Learning About the "Real World" in an Urban Arts Youth Program

Reed W. Larson
Kathrin C. Walker
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

To make the transition to adulthood, youth must learn to function in the complex and unpredictable "real world" of adult life. This is an intensive case study of an urban arts program that sought to provide youth with experiences that prepared them for the real world of arts careers. We conducted 75 interviews with 12 youth and their adult leader over three cycles of engagement with the real world. Analyses suggest that participants experienced a developmental process that entailed experiences of dissonance and challenge followed by active adaptive learning. The adult leaders played a critical role in supporting this developmental process through balancing to maintain an approximate fit between the challenges youth experienced and their abilities to respond to these challenges.

Keywords: youth development; after-school programs; real world; youth; practitioners; adaptation

"It's kind of a taste of what it's gonna be like in the real world."

"It's realistic to what you have to do in the real world. You can't always have your own way."

"That was something that could happen frequently in the real world, in the workplace."

High school students describing their experiences in youth programs.

In discussion with American high school–aged youth (and the adults who work with them), frequent references are made to the "real world" and to the youth's lack of preparation for it. The general theme of these comments is that youth's current lives take place in a protected, artificial world that is apart

from the one they will live in as adults: a world that is broader, has different rules, and can be more rough-and-tumble. National panels have expressed similar concerns that schools are not providing young people with experiences that prepare them for the types of real-life work settings they will need to function in as adults (Coleman et al., 1974; Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991). Providing youth with positive learning experiences in adult worlds, however, is not an easy matter, especially given that many have been sheltered from it to this point in their lives. Youth's encounters with the complex, fast-paced, hardball, and risky real worlds of adult interchange are by no means certain to go smoothly.

The emerging literature on positive youth development needs to engage with this question of how youth make successful transitions into the complex worlds of adult life. What are the developmental processes whereby youth learn to function in adult systems? Contemporary developmental science takes a systems perspective in which development is conceptualized to occur through interactions between individuals and dynamic behavioral settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Lerner, 2002). Writings on positive youth development stress that this is a process in which adolescents are conscious and deliberate producers of their own development (Larson, 2000; Lerner & Busch-Rossnagel, 1981; Lerner, Theokas, & Jelicic, 2005). To understand positive development into adulthood, it is important to understand adolescents' active experiences of interaction in adult real-world systems and how these experiences succeed (or fail) in accommodating youth to these systems.

As a step in this direction, this article presents an intensive case study of youth's developmental experiences in an urban arts program, Art-First,[1] which sought to prepare ethnically diverse teens for the real world of arts-related careers. The program included an internship in which youth were placed in professional arts settings. It also included the creation of public murals, a project that gave youth an unexpected encounter with the hard knocks of the real world. Our objectives for this investigation are, first, to examine how learning about adult worlds takes place—what is the developmental process?—and second, to examine the roles program leaders play in shaping and facilitating this process. By analyzing the unfolding of youth's interactions with real-world systems across time, our goal is to help build preliminary theory about how positive development into adult systems transpires.

BACKGROUND

Organized youth programs, it has been argued, may be the contexts in youth's lives that are best suited to helping them learn to function in adult worlds (Heath & Smyth, 2000; Larson & Kleiber, 1993; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). These programs provide youth with manageable opportunities to learn the norms and operating procedures of adult systems. Arts, sports, and other youth programs typically engage participants in adultlike normative worlds that require adapting to constraints, working toward goals, and receiving authentic evaluation of one's actions (Heath, 1994, 1998; Larson, 2000). In some programs, such as the one reported here, youth work with adults who are participating in the same activities, and thus youth are directly engaged with the norms, language, and modus operandi of adult worlds (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; Youniss et al., 1997).

An important part of this argument is that young people do not learn just the norms of these worlds, they learn to be agents within these normative systems. Organized programs provide youth opportunities to learn to operate within a rule-bound realm and experience the real-life consequences of their actions for themselves and others (Heath & Smyth, 2000). Youth's participation in many organized programs is structured around a program cycle in which youth work toward a goal, product, or performance (Heath, 1994; Larson, 2000). As part of this work, they confront challenges, obstacles, and setbacks; Heath (1997) describes youth in the position of dealing with budget shortfalls, transportation dilemmas, and a toilet that overflowed. As a product of these experiences, it is argued, youth learn to plan ahead, consider contingencies, and develop strategic skills for dealing with the irregular "bounded rationality" of human systems (Heath, 1998; Heath & Smyth, 2000; Larson & Hansen, in press).

Related ideas on how this developmental process occurs can be drawn from the literature on experiential learning, a literature based primarily on practitioner knowledge. The foundational concept of experiential education is *learning by doing with reflection* (Dewey, 1916; Priest & Gass, 1997). The core model of this process is a learning cycle in which there is first some type of preparation or planning followed by active engagement in a real-world context or project. As the person engages, he or she observes the success or nonsuccess of his or her actions and thus receives feedback. During and after the experience, learning is aided by reflective cognitive processes in which learners interpret, evaluate, and generalize from this feedback (Dewey, 1916; Priest & Gass, 1997). Experience is translated into usable concepts (Kolb, 1984).

An important concern, however, is that a positive outcome to this learning cycle is not assured, especially when people are put in novel, complex, and unpredictable real-world contexts. In internship programs, for example, it is common for interns to experience their jobs as boring, routine, and formulaic—or too challenging—and these experiences can lead to frustration and other negative emotions that can lead them to disengage psychologically or drop out (Baker, 2004; Marling, 1992). However, the practitioner literature also suggests that interns often experience a sequence of phases in which positive anticipation is followed by disillusionment but then by adjustment and a sense of competency (Sweitzer & King, 2004). A related concern is that in real-world interactions, "stuff happens." Unexpected events can intervene and interfere with participants' achievement of their goals in the setting or project. A leading handbook on adventure programming warns that if things go wrong and participants' efforts lead to the experience of failure, it can have a net negative effect on their sense of competency (Priest & Gass, 1997).

