting out of class and just kind of forgetting about things and stuff.

Lance: I'm a lot more open than I thought I guess. Talking to people that I am usually not comfortable talking to, stuff like that.

Nick: At the beginning of the year, I'm not saying I am a A B C D student or whatever but like let's say like D or F was like a bad student, well not a bad student, but a child who didn't cooperate and an A student was like a child who, well is like me right now, like I haven't been to the office for trouble in awhile and CE helped because if I kept up my D student I would end up homeless or something and cause just being out of school instead of in school is different because.....out there you can see what happens in your future....and in school you can just see like through a window or something.....It's just helped me cooperate and slowly turn into an A student.

The beauty in these reflections, is that they are beginning to discover the strengths and areas of growth in themselves, and the possibilities that growth brings. They may not have specifically learned more about themselves as learners in the school or academic sense, but they learned more about “themselves”. In the adolescent world, a big part of the journey is finding out who you are and how you fit it. The detail and richness of their reflections inspires hope that community partnerships and relationships can be an important travelling partner in that journey.

Learning More About our Natural Surroundings

It is quite remarkable all the different kinds of learning that are possible by working in the community. Students reflected on the style learning, what they learned about themselves and others, and the ways they can make a difference. The following reflections add another

dimension to the possibility, learning specific knowledge. In this case, it was connected to their work with Greenways Land Trust. Also, there appears to have been a deeper understanding for some, that as humans, we have a big impact on our environment. This theme is significant, not in the amount of detail perhaps, but as a sign that finding a volunteer experience that builds a relationship to the environment is meaningful.

Stacey: People walking where they shouldn't causes erosion.

Stacey: Humans are the worst invasive species 'cause we go where we are not supposed to go.

Lindsey: I learned a lot about the invasives

Trenton: Today we went to Willow Creek Millennium Park and we met Chuck and Ray. We cut down broom and blackberry bushes with others and we helped make a trail and Chuck said to cut them into little bits so they can't grow again and that there are lots of habitats by the ocean.

Nick: I have lots of knowledge but I learned new things about the environment.

Nick: With Chuck I learned that most species like blackberry and broom, well first of all I didn't even know what broom was or that it was invasive. We planted trees and I didn't know we had to add that special fertilizer with probiotics or something at the roots.

Nick: We hiked on the trails and learned about the different trees like Cottonwood, Willow and Cedar. And stuff that people do that's not good for them (the trails). I'll look at the trail differently when I see it again and be careful with my dog.

Tom: Humans are invasive species!

I was pleased that there was an experience that provided a relationship to our environment, and that the students could concretely see the “before” and “after” picture of their work, such as improving parts of our local walking trails and natural parks. I noticed a certain energy when we worked outside. There was a sense of “play” that came with that work. There wasn't less responsibility, but definitely the sense of a little more freedom to joke and run

around, the chance to throw rocks in the river, make wreaths out of invasive ivy, eat some berries now and then, and simply sit on log and skip rocks into the ocean. In fact, it was the only volunteer experience in which we interacted with each other most. Without the need to take care of others, we could focus on taking care of our environment and each other. The voices of these students provided findings for my research that were invaluable. In the following chapter, I would like to share my thoughts on their meaning and significance, the implications they offer, and define any possible limitations they brought to my attention.

Chapter 5 A Discussion of the Research

Connecting Back

Middle school is no coincidence. In fact, it is quite the opposite. The root of “coincidence” is to “coincide” which means to fit together. What we do in middle school, as a social and learning environment should coincide, fit, with the needs of our students and meet them where they are at developmentally. A middle school’s culture, instruction and support should fit the cognitive/intellectual, moral, social/emotional, and psychological and physical needs of adolescents. Who are these young people? How do we create a setting and experience that encourages each one to be the best they can be? Why do we do the things we do? How do we respond to their best interests? Again, there needs to be a fit. A fit between what we know and what we do.

Unfortunately, we also know that the fit isn’t always there for every adolescent because every adolescent is unique. Their family culture and experiences are different, their learning styles are different, the way they interpret the world and themselves is different. Some have degrees of physical or intellectual challenges, and others struggle with mental health. Thankfully, we strive to differentiate the way we respond and provide opportunities for students to learn and show their learning. We should also strive to differentiate the way we support those who still struggle in some way.

