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Discovering the Possible:
How Youth Programs Provide Apprenticeships in Purpose

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> "I've learned skills here; and it makes me feel better about life beyond high school: the life that makes us all freak out. I've realized that even small projects, our projects, can mean a big deal to other people. I realized that I just want to make a difference."
>
> Liliana, Member of Unified Youth[1]

To develop purpose young people need to discover they can influence the future. Many teens live in the present. The possibility of achieving long-term goals can be unimaginable (Damon, 2008). As described by Liliana, the adult world can be frightening and overwhelming. Society seems rigged against them, and it *is* for youth who experience marginalization (Furstenberg, 2006). To develop purpose, teens must believe they can overcome obstacles to their goals – and must develop competencies and dispositions to do so (Hill, Burrow & Sumner, 2013).

In this chapter I examine an intentional setting in which teens have experiences pursuing meaningful goals. Youth development programs (including school extra-curricular and community programs) are a context in which many teens discover they can make a difference and build competencies for purpose. My research team has focused on project-based arts, technology, and leadership programs in which high-school-age teens work over time to plan,

[1] Names of youth, staff, and programs are pseudonyms.

create, or achieve something meaningful. The ethnically diverse low-to-middle class youth in our studies created films, planned events, and lobbied public officials, among other projects. Liliana organized community events for Latinx families; and through these experiences she developed planning skills and became invested in serving her community. These programs and projects, as I describe, provide a rich apprenticeship in purpose building.

Several authors have recognized the role of youth programs in purpose development (Bronk, 2014; Damon & Malin, 2020; Sumner, Burrow & Hill, 2018), but little research has examined *how* this occurs: What are the processes? Studying this question can help illuminate professional practices and youth processes that support purpose development across organizational settings (including schools and faith-based organizations). But it is a complex question. We know that adults cannot directly *teach* or *impose* purpose on youth. The development of purpose and competencies for purpose need to be youth-driven (Damon, 2008). Adults' role requires skilled, soft-touch transactions that serve youth's self-creation processes.

This question is also complex because many of the youth processes my team has identified involve struggle. As I discuss, youth like Liliana build competencies for purpose through episodes of grappling with difficult, ill-structured challenges in their projects. These include the challenges of pursuing real-world goals (e.g., navigating the unknown, confronting injustices, creating art that impacts others) and challenges with their own emotions (e.g., frustration, experiences of failure). Because these processes are complex and are played out within the nuanced dynamic context of program activities, we have studied them with qualitative methods. My goal here is to illuminate processes of purpose development in context, as supported by staff and enacted by youth.

Background: Purpose Development in Adolescence

Before introducing our research, let me situate it within the purpose literature. Studies indicate that few teens develop a lasting life purpose – that is more likely in early adulthood (Malin, Reilly, Quinn, & Moran, 2013). However research suggests that adolescence can be an important period to develop competencies and dispositions that contribute to purpose (sometimes called "precursors"). These include skills for planning, self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and moral character strengths (Bronk, 2014; Damon & Malin, 2020; Kosby & Mariano, 2011; Livner Urban, MacDonnell, Roberts, Quinn, Samtani … Morgan, 2018). Teens in our research reported gains in these competencies in youth programs.

The literature also identifies some of the experiences that can contribute to purpose development in adolescence. One is experiences of pursuing and successfully achieving meaningful goals (Bronk, 2014; Sumner et al., 2018); I will describe how project-based programs excel in providing these. Other experiences that can contribute to purpose-building include: exploring interests, discovering talents, having a mentoring relationship (Bronk, 2014), and developing a social network of people with shared goals (Sumner et al., 2018). Our studies show how programs afford youth these purpose-building opportunities.

Our Research on Development in Youth Programs

A context of high engagement. My interest in programs as developmental contexts was sparked decades ago, when I was conducting experience sampling studies of adolescents' daily lives. Teens reported on their psychological states when signaled at random times across the day. My attention was captured by the repeated finding that programs were a unique context in teens' lives where they experienced much higher than average levels of feeling challenged, intrinsic motivation, and concentration, *simultaneously* (Larson & Klieber, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen, 1993; Larson, 2011). *Whatever challenges they were working on in*

programs appeared to be really engaging! This is a state that is optimal for leaning. The high motivation suggested that youth were energized; and the high concentration suggested youth had the cognitive bandwidth to devote their minds fully to new and complex challenges in their projects (Larson & Rusk, 2011).

I became especially interested in project-based programs because Heath (1998) found that conducting a project over an *arc of work* provides special affordances for youth's learning. I suspected that being highly engaged across this arc of challenging work could be a driver of powerful developmental processes (Larson, 2000), which could include developing purpose. This hunch led me to drop what I was doing and change the purpose driving *my* research life. I devoted myself fully to the idea that youth in project-based programs might be voluntarily and intensely engaged in powerful processes of self-creation.

Now, 20 years later, my team has completed qualitative interview studies with hundreds of youth in dozens of high-quality project-based programs. We confirmed that these youth were often "super-motivated" (as one said) and deeply engaged. We discovered that this was partly because they became *personally invested* in their projects (Dawes & Larson, 2011). When my collaborator Nickki Dawes asked our youth what motivated them, they said their projects had become connected to personal goals, including to future school and work goals, experiencing competency, and Damon's (2008) noble goals that are "beyond the self" (these included goals like teaching children and working to keep teens out of gangs). An additional discovery was that youth were invested not just as individuals, but often as members of teams working toward shared project goals (Larson, McGovern & Orson, 2019).