Our first objective in this investigation is to understand the unfolding of these processes in real time, from the point of view of the young people going through them. Organized programs appear to provide favorable conditions for youth to be producers of development (Larson, 2000). Thus, it is important to understand youth's conscious experience because their ongoing construction of events is likely to affect their actions as well as provide the gist for developmental change. We ask, What are youth's ongoing experiences as they engage in real-world settings or projects, and how do these shape their thoughts, actions, and developmental processes?

Our second objective is to understand the role of adult program leaders in facilitating these developmental processes. Leaders play an important role in both designing the program and guiding activities and youth as the program takes place. The practitioner literature stresses that effective program leaders are intentional in how they design and guide program activities (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005). However, there is little research that examines how they actually do this: in a specific program context, in real time, in response to unexpected events and challenges.

The framework we adopted for thinking about practitioners' role in facilitating youth's encounters with real-world settings is that of person-environment fit. Eccles has argued that youth programs are most effective when they provide a fit between youth and the program setting (Eccles, 2005). In situations where there is a poor fit in terms of values, personal and social identities, demands placed on youth, and so on, young people are likely to become alienated and disengaged. Yet a program that introduces youth to novel real-world settings and problems almost inevitably takes

youth outside the environments in which they are most comfortable. Indeed, a deliberate goal of experiential learning is often to place youth outside their safety zones (Priest & Gass, 1997). How do leaders keep youth engaged at the same time that the youth are being challenged with novel settings and demands?

Our study of Art-First allowed us to examine these questions as we observed youth going through three distinct program cycles of work, two that were planned and one that was not. We used these cycles as the framework for analyzing youth's developmental processes and how the adult leaders facilitated this process. We employed grounded theory and related qualitative methods because our objectives (which included understanding both youth and leaders as active agents) required that we understand the participants' conscious experience, intentions, and thought processes (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Our goal was to use methods of discovery to gain insights regarding how youth learn to function in adult systems.

ART-FIRST AND HOW IT WAS STUDIED

Program Description

Art-First is a community-based arts organization whose mission is to offer underserved youth high-quality visual arts instruction and career training. Housed in the arts district of a major U.S. city, Art-First is a thriving art complex with six studios, a college- and career-resource center, library, lounge area, and two gallery spaces. The professional but family-like staff creates a space where both art and young people are taken seriously. Youth can take a broad range of courses in visual and media arts as well as participate in college and career planning. Art-First is not your typical youth agency run on a shoestring; it has a corporate structure, including a development department that manages its many individual, foundation, and corporation donors. This funding stream allows Art-First to provide an environment where diverse youth from across the city come to expand their horizons, artistically and professionally.

We followed Art-First's Career Preparation program, which was designed explicitly to help youth in the 11th and 12th grades prepare for the real world. Rebecca, an energetic young social worker, coordinated the different components of the program with the help of a professional artist-teacher and a program alumnus who served as her assistant. Prior to the main part of the program, youth were required to complete a 6-week career development course.

The course met once per week in the spring and employed hands-on assignments aimed at equipping youth with practical job skills, including resume writing, interviewing, and workplace etiquette and expectations. Participants in this course were then eligible to apply for Art at Work, our primary focus, which involved 20 hours per week for 6 weeks during the summer. Youth in Art at Work were paid $6.50 per hour, and it engaged them in two distinct models of experiential learning.

The first component of Art at Work was an internship. For two afternoons per week, students worked in professional arts-related settings (such as an art museum, an architecture firm, and a toy design company). When Rebecca recruited internship sites, she wanted to assure that the jobs would go beyond mundane clerical tasks and engage youth in challenging activities. She arranged internships where youth worked on creative projects, such as designing logos and brochures and researching and creating museum exhibits. This model of experiential learning immersed youth directly in real-world settings.

The second component of Art at Work involved the creation of a commissioned set of murals. For two afternoons each week, the youth painted individual life-size portraits of themselves to be permanently installed on the nearby metro platform. The work for the murals included field trips to view artwork at other stations, studying the site where their murals were to be mounted, and visits with two well-known mural artists. The murals engaged youth in a professional public art project and a project model of experiential learning in which they dealt with constraints and risks dictated by the real world.

Data collection

To understand the unfolding of events and experiences in these different program components, we conducted regular interviews with youth and with Rebecca across the two 6-week periods. We asked Rebecca to select 12 representative youth to take part in the interviews, and all 12 agreed to participate. These youths included 6 Latinos and Latinas, 2 Asian Americans, 2 European Americans, and 2 multiracial youth (8 females and 4 males). This demographic profile approximated that of the program's 16 participants, who were nearly half (44%) Latino or Latina and two thirds (63%) female.[2] Although we did not obtain socioeconomic status data on the 12 youth's families, we used their addresses to determine that the average youth came from a census track with a median 2000 household income of $39,605 (range $27,500 to $60,301), which approximates the median for the city ($38,625) and for the United States ($41,994).

Interviews were scheduled to occur every 2 weeks during the career development course and every 1.5 weeks during Art at Work. Interviews at the beginning, midpoint, and end were conducted in person and lasted approximately 1 hour. The other interviews were conducted by phone and lasted approximately 15 minutes. A total of 67 interviews were completed with the youth, and 8 interviews were completed with Rebecca. To help understand the program context, a member of our staff also carried out four observations of the on-site program sessions. In addition, we examined brochures and other documents about the organization and program that were provided by Rebecca. All data were collected by members of our research team, and the same person conducted all interviews with a given interviewee.