In my experience I noticed that there still were students falling through the cracks, and in my heart believed that their experience in middle school, through those crazy years of adolescence, could impact their future. Why were these kids falling through the cracks? What were the signs? What do we already do for these learners, and what could we do differently?

What other supports could we provide that would help them find ways to share their gifts and strengths? How could we make their connection to school stronger? Is there another way of helping them improve their emotional and social competence?

For me the heart of the matter was wondering if there was another way of supporting students who exhibited disengagement from school, which also in some way fit where they were at developmentally. As a middle school, how could we best respond and create the conditions to find ways for these adolescents in a critical stage of their development, to explore and discover their strengths? Those were the questions that kept me awake at night. That was the driving force behind Community Explorations.

My research question was *What are the experiences of middle school students who exhibit some degree of disengagement from school, as they participate in community volunteer activities? Will the experiences in Community Explorations broaden their conception of learning and their capabilities as learners?* The question came from me, but the answers were represented through the voices of the Community Exploration students with whom I worked closely.

The journals they kept along the way, my field notes and the interviews at the end of the year, represented conversations in which I could analyze the thoughts of each student, honoring their individual experiences and voice, while at the same time, paying attention to collective themes.

The following is a synthesis of my understanding of what I learned about their learning, the implications that should be measured and a look at the limitations of my research and the program itself. I will also offer considerations for the future direction of Community Explorations as a support system for our school.

Discussion

I have been resolute with my argument that as educators we need to thoughtfully consider the developmental stage of our learners. With that knowledge, comes the responsibility of following through with decisions that are purposeful and beneficial to their needs. The purpose of Community Explorations was to do so, and offer an additional type of support for learners who struggle with school, not academically, but socially and/or emotionally. Looking at adolescent development and its characteristics, and matching in the best way possible the learning experiences and conditions in which students in this age range will thrive, Community Explorations became a part of the student support services we offered our students.. I want to reinforce that Community Explorations did not replace the vital care and skills that our counselor, Youth Care Worker and Aboriginal Support Worker provided.. As a team our efforts were interconnected, and we supported our students cooperatively.

The research of Peter Scales and Nancy Leffert described forty developmental assets as building blocks for adolescents to be successful (2004). The role Community Explorations played was to involve students in community partnerships that would target two of these assets: empowerment and positive self-identity. The goal was to actively engage the students in authentic, meaningful experiences in which they could develop a sense of purpose to the community, school, and their role as learners. The hope was that by feeling more empowered to make a difference for others, they would see a difference in themselves, that they would have a wider lens to view their strengths, which would foster a more positive picture of their self-identity. Perhaps this would make them feel more connected to school and increase their level of social and/or emotional competence.

The connection between a sense of empowerment contributing to learning about one's self, and fostering a positive self-identity, was clear in the context of this research project. The students in this study identified and voiced each of their contributions to the community in some manner. Their actions made an impact. For some, it was knowing that they influenced someone in a positive way. For Lisa it was making a personal connection with an elderly resident named Mary who searched Lisa out on every visit, and offered her biscuits and tea. In Stacey's case, it was her experience with a group of kindergarten children who shouted with joy as she walked into their class, and the feeling that she was helping them learn the alphabet. For others, it was the general sense of knowing they made others happy or that they were helping in some way, even if that meant simply taking the initiative to learn their names, and address them personally. I will never forget the day that Tom, a quiet boy whom at school kept a very low profile, stood up with the rest of the Community Explorations group, and danced the chicken dance with other long-term care residents at a Valentine's Tea. That morning, just before leaving, I had to wake him up from the couch in the medical room because he was feeling so tired. But he found the energy to do that dance because of knowing it would make others happy and that was his contribution. In my field notes I shared:

What I noticed today is that the kids' comfort level is increasing – that they are more in charge. They set up, get residents, know more names, and don't need encouragement to help. There's a lot less strangeness going on. These are the kids that in a classroom, because it's so different, don't stand up and take charge. Lisa and Lance help all the time and you can tell it's in their nature, but there's not as much confidence when they are with their peers.