Because they were so motivated they dived deeply into their projects: they took on difficult challenges and roles; they learned to work together and developed competencies for

purpose. Before discussing these findings, however, let me describe our research.

Research methods for studying processes in youth programs. Our studies obtained youth's and staff's accounts of their program experiences. We interviewed youth about ongoing progress and challenges in their projects, how challenges were resolved, what they learned, how they learned it, and the roles of leaders and peers in supporting this learning. We interviewed adult staff (henceforth "leaders") about why, when, and how they provided supports for youth's work and learning. For both, we repeatedly asked for examples of specific experiences, actions and interactions that were related to youth's projects and learning processes. Although we did not ask about development of purpose, much of the data we obtained were directly related.

The findings I report come from three studies with a total of 29 project-based programs that served high-school-aged youth. We selected programs that had features of high quality: they were youth-centered, had experienced staff, and high rates of youth retention (Larson, McGovern, & Orson, 2019). The net sample included 259 youth and 84 experienced program leaders, most interviewed at multiple points over the course of the program.[2] The interviewed youth were about equally African American, Latinx, and European American. Because they represent two-thirds of the sample, most of the examples I feature here are youth of color.

In the chapter, I first present a case study of one youth's program experiences that shaped her purpose development. Then I describe how programs and staff create an environment that supports youth's purpose building. The next two sections report findings on how youth develop competencies and direction for purpose. In the conclusion, I then provided an integrated picture of how program supports and youth processes together facilitate purpose development.

II. A Case Example: Imani's Development of Purpose in a Mural Arts Program

[2] Results from these studies have been reported in numerous publications (www.youthdev.illinois.edu).

Sponsored by a local Mexican art museum, Toltecat Muralists has been a neighborhood institution for years. Youth learn graffiti and mural skills, meet local artists, and have created over 30 community murals. Photos of some were on the walls of the studio, along with art by current members. Toltecat exemplifies key elements we found in other high-quality programs. The program members (all Latinx and African American) described a positive interpersonal environment. The two Mexican-American leaders cultivated high standards for youth's work, at the same time they supported youth's artistic expression and ownership.

Joining the program. During her year in Toltecat, Imani Marks reported a chain of meaningful experiences that contributed to her active processes of purpose development. Imani was an African American 10th grader from a Westside Chicago neighborhood. Asked what her life would have been like if she hadn't participated, she said: "Before I joined, I wasn't doing a lot and I felt tired. Me and my friend would hang out after school and do nothing." Imani was shy and quiet, but she was interested in art. So she decided to try it.

On the first day Imani found the group environment welcoming, "I liked how all the other students greeted me and I was real comfortable." They shared her interest in art, and she quickly became friends, as they worked side-by-side on initial training activities, like learning to spray-paint block letters. As their projects became bigger, the group bonded around their shared investment in the Toltecat tradition of doing good murals.

Imani also progressively opened up and developed a trusting relationship with the adult program leader, Desiree Bustamante:

> She would help with some of my strokes that I got wrong, with critical advice. That really helped me a lot. It made me respect her more too. She never really insulted me at all – other adults they just want to hit it into your head. She's just so fun and laid back that it

makes me comfortable around her...Things she does inspire me.

Many youth distrust adults because of encounters in which teachers, public officials and others were domineering and disrespectful toward them, an experience especially frequent for youth of color (Jarrett, Sullivan & Watkins, 2005; Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Apfel, Brzustoski, Master, Hessert, Williams, & Cohen, 2014). But Desiree was like a friend. She supported Imani's agency as a learner and artist; she provided straightforward feedback that helped her develop new skills and take on more ambitious artistic goals.

Much to Imani surprise, she emerged as a group leader. Although shy, she was highly self-motivated (an asset confirmed by her mother). Imani explained, "I motivate myself, usually just by thoughts in my head like, 'I can do this.'" Desiree described how other youth started to turn to Imani for advice, and Imani began to recognize that she had an important role in the group: "When I said something and everyone agreed with me, I felt I should speak my mind more often." Imani took responsibility within the group. She said it was a new experience to be a leader, "with other people depending on me; before, it was always just me."

Creating a community mural. The climax of the year was students' creation of a mural on the front of the program building. Imani described how the group planned the mural. "Usually it would start as a conversation about bad things [in the city] and, then, how we can turn that into something good." They were particular concerned about the negative attitudes Chicago adults had toward them. (Earlier in the year, the group had been racially profiled and followed when they visited a downtown art store; Gutiérrez Larson, Raffaelli, Fernandez, & Guzman, 2017). Imani said, "We wanted to show the community something different." They decided: "We're going to put a Hispanic [girl] on one side and an African American girl on the other side and they would have inspiring words around them to show that there is good out there." This was a

"beyond-the-self" purpose.

As they got into the painting, Imani said: "It was really starting to build up. It was getting fun and intense." The mural caught the attention of passersby, who stopped to