The youth interview protocols included a range of open-ended questions aimed at getting the youth's ongoing accounts of their experiences as well as reports related to diverse areas of development (Larson et al., 2004). Interviews typically began with a request for an update on the youth's activities and experiences in the program. Much of the data used for this article came from a repeated cycle of questions asking youth to describe their current goals in program activities, the challenges and obstacles they were encountering, strategies they were using to meet goals, and what they were learning. We also drew on youth's responses to other questions that dealt with their motivational state and the role of the leaders in the program. Interviewers were trained to use the protocol as an interview guide (Patton, 2002), including probing for more in-depth responses and explanations as warranted and adapting the wording of questions according to the youth's accounts of their ongoing experiences.

Data from the interviews with the youth and with Rebecca were also used to understand the adult leaders' roles in shaping and supporting the youth's development. The interviews with Rebecca followed the same schedule described above and covered a wide variety of topics, including her goals for the program, her philosophy, how she designed the program, and her ongoing perceptions of the youth's experiences. Similar to questions we asked of the youth, we asked her at each interview about the challenges she faced in implementing the program and what she did to respond to specific situations during the course of the program.

Data Analysis

Our use of the program cycle as the framework for the analyses drew on established techniques in sociology, political science, and other fields where investigators are concerned with understanding temporal sequences of events and change processes from qualitative data (e.g., Miles & Huberman,

1994; Ragin, 2000). For each program cycle, our analyses first examined the adult leaders' intentions for that program component and the challenges they experienced in implementing those intentions. These analyses focused primarily on their front-end work: what their goals and plans were, what they did to set up that program component, their expectations, and the challenges that followed from these as the program started. Our sources of information were the leader interviews, program documents, and when pertinent, youth's reports on the leaders' behavior.

Our second set of analyses focused on the sequence of activities, events, and experiences across time for each program component. In these analyses, we identified the significant temporal phases and critical events and compared the data from each interviewee related to these phases and events (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Although individual youth had distinct experiences, we found there to be substantial commonalities in the challenges and learning processes that youth reported at specific time points; therefore, we decided to focus primarily on describing this shared chronology. In these analyses, we also examined Rebecca's accounts of youth's experiences as a further source to verify the patterns. In addition, we used her reports and the youth's reports as convergent sources of information on the leaders' actions during this chronology and how they influenced the youth. The emphasis of the analyses in this second set followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) objective of "preserving the historical chronological flow and permitting a good look at what led to what, and when" (p. 110).

The third set of analyses was synthetic and focused on addressing our two objectives for each program cycle: What was the change process experienced by youth and how did leaders facilitate it? We drew on the prior two sets of analyses to formulate conclusions for each objective. Similarities in what happened across the program cycles were then synthesized and are presented in the Discussion section of this article. Although the first two sets of analyses focused solely on the data, in this final step we incorporated ideas and concepts from our reading of the literature. The analyses, then, proceeded from the more descriptive first two stages to the more holistic formulation of theoretical explanations for the findings in this final stage (cf. Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Our original analyses examined the spring career development course as well as the two separate components of Art at Work. However, because the career course involved only a few hours per week and included many different short-term activities, including classroom instruction, it did not yield valuable findings regarding a time sequence of real-world experience. Thus, we draw on data from that component only as needed to provide context for

the other two components. But an unplanned event occurred after Art at Work, which we describe below, that resulted in a third program cycle. Although our interviewing had been finished by that time, we conducted a focus group with the youth and an interview with Rebecca to understand the sequence of experiences during this additional program cycle.

EXPERIENCING AND
RESPONDING TO THE REAL WORLD

The Internships

Leaders' intentions and challenges. The internships were crafted to provide youth with high-quality experiences in the world of professional art. Rebecca said that her goal was for "the students to have a better sense of themselves and professionalism and to apply what they learn to their own interests and dreams of the future." Each internship site was required to identify a special project for the student to complete. Prior to the start of the internship, Rebecca reported,

> I have graphic designers and curators signing on, saying, "I'm going to commit myself to providing opportunities that [youth] can really learn and say, 'I know what curating in a museum is like' or 'I know what working on a project for a client is like.'"

It was important to Rebecca that the internships were substantive and that youth had experiences working on authentic projects within a professional milieu.

Maintaining high-caliber internship sites, however, meant that Rebecca's and Art-First's reputations were on the line. Having identified and persuaded prominent local institutions to commit to offering more than a clerical position, she had to be sure that the young people would follow through on their end of the bargain. Training in the career development course was aimed at ensuring that youth were prepared. Rebecca taught them and created activities to make them aware of what to expect and what would be expected of them, including workplace norms and etiquette. When the internships started, Rebecca struggled with how much supervision and monitoring she should provide. She verified that youth showed up the first day, she met with site supervisors to check up on the youth, and she quizzed youth on what they were doing and experiencing at their placement. One youth said, "She's the

mother [laughs], constant mother. For the first day of our internship jobs, she made us call that we got there on time [laughs]." Rebecca's insistence on high-quality internships provided youth with professional experiences but also increased the demands on her.

Time line of experience and learning. As youth began their internships, they reported high levels of anticipation. They were eager to apply their learning from the career development course to the world of real work. Carlos said, "My motivation has been an absolute high throughout the entire program, but it's like at a new level right now because it's no longer a class, it's more like an actual job." Some youth, such as Jacqueline, felt excited by the scope of their work: "The project they gave me is putting up art work throughout the entire building. So that's pretty big and it's pretty exciting." Others were surprised to be welcomed and accepted in the setting as colleagues. Lee said, "They don't treat me like, 'Oh, there's another intern.' For some reason, they ask me about my opinion. So that's pretty cool." The youth recognized and were enthusiastic about the uniqueness of these substantive work opportunities, which went beyond what one youth described as the typical "sort and file" internship.