These experiences gave them a venue to make a difference, to take risks, and to show leadership that is not always possible for them to do in school. I also wanted to find out whether having a sense of purpose in the community, and more confidence in themselves, would impact their level of engagement in school.

It seems the more we know about adolescents and learning, the broader the spectrum of the definition of engagement, and rightfully so. We have gone from a more narrow definition which includes evidence such as on task behavior, homework and assignment completion (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009) to a wider one that observes higher order thinking skills and problem solving (Friesen & Milton, 2009) and social attitudes and skills such as following the expectations of “written and unwritten” rules of classroom and school behavior (Finn & Zimmer 2012, p.10). My particular interest was if feeling a sense of empowerment and positive self-identity would result in increased affective engagement. Affective engagement is the way students feel about school and themselves, or more precisely, “Affectively engaged students feel included in the school community and that school is a significant part of their own lives (belonging), and that school provides for out-of-school accomplishments (valuing)” (Finn and Zimmer, 2012 p.10).

I directly asked them during the interview how Community Explorations impacted how they felt about school. Five out of six students replied that the experiences made school more fun, less boring. That notion is verified in Chapter 4, whereby the students reflected how much they enjoyed the hands-on learning, and how they felt they were learning more in this manner. Also, in other parts of their journals and interviews, they were each able to share with specific examples knew learning about themselves. What this tells me, and through my own observations, is that they were definitely engaged in the process of hands-on learning, and making

contributions to the community, and that they gained an appreciation for the opportunities that school could bring, and an appreciation for themselves. But, I do not feel that there was clear evidence to prove that it made them more engaged to school in general, at other times and in other areas, outside of those particular Community Explorations days. I do not share that with regret because what I do not know is just as valuable, as it will influence the decisions that I make in supporting future Community Explorations students for the better.

What I do know, and what the data reflects, is the important extent of learning that occurred that is unique when partnering students with the community. The volunteer experiences had elements of service learning, which is defined as an experiential learning experience benefiting the volunteers and community partners, and in which there is direct link to curriculum objectives.

First of all there was a mutual benefit. Our partners at Yucalta Lodge, Penfield Elementary and Greenways Land Trust also benefitted from Community Explorations. A partnership is based on reliance, and they relied on us as much as we relied on them. In relation to how it empowers students and how they identify to themselves as learners, Scale et al state that service learning allows students to engage in “ meaningful roles that help build in them a sense of being valuable, competent and connected to others” (Scales et al., 2005, p.333). The authors go on to say, “ to the extent that service learning might fit well with the developmental need of young adolescents, it might be a potential means of maintaining or enhancing students’ engagement and confidence” (p.333). There was not doubt that this was the case. The students were engaged in their responsibilities, showing more confidence in themselves as they developed a stronger sense of their role in the community.

Our experiences were not directly tied to academic curriculum outcomes. There was no direct integration of curriculum outcomes to the community service projects, as emphasized by proponents of service learning. Yet, I would offer a consideration. If we examine our current re-designed curriculum with its focus on personal and social competencies, we did engage in an important component of our curriculum's beliefs in learning. Curriculum is more than meeting academic learning outcomes. I would regret to see educators avoiding service-learning opportunities in which the academic outcomes were not transparent. As my students showed, there is so much more to learn.

An important realization for me is that there was an interplay between the volunteer experience, the learning itself and the learner. It would seem impossible for students to volunteer in community projects, and not learn something about themselves as learners. I see Community Explorations as the foundation that offers students the opportunity to learn new skills, knowledge, and attitudes, while learning in the community, that result in the students learning about themselves. Perhaps it's due to the reality of having a big responsibility in which to follow through. Trenton admitted he did not always like what he had to do, but he did it anyway because that was his job. I know he was referring to the hours we spent having to cut down invasive species before we could plant native ones along our estuary. That would not be the case if Trenton were given a math activity or writing activity that he found challenging. Normally, Nick is quick to show his frustration with his peers, if his perception is that they disagree with him or are not taking his lead when working on a group project. Yet, when he described the frustrations in leading kindergartners in activities, whom he described as dysfunctional and bad listeners, he always showed patience and self-control with them. I believe based on their reflections and my observations, that it was the nature and quality of the learning

experiences in the community that presented the opportunity for the students to learn something meaningful about themselves.