In the first weeks, however, some youth reported disenchantment as they discovered that their internship was not everything they had expected it to be. Some reported confronting rigidity about procedures or dress codes or feeling overwhelmed, pressured, or bored. Marco, who was placed in the art department of a major financial corporation, was assigned to help organize their collection. He reported, "I have to sit there for 4 hours, looking at slides, selecting slides, labeling slides, and then running down through my list of slides; it becomes tedious work." Lee got to do some interesting work as an intern at a graphic design company, such as help with sketches of prototypes. But he became frustrated when his painstaking efforts seemed to be for naught:

> Like the last time I was there, I had to cut up a layout of a mat. It was basically a big puzzle . . . and I'm tracing everything out, and I taped everything together, and then once I gave it to one of the designers, he changed the whole thing!

The daily realities of participating in the adult world took a number of youth aback; they were not fully ready for the sometimes tedious and aggravating parts of their jobs.

Rebecca said that some youth had built up "superstar" expectations for their internships and, as a result, felt let down when some tasks were not challenging or their efforts were not appreciated. Youth reported discussing their

disenchantment with her. As she talked with them, she attempted to moderate their expectations and help them understand that this is the nature of real work. In one case, she discovered that an intern was alienating the site supervisor by cutting her off and finishing her sentences, so Rebecca delicately talked with the young woman to change her behavior.

Despite frustrations, the youth were resolute in wanting to make their internships successful. Jacqueline commented, "Even if you get a little bit frustrated, you just have to keep doing what you're doing, and it's important to give your all and enjoy what you do." Lee said, "I just basically learned how to keep at it, not to give up—once in a while, step back and clear your head, and then get back at it." They saw the frustrations as challenges to be addressed.

As the internships progressed, the youth reported adjusting their goals and expectations, and they began reporting valuable learning experiences. This included learning and accepting the rules and norms of the professional culture. Ana said, "I learned that different environments call for different parts of my personality. I have to learn to control certain aspects of my personality when I'm in a professional setting." Pablo put it this way: "As long as we kind of act like adults, they'll treat us like adults. So you know, occasional jokes, just not all the time. Gotta learn when to control." Partly because they were invested in the projects within their internships, youth learned to monitor and moderate their behavior according to the norms at their work site.

Youth also reported developing skills to exercise agency within the particular professional environment. A youth who worked at a museum reported overcoming her initial anxiety and becoming confident and skilled in giving presentations to museum visitors. A number of youth, including Karen, reported learning how to work within deadlines: "They tell me you have to do this, but you have 3 weeks to do it." Lee, who had initially been frustrated with his internship at a graphic design company, reported increased understanding of the steps of creating a new logo and became interested in the possibility of a career in the graphic design industry.

The youth's reports of developing agency within these settings was exemplified by Jacqueline, who had never had a paying job prior to her internship at a prestigious theater company. Like others, she initially commented on how many rules and steps her job required. Her first task was to write a proposal about her artwork installation project, something she had to learn to do, then seek approval from her superiors. Proposing the project to the executive director and marketing director, however, gave Jacqueline the opportunity to be assertive, and as her project progressed, she felt more confident about her ability to contribute to the organization: "I think this opportunity is helping me speak up more." By the end of her internship, Jacqueline reported feeling

more comfortable in this professional setting and was developing a vision of her job aspirations:

> It just made me realize what kind of height I want to achieve in my career aspects. I don't know what I want to do per se, but I know I want to be one of the people on top [laughs]: the one making all of the decisions.

Jacqueline discovered how to get things done in this setting and learned who has the most leverage to do this.

Conclusions. Our analyses suggest that the process of developmental change described by youth followed a dialectic in which initial dissonance stimulated adaptive learning. Youth encountered the real-world challenges posed by unfamiliar norms, demands for professional behavior, tedious tasks, and having their work redone. Their initial reaction was often surprise, aggravation, or disappointment. But they responded with resolution and in time actively accommodated and assimilated to the norms of the professional setting. They described progressively coming to understand how and why things were done and gained confidence in exercising agency in that setting. Their experiences loosely followed the internship phases of anticipation, disillusionment, adjustment, and competence described in the practitioner literature (Sweitzer & King, 2004), although youth often reported multiple cycles of learning as they responded to different challenges during the 6 weeks. In these accounts, youth represented themselves as active participants in this process of adaptive learning in both identifying challenges in the setting and learning from them.

Our analyses also suggested that Rebecca played a valuable role in facilitating this process of active adaptive learning. The internships placed youth in novel real-world settings that put them out of their comfort zones. The dissonance they felt, as we just discussed, helped stimulate the processes of active adaptation. Much of Rebecca's efforts, however, appeared to involve keeping youth from experiencing extremes of person-environment misfit and dissonance that if prolonged would threaten their engagement in this adaptive process. These included choosing appropriately challenging settings, preparing youth with skills for those settings, helping to adjust youth's expectations to realities, and intervening when necessary to make sure a youth's behavior fit what was required in the setting. This role, we think, can be described with the term *balancing*: Rebecca worked to create and sustain the fit or balance between the youth and the environment to keep them engaged in the process of active adaptation and learning.

The Mural Project

Leaders' intentions and challenges. The mural project took place during the same 6 weeks and provided an opportunity for youth to learn about doing commissioned public art. The purpose of the project fit with descriptions of the goals for public art: to provide voice to community members, improve the aesthetic environment, and contribute to the cultural development of the community (Adams & Goldbard, 2001). Rebecca's written proposal to the transit authority stated that the murals would serve as a constant reminder to commuters of the "resilient voices of youth" and that the work would enhance youth's skills in solving problems, meeting deadlines, and working within specified guidelines.

The mural project posed several coordination challenges for Rebecca. Having gone through a demanding process to get approval from the city for the project, she felt accountable that youth produce high-quality murals that were within the transit authority's guidelines. One challenge was recruiting students who not only met the criteria for the internships but also had sufficient artistic skills for painting the murals. A second was the tight time schedule. Midway through the 6 weeks, Rebecca worried, "I have a humungous deadline with the mural, and so I'm very anxious about making sure we're on track."