My conclusion is that when students are engaged in authentic meaningful learning, meaningful learning will happen for them, perhaps in ways never expected. Also, I wonder if having fewer learning expectations in place allowed the freedom for each student to discover their own learning. It makes me think that when we tell students what they will learn, we may be closing the doors to important opportunities. They need to find out, then tell us.

Implications

Community Explorations is a good fit for adolescent learners. It has enabled my group of students this year to learn more about learning and themselves as learners. It has a role in supporting students who need the tools to develop better social and emotional competency. Engaging in community projects would benefit all students. In fact we had many classes this year directly or indirectly helping our local and global community in many ways, each with different time commitments. I witnessed students organizing bake sales to help overseas development projects, our Leadership Group helping raise hundreds of donations in food items, and a grade 6/7 class spending time with a neighborhood adult day care society. Two grade 6/7 classes were also involved with Greenways Land Trust in reviving a park for the better part of the school year. The difference is that Community Explorations offered consistency, and collaboration in the form of a small group setting, immersing the students in community projects, and over time developing and nurturing the learning and the learners. It seems that without the larger audience of their peers, the students were able to be themselves which was an important aspect as well given all of the insecurities that come with adolescence. Therefore, the biggest implication is the

benefits of providing opportunities in a small, safe setting, in which struggling students can develop new and existing strengths with more confidence.

On a personal level, there was an important implication that could have a significant effect on Community Explorations for the future. While analyzing the data, I realized there was a missed opportunity to transfer their learning into other areas of their school life. If Community Explorations is a way of broadening the perception of learning, and the perception that the students have of themselves as learners, it could be even more powerful if there was transference. What I mean by that is, the opportunity to transfer and apply what they have learned about themselves to other situations in their regular school day rather than having them more isolated and limited to the work they do in the community. It would require that I take on the role in mentoring these students in a more meta-cognitive process. This became apparent to me during the interviews, when I asked what was challenging for them, and discovered that for some students, the challenges and how they overcame them, was probably the best learning of all. Unfortunately, this realization was only my own. There are two examples in particular I would like to share.

Lance is sensitive to the words and actions of others, especially when he feels he is being criticized or anyone else is being put down. Over the past couple of years that I have known him, I have seen him completely shut down in class leaving him in a very negative state of mind. As I watched some of his reactions towards the other students in the group, he did show his frustration towards others at times, but he simply expressed his disapproval in a firm but calm manner, or tried to redirect the behavior. Sometimes he just shook his head and did not say a thing. But not once did he give up, or let his emotions stand in the way of participating. I acknowledged his ability to show self-control and asked him how he did it. He replied that if he

got too angry towards his peers, it might affect the work he had to do that day, so he tried to ignore them and stay focused.

Nick's example is longer, but I feel it shows the depth of learning that can take place when working in and with the community, and how I could have helped build bridges between Nick's insights and the challenges he sometimes faced in the classroom. When I asked Nick what was most challenging about being in Community Explorations he replied:

Probably the most challenging thing about was trying to communicate with people that weren't your age. The seniors sometimes wouldn't listen or sometimes it was just awkward to hang around with them 'cause they wouldn't answer or they would look at you funny or something. And the kindergarteners at Penfield, well, they had social skills but they were rowdy and all over the place. It was crazy.

As a vice principal, Nick and I had many conversations and debriefs over the course of the year. He is a bright, funny student, whose main challenge is controlling his anger. So I was curious to know how he handled it, when he faced these challenges during Community Explorations. His response was:

I just realized that I wasn't at school or at home and if I did something wrong it would look bad at my family, it would look bad at me, and for other people that knew me, so I just controlled myself. Sometimes it would be awkward but I wouldn't show my awkwardness.

I followed by applauding Nick for his leadership and responsibility even though I knew it wasn't always easy. I shared how I knew he would always do the work and follow through even it wasn't going to be easy. He jumped back into the conversation and added:

To follow through like that and like realize that you are in a situation that you don't want to be in like say me mowing the lawn, it's not bad but say it was bad, I would keep thinking it is all going to be over soon, it's going to be done and I won't have to do it for two weeks...and then it would be done before you know it because you're going to keep on thinking that and you are going to do the job. Because you're focusing and thinking that.