Time line of experience and learning. The youth's painting of the murals was directed by a professional artist, Emilio, who had been teaching at Art-First for a number of years. Emilio took the youth through a series of steps, each involving learning different technical skills. After meeting with a transit authority representative, youth visited their platform site and took digital photos of themselves posing as they wanted to look in their mural. They then transposed the photos onto sketches of themselves, with the platform's urban skyscape in the background. While they painted the murals, Emilio helped them refine their techniques for using acrylics, layering paint, and creating definition and depth.

As the youth started this process, they were highly motivated. They reported relishing the opportunity to be paid for work they loved. Bobby said, "You come in and work, but it's not like real work, because you actually enjoy what you're doing. That's like my hope; that's how I want my jobs to be." They also were excited by the prospect of doing public art. Jan saw the public murals as fulfilling a mission:

> I think it's a good project, especially in a city like this where there is so much hate. You know, looking at a painting, especially done by kids like myself, it's something positive you can do for the world around you.

Marco saw this public mission more personally: "I want to capture my strong emotion about creating art. It's a self-portrait and you certainly want to render yourself as you are." He wanted to paint his panel "so that people see my character through the painting."

Some youth also reported feeling daunted by the scale and nature of the project. To achieve consistency across the 16 murals, everyone was required to produce a life-size self-portrait. Many of the youth, such as Susana, had never worked on such a large canvas: "The mural was so big and I'd never painted in that kind of scale, and I'd never done a full body portrait." Therefore for some, the excitement was coupled with apprehensions about painting a picture of themselves that would be displayed in a very public location.

This excitement was also tempered as the young people began to come up against the external constraints imposed by the transit authority. They were required to paint a portrait of themselves using a specified art medium, such as pottery, sculpture, or photography. Because they needed to have a variety of media represented, Rebecca decided to have youth randomly select a medium and trade if desired. But not all youth were content with the medium they ended up with. There were also restrictions on the content of their murals. They had to be in a realistic style, they could not contain any written text, and youth had to avoid colors that could be interpreted as gang affiliated. As one youth complained, "Apparently they're very, very anal about what goes up on the station, and they look into everything that you draw so that there's no subliminal messages or anything." These top-down constraints made many youth feel, as one put it, "stifled." Carlos summarized the frustration expressed by several youth:

> We were told [that] we were going to do a self-portrait and the medium that we chose, and along the way, we came across many obstacles. Like, we thought we were going to all choose our own mediums and we had to choose them out of the bag, and there was a lot of restrictions that the [transit authority] has. So we felt at times that this was not our artwork, because we were having to follow so many rules.

As with the dissonance experienced in their internships, however, the youth actively adjusted to these limitations. Youth reported a process of coming to understand the restrictions as an inherent part of commissioned art and adapted to them, even coming to appreciate them. Jacqueline said,

> I think everybody realized we're here to do a job; it's not like summer camp or anything. Because you're working for a client, you don't have complete freedom. I think that really helps, because a lot of people my age just think, 'Oh, I can be an artist and do this and that and the other, do whatever I want.' But a lot of times, you get commissions for stuff and you're working for a client, and you have to compromise your ideas. It's realistic to what you have to do in the real world. You can't always have your own way.

Youth reported learning that when accountable to a client, they might need to make concessions, but they could still enjoy the process and find outlets for their personal expression within those constraints.

Rebecca contributed to this learning process. Anticipating that the project's constraints could hamper youth's enthusiasm, she had invited public artists to talk with them. Carlos reported, "They warned us that sometimes we're going to have to give up some stuff in order to continue doing the work, because otherwise they could always just find someone else." And he described coming to understand that "there will always be rules you have to follow, and you're just going to have to come up with ways to approach it differently so you enjoy it all the same." At the same time, Carlos and the other young artists described becoming engaged in the technical challenges of creating their murals: layering paint, creating three-dimensional perspective, how to paint clothing, and so on.

As the youth overcame this first hurdle, they quickly came across the hurdle of the looming deadline for the murals to be completed. The youth and adults had been talking about the challenge of finishing the mural on time from the 1st day. But it became clear that most youth were behind schedule, and although Rebecca and Emilio added several "emergency sessions" for the youth to paint, some youth had to adjust how they worked. Lee, who had carefully been painting each brick in the background, said he had to find a quicker approach. Marco described the deadline as a "major setback" because "here you are trying to portray who you are, but then it's due tomorrow, so you can't change your smile or you can't change your ear." Emilio provided support and suggestions. Youth said he gave inspiring motivational speeches and helped them take a holistic approach to their murals, for example, advising several youth not to get stuck on painting their faces. Some youth said that the time pressure gave them a renewed sense of energy. Jan reported experiencing "intense levels of inspiration because you're so focused." During the final crunch period, those youth who had finished their murals pitched in to help others complete theirs, which seemed to increase collective identification with the project as a whole.

After they were done, the youth reported that this experience of working with a deadline had helped them learn to manage their time. Susanna said, "It's a good learning experience because now, if I have to do it again, I know to get down." Youth described learning to plan ahead, speed up the pace, and cope with the pressure of a nonnegotiable deadline.

The youth also expressed pride in their individual and collective achievement. After the murals were completed and treated with a protective sealant, they were mounted at the train station by transit employees. Marco said that "seeing it completed was really fun." Jacqueline reported, "I just really have a huge sense of accomplishment now, because who my age gets to have their artwork up for public display that hundreds of people are going to see each day?" By creating public art, the youth also became more connected to the city. As one youth said, "Now this train station has become our train station, like the Art-First train station. It's a good feeling."

Conclusions. As with the internship, the underlying developmental process appeared to involve a dialectic of challenge and adaptive learning. Youth actively assimilated and accommodated to the real-world constraints and demands they confronted. The production of public art has been described as "complex, often unwieldy and sometimes antithetical to the artists' creative processes" (Feuer, 1989, p. 139). But after their initial dissonance with the requirements for the murals, youth described changes in their thinking that helped them adapt. They reframed their situation from the point of view of adult artists who do commissioned art. Youth also adapted to the time constraints by finding shortcuts and helping each other. Reflecting on the process, Marco said it's important to "listen to yourself":

> You just have to analyze why you're frustrated and then go on and find a solution to that. Maybe it is just because you couldn't find the right color, just certain things that may not even be that big of a deal. So you just deal with it and go on and do the best you can.

This describes a conscious process in which Marco used his emotions as information (cf. Schwarz & Clore, 1983), as cues on dissonance he needed to address. Through an active process of identifying challenges and responding to them, youth developed agency within the constraints of the project.

As with the internship, Rebecca and Emilio appeared to play an important balancing role in creating and sustaining conditions for youth to engage in this adaptive learning process. They helped youth understand that the constraints imposed on the murals had a rationale and were intrinsic to public art. They helped youth manage their work on the paintings so that the deadlines

were met. They also helped youth manage emotions that could create disengagement. Lee, who was initially anxious about his mural, said, "They told us, 'Don't be afraid if you've never worked big before or if you're not confident in your realism.' They're giving us lots of tips on how to handle the piece." As with the internships, the leaders' role can be seen as helping to balance the fit between the demands of the real-world situation (e.g., meeting the strict requirements for the murals) and the skills, dispositions, and emotions of these young artists. By balancing this fit, Rebecca and Emilio helped maintain conditions in which youth were actively engaged in learning and adapting to the demands of a real-world project.

An Unexpected Third Program Cycle: The Art Restoration Class

After the murals were mounted, a ceremony was scheduled at which the mayor would dedicate them. But one week before the ceremony, disaster struck. On a Sunday when no one was around, a vandal slashed and scratched the murals with a sharp object. The vandalism was brutal: The eyes of the youth in many of the self-portraits were gouged out.

The vandalism was deeply disturbing to the young artists and the adult staff alike. In the focus group we conducted with the youth several months later, the pain was still evident. Some expressed anger—"I was mad that we worked all summer and that within a week, they're all vandalized"—others, sadness: "It was hard; everyone worked so hard, and then to have them destroyed in one day." With the irony of youthful artists, a couple youth complained, "If you're going to vandalize it and do graffiti, at least make nice artistic design on it"; "they just scratched and gouged out, they just wanted to hurt." Several youth had a bitter feeling that the murals should be kept up "for everyone to see the crummy stuff that people will do." The youth were also resentful of the lack of security at the station, and it brought up for them other bad experiences the youth had with the transit system. Karen saw a connection to how the poor security meant that many of her friends were harassed on the trains.

Leaders' intentions and challenges. Rebecca was upset, too, but after a period of grief, she came up with the idea of addressing the youth's distress and teaching them important skills, as well. She contacted all of the students who painted the murals and asked if they would be interested in taking part in a class on art restoration in which they would learn the necessary techniques and restore the damaged paintings. Eight of the original 16 youth, plus 3 other youth, agreed to participate, even though they would not be paid this

time. Their motivation, as Susanna explained, was to "show people that even though they marked them up once, we'll still work on them again." Rebecca also took on the task of raising money ($100 per mural) to buy durable Plexi-glas to protect the murals when they were remounted.

Time line of experience and learning. Art restoration is a sophisticated craft, and Emilo, who taught the class, said that a number of restoration experts in the city scoffed at the idea that teenagers could learn it. In a 6-week course, Repairing Works of Art, the students learned the history and funda-mental techniques of art restoration, visited restoration sites around the city, and then applied what they learned to repair the murals. The objective was to restore the murals as closely as possible to their original state based on photos that had been taken before the murals were mounted. As in the final stage of painting before, youth often helped with each other's paintings, and some worked on the murals from the youth who were not in the class.

Attempting to replicate the original paintings represented another sort of real-world challenge, especially when youth were working on other youth's paintings. As Jan said,

> My style is very, very, very surreal, so when I was working on her arm, I was like, "I wish I could go just grab a different color and go like this [gestures] and turn this into some weird form." It was disciplining my way of thoughts, you know, just really focus on, "Oh, I have to do it this way." So it was like a painter's boot camp because I really wanted to step outside of the box. But in this case, it's hard for me to stay in the box and just do it exactly like the other person wanted.

Carlos reported that he had to constantly hold back and focus on replicating the original artist's style with integrity. The youth described learning skills of discipline, restraint, and compromise that are fundamental to functioning in the real world.

The youth also reported learning valuable technical skills that could help them with careers in the arts. They learned to prepare the surface of each painting by sanding and filling in the scratched and gouged areas with wood putty and gel gloss and how to mimic the original color palette and painting style. Often, the original brush stroke had been done with a large brush that carried several different colors, but to replicate that stroke, youth had to use a very small brush and put in each color separately. Emilio expressed pride in having these young people succeed in the technically demanding act of resto-ration, despite skepticism from local art restoration professionals. As the youth anticipated the murals being remounted, a couple voiced concern that

they might be damaged again, and Jan joked that they should paint some large policemen to be mounted alongside the paintings. But several said that if they were damaged again, they can always restore them again.

In the focus group, which was held in the hour before the final class session, the youth reported learning not only how to repair damaged art but also how to respond to setbacks in their lives. Carlos reasoned, "If I was able to get through this, then obviously you can get through other stuff." Jan had made a similar deduction from their experience:

> I kind of felt, I guess the word is *hope*. Like, no matter what they do, you can always bring it back to its original state, and I think that's awesome. No matter where you get in life, you get to those points where life is horrible, but you always get past it. So there's always ways to fix anything that goes wrong, regardless of what it is.

Bobby drew an even broader lesson that by applying effort, you can deliberately change yourself:

> For any artwork that you do, if anything gets ruined, you can always just fix it up. So that gives you, like, a boost of confidence knowing, like, you have your whole life to fix anything that you need to and improve on yourself no matter what.