At this point I took the opportunity to ask:

So that thinking that you use for mowing the lawn or for something that is challenging have you ever thought of using that thinking for times at school?

Nick's answer was:

Yeah like certain situations for school work I don't like.

Imagine if I had taken these insights, and somehow had helped Lance and Nick turn them into tools that may have transferred into the classroom. For me, this conversation on its own, offered me an important insight, challenge and goal. It will be one of the considerations I explain in the following section, and probably the one that could make the most difference.

Considerations for Future Direction

Community Explorations has been offered at our school for two years. Each year there have been adaptations to make it a more significant support system for some of our struggling learners. For example, I was more directly involved and as the vice principal dedicated my all of my teaching allocation time to working with this group of students.

Last year, we had a district instructional support teacher take the lead with the group. This year, I became the instructor/mentor instead of just a facilitator. As the vice principal, I supported these students in many ways. I had to balance my role as vice principal. This meant, when these students were in difficult situations, I had to not only support them, but their teachers, peers and families as well. Difficult decisions were sometimes made. Thankfully I always could maintain a positive relationship with these students, and my direct participation and

commitment to Community Explorations served to strengthen these relationships. It added another important layer.

Another important result of me taking responsibility for the program, was that there was more consistency and better communication with our community partners. Flexibility was also possible in two important ways. First of all, I could speak with the classroom teacher and coordinate any changes that needed to be made to our schedule. A few times, in order to adapt to our community partners' requests, we needed to change the days and/or time of our meetings. Secondly, there was the possibility to collaborate with staff when a teacher or myself wanted to consider students for the program.

My research this year has allowed me to dig deeper into the real value of Community Explorations as a way of supporting students who struggle. The opportunity to have conversations and read reflections as to how the students felt about learning and themselves as learners was invaluable, not only as a teacher and researcher, but as a middle school educator passionate about supporting adolescents in this exciting and challenging time of their lives.

Therefore, there are three important considerations I would like to propose for the following years. First of all, I would like to continue my research into pre-screening assessments for students who exhibit challenging behaviors. At the moment when considering students for Community Exploration, our support team relies on our observations and records on students from the previous school year, and in-coming School Based Team notes from our feeder elementary schools. In essence, we start with what we know, then build from there, with the understanding that any student could enter the program at any time because we believe in a responsive approach. A pre-screening assessment tool for teachers, would make them aware of behaviors and/or attitudes that need support in a more pro-active manner. We all know that

many students who need support are not always just the ones with specific ministry behavior designations that come with IEPs. A pre-assessment tool would hope to flag students before they have already reached a critical point.

Secondly, I need to take more responsibility to share the findings of my research with staff. I would like to create a simple presentation, with the intent to clarify its purpose, and explain how it is part of the school support team. With a better understanding of the students this program targets, its rationale and its goals, the staff would be more aware of its value.

The third consideration is the one that I feel could have the most benefit for the students and is the most important for me. It goes back to belief that I need to work more closely with the students and their classroom teacher, in building a bridge between Community Explorations and the classroom where a transfer of learning can take place. I do not want it to be seen as a pull out program, isolated from their regular school experience. Learning from the community, learning from their challenges, learning about learning, and learning about themselves should not be relegated to four hours in a timetable. Therefore, I need to establish routines, and use approaches whereby students can take their learning and improve how they feel about themselves in the classroom. This will require student self-assessments, more reflections and personal goal setting on the part of the students, which will be shared with their classroom teachers. My role will be to be transparent with the students on how learning through community partnerships can be a tool in school, and provide three-way conversations that include me, the student, and the classroom teacher. With these considerations, I am not only excited about the future of Community Explorations, but the future of the students participating in Community Explorations.

Limitations

Upon reflection, I wish I had included in my research, input from the classroom teachers that worked directly and on a daily basis with the Community Explorations students. I would have designed a type of pre and post profile assessment tool, whereby the teachers could have contributed an important point of view of their students. I would have collected information that would have somehow measured in a qualitative manner to what extent, if at all, the level of affective engagement, or other forms of engagement for that matter, changed over the course of the year as a result of their participation in Community Explorations.

Also, there was a time constraint which affected the amount of times students were able to complete journal reflections. Depending on the location of the community partner with whom we were working, at times we would arrive back to the school with only a few minutes before the lunch hour. As a result there were fewer entries than I had hoped, and as a result fewer reflections from which to draw the data.

Conclusion

I have carried this quote with me for the past twenty years, since my first year of teaching. It spoke to my belief that as educators what we do and how we do it, and what we say and how we say it, has the potential to make a student walk with pride and dignity.

In the eyes and attitudes of the parents and teachers who raise and educate them, children find mirrors through which they define themselves.

- Alduous Huxley

I still believe that. But now more than ever, I believe in creating opportunities and experiences in which children through their own eyes can hold up a mirror and discover their own positive and powerful definitions of themselves. The students that I worked with this year

have a lot to feel proud about. They were courageous, unflinching, reliable and fun. Each and every one of them made a meaningful contribution to the community, to themselves, and to my learning as well.

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Appendix

Table 1. The Framework of 40 Developmental Assets, with Definitions
<i>Search Institute has identified the following building blocks of healthy development that help young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible.</i>
<i>External Assets</i>
Support
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Family Support – Family life provides high levels of love and support. 2. Positive family communication – Young person and her or his parent(s) communicate positively, and young person is willing to seek advice and counsel from parents. 3. Other adult relationships – Young person receives support from three or more non-parent adults. 4. Caring neighborhood – Young person experiences caring neighbors. 5. Caring school climate – School provides caring, encouraging environment. 6. Parent involvement in schooling – Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school.
Empowerment
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Community values youth – Young person perceives that adults in the community value youth. 8. Youth as resources – Young people are given useful roles in the community. 9. Service to others – Young person serves in the community one hour or more per week. 10. Safety – Young person feels safe at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.
Boundaries and Expectations

11. **Family boundaries** – Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.
12. **School boundaries** – School provides rules and consequences
13. **Neighborhood boundaries** – Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.
14. **Adult role models** – Parent(s) and other adults model positive, responsible behavior.
15. **Positive peer influence** – Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.
16. **High expectations** – Both parent(s) and teachers encourage the young person to do well.

Constructive Use of Time

17. **Creative activities** – Young person spends three or more hours per week in lessons or practice in music, theatre, or other arts.
18. **Youth programs** – Young person spends three or more hours per week in sports, clubs, or organizations at school and/or in the community.
19. **Religious community** – Young person spends one or more hours per week in activities in a religious institution.
20. **Time at home** – Young person is out with friends “with nothing special to do” two or fewer nights per week.

Internal Assets

Commitment to Learning

21. **Achievements motivation** – Young person is motivated to do well in school.
22. **School engagement** – Young person is actively engaged in learning.
23. **Homework** – Young person reports doing at least one hour of homework every

<p>school day.</p> <p>24. Bonding school – Young person cares about her or his school.</p> <p>25. Reading for pleasure – Young person reads for pleasure three or more hours per week.</p>
<p>Positive Values</p>
<p>26. Caring – Young person places high value on helping other people.</p> <p>27. Equality and social justice – Young person places high value on promoting equality and reducing hunger and poverty.</p> <p>28. Integrity – Young person acts on convictions and stands up for her or his beliefs.</p> <p>29. Honesty – Young person “tells the truth even when it is not easy.”</p> <p>30. Responsibility – Young person accepts and takes personal responsibility.</p> <p>31. Restraint – Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.</p>
<p>Social Competencies</p>
<p>32. Planning and decision making – Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices.</p> <p>33. Interpersonal competence – Young person has empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills.</p> <p>34. Cultural competence – Young person had knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.</p> <p>35. Resistance skills – Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations.</p> <p>36. Peaceful conflict resolutions – Young person seeks to resolve conflict nonviolently.</p>
<p>Positive Identity</p>

37. **Personal power** – Young person feels he or she had control over “things that happen to me.”
38. **Self-esteem** – Young person reports having high self-esteem.
39. **Sense of purpose** – Young person reports that “my life has purpose.”
40. **Positive view of personal future** – Young person is optimistic about her or his personal future.

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