Emilio described the restoration process as "redemption," where the group felt empowered by taking a negative setback and turning it into a positive and productive experience. In addition to learning technical skills of art restoration, the youth also had developed a sense of greater personal resiliency that they were able to respond to real-world setbacks with positive agency.

After the murals were restored, they were remounted on the platform. According to a transit authority press release announcing the dedication ceremony, the station "is more attractive and inviting thanks to Art-First's talented staff and students. Through the Adopt-a-Station program, area residents have another reason to take pride in their community and enjoy a unique gateway to the neighborhood."

DISCUSSION

This case study suggests how organized youth programs can provide young people successful experiences learning to deal with the challenges, constraints, and hard knocks of the real world. Through placements in pro-

fessional arts settings and the creation of public art, these urban American youth learned norms and developed abilities to act as agents in adult systems. Although this study is limited to one set of youth, it suggests similarities in the developmental process across two models of experiential learning, an internship and a project, and across three program cycles. We conclude by examining these similarities with the goal of providing preliminary concepts on this development process and adults' role in facilitating it.

Development Process: Challenge → Adaptation

The process that we observed driving growth across the three cycles involved a dialectic of challenge followed by learning. The youth's encounters with the unfamiliarity, complexity, and unpredictability of the real world elicited a range of dissonant reactions. Initial excitement about the internships turned to disenchantment for youth as they encountered the mundane, time-consuming, and sometimes frustrating operational procedures of the workplace. During the murals project, youth were put off by the external constraints and demands placed on them and were challenged by the large scale of the murals and the tight time schedule. The vandalization of the murals evoked an array of emotional responses among the youth, from anger and resentment to sorrow and defeat. In all these instances, youth felt discontent with their window into adult life and experienced negative emotions that, if sustained, could have led to disengagement.

These varied real-world challenges, however, induced youth to engage in adaptive processes of adjustment and learning, processes that are generally thought to be intrinsic to the human species. Piaget (1967) theorized that the experience of dissonance is what mobilizes children's and adolescents' active engagement in assimilation and accommodation. Motivational research suggests that humans have a system of intrinsic motivation, efficacy motivation, or competency motivation that is activated when they experience challenges that are within their capabilities to overcome (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Priest & Gass, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000). And research on stress suggests that humans have a fundamental disposition to adapt to traumatic events, providing the trauma is not too extreme (Compas, 2004). It appeared that youth at Art-First learned to function in real-world situations through these types of natural learning and adaptive processes.

These processes appeared to be ones in which the youth were conscious and deliberate producers of their own development. They described learning from dissonant experiences how to adapt their expectations and behavior: to accept the professional norms of their internship settings, to "control certain

aspects of my personality," to work within the constraints associated with public art. Youth reported deducing from their experience of bouncing back from the mural vandalization that they had capabilities to respond resiliently to negative encounters of the real world. Several youth identified the emotions they felt as cues for consciously figuring out how to respond to the challenges of different situations. Across all three program cycles, youth taught themselves abilities for functioning in complex, uncertain, and risky adult worlds.

Role of Adult Leaders: Balancing

Rebecca and Emilio were intentional in creating conditions for this dialectic of adaptive learning to occur. Our conceptualization of these youth practititioners' role as balancing can be related to multiple concepts in the literatures on learning and development:

- Vygotsky theorized that learning is optimized when learners are within their "zone of proximal development"; and teachers' role is to scaffold youth's engagement within this zone (Rogoff, 1998).
- The theories of intrinsic motivation that we just mentioned suggest a role for practitioners in keeping youth within a range of challenges matched to the youth's abilities (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).
- Our research suggests that youth's engagement in a program is optimized when practitioners balance supporting youth's experience of ownership with helping keep their work on track (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005).

The common theme is Eccles's (2005) idea that development is most likely to occur when there is a fit, at least an approximate fit, between youth and the environment.

The Art-First leaders were both proactive and reactive in nurturing this fit or balance between the youth and the program. Before the program started, Rebecca chose internships that would be substantive and fit to youth's interests. She designed the murals project so that youth would be challenged at a level where they could experience success. She also prepared youth for these experiences, equipping them with practical job skills and awareness of workplace etiquette and expectations fit to the real-world situations they were to be placed into.

As the program cycles proceeded, the adult leaders were also reactive in balancing—or counterbalancing—to maintain the person-environment fit. Rebecca helped youth with strategies and tips when they faced challenges at their internship sites, and she intervened when supervisors were concerned

about interns' behavior. When youth grew frustrated and overwhelmed by the mural's strict deadline and constraints, Rebecca and Emilio provided encouragement and added emergency sessions. And when the artwork was damaged, Rebecca helped the youth respond to their natural feelings of anger and bitterness by designing a course that turned the setback into a constructive learning experience. These different actions and reactions served to alter the environment, or sometimes the youth, to create a fit in which youth could more easily move forward.

A central feature of this balancing was helping youth remain engaged in the process of adaptive learning. We have suggested elsewhere that adult leaders help keep youth in a "channel of engagement" (Larson, Hansen, & Walker, 2005). In the context of this program, the term *channel* suggests a degree of canalization that was only intermittent because the nature of real-world experiences is to repeatedly knock youth off balance. The youth's lack of prior real-world experience made it harder for Rebecca to provide a continual experience of youth-environment fit, and it would not have been helpful for her to blunt every real-world encounter the youth had, because the dissonance youth experienced stimulated the process of adaptive learning. Rather, her role appeared to be that of protecting youth from extreme and extended experiences of dissonance that could precipitate disengagement.

Limits and Future Directions

The value of a case study is to provide an in-depth, contextual look at the phenomena of interest as a means of generating concepts for future research (Stake, 1995). A limit of case studies, however, is that they provide little information on whether and how these concepts generalize across diverse settings. Research aimed at examining and testing the processes described here across programs is needed. A particular limitation of this case study was that the program went so well that we have little data to understand how youth's experiences with the real world can go askew and on the conditions under which lack of fit between youth and program leads youth to disengage. Further work is needed to study these issues with youth in diverse programs, including those that are less successful. Research is also needed that examines individual differences between youth: How might these developmental processes differ by age, prior experience, ethnicity, and different dimension of individual fit with the program environment? Through following diverse youth's experiences across time, we can more adequately understand the conditions under which they experience sustained engagement in learning to function in complex and unpredictable real-world settings.

NOTES

1. The name of the program, the youth, and the adult leaders have been changed to provide anonymity.

2. The study of Art-First was part of a larger research project in which multiple youth programs were studied with the same procedures (Larson et al., 2004). The protocol and funding for the larger project dictated 8 to 12 youth to be interviewed in each program.

REFERENCES

Adams, D., & Goldbard, A. (2001). *Creative community: The art of cultural development*. New York: Rockefeller.

Baker, B. (2004). Dissemination of research to reform practice: Fishing (and lawyering) to learn. In P. L. Linn, A. Howard, & E. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook for research in cooperative education and internships* (pp. 279-300). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1999). Environments in developmental perspective: Theoretical and operational models. In S. Friedman & T. Wachs (Eds.), *Measuring environment across the life span* (pp. 3-28). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Coleman, J. S., Bremmer, R. H., Clark, B. R., Davis, J. B., Eichorn, D. H., Griliches, Z., et al. (1974). *Youth transition to adulthood: Report of the panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Compas, B. E. (2004). Processes of risk and resilience during adolescence: Linking contexts and individuals. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 263-296). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: HarperCollins.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Free Press.

Eccles, J. S. (2005). The present and future research on activity settings as developmental contexts. In J. Mahoney, J. Eccles, & R. Larson (Eds.), *After-school activities: Contexts of development* (pp. 353-371). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Feuer, W. (1989). Public art from a public sector perspective. In A. Raven (Ed.), *Art in the public interest* (pp. 139-153). Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.

Heath, S. B. (1994). The project of learning from the inner-city youth perspective. In F. A. Villarruel & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Promoting community-based programs for socialization and learning: New directions for child development* (Vol. 63, pp. 25-34). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Heath, S. B. (1997, April). *Language and work: Learning and identity development of older children in community settings*. George Miller Committee Lecture, University of Illinois, Urbana.

Heath, S. B. (1998). Working through language. In S. M. Hoyle & C. T. Adger (Eds.), *Kids talk: Strategic language use in later childhood* (pp. 217-240). New York: Oxford University Press.

Heath, S. B., & Smyth, L. (2000). Art *Show: Youth and community development*. Washington, DC: Partners for Livable Communities.

Jarrett, R. L., Sullivan, P. J., & Watkins, N. D. (2005). Developing social capital through participation in organized youth programs: Qualitative insights from three programs. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *39*(1), 41-55.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Larson, R. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 170-183.

Larson, R., & Hansen, D. (2005). The development of strategic thinking: Learning to impact humans systems in a youth activism program. *Human Development, 48*, 327-349.

Larson, R., Hansen, D. M., & Walker, K. C. (2005). Everybody's gotta give: Adolescents' development of initiative within a youth program. In J. Mahoney, J. Eccles, & R. Larson (Eds.), *After-school activities: Organized Activities as contexts of development*, pp. 159-183. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Larson, R., Jarrett, R., Hansen, D., Pearce, N., Sullivan, P., Walker, K., et al. (2004). Organized youth activities as contexts of positive development. In A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *Positive psychology in practice* (pp. 540-560). New York: John Wiley.

Larson, R., & Kleiber, D. (1993). Daily experience of adolescents. In P. Tolan & B. Cohler (Eds.), *Handbook of clinical research and practice with adolescents* (pp. 125-145). New York: John Wiley.

Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *33*(1), 74-75.

Lerner, R. (2002). *Concepts and theories of human development* (3rd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lerner, R., & Busch-Rossnagel, N. (1981). *Individuals as producers of their development*. New York: Academic Press.

Lerner, R., Theokas, C., & Jelicic, H. (2005). Youth as active agents in their own positive development: A developmental systems perspective. In E. Greuve, K. Rothermund, & D. Wentura (Eds.), *The adaptive self: Personal continuity and intentional self-development* (pp. 31-47). Cambridge, MA: Hogrefe & Huber.

Marling, W. (1992). The vague aches of interns. In A. Ciofalo (Ed.), *Internships: Perspectives on experiential learning* (pp. 46-51). Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluative methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Piaget, J. (1967). *Biology and knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Priest, S., & Gass, M. A. (1997). *Effective leadership in adventure programming*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Ragin, C. C. (2000). *Fuzzy-set social science*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rogoff, B. (1998). Cognition as a collaborative process. In W. Damon, D. Kuhn, & R. Siegler (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (Vol. 2, 5th ed., pp. 679-744). New York: John Wiley.

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 68-78.

Schwarz, N., & Clore, G. L. (1983). Mood, misattribution, and judgments of well-being: Informative and directive functions of affective states. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *45*, 513-523.

Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. (1991). *What work requires of schools: A SCANS report for America 2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sweitzer, H. F., & King, M. A. (2004). *The successful internship: Transformation and empowerment* (2nd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (3rd ed.). New York: John Wiley.

Walker, J., Marczak, M., Blyth, D., & Bordon, L. (2005). Designing youth development programs: Toward a theory of developmental intentionality. In J. Mahoney, J. Eccles, & R. Larson (Eds.), *After-school activities: Contexts of development* (pp. 399-418). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Youniss, J., McLellan, J. A., & Yates, M. (1997). What we know about engendering civic identity. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *40*(5), 620-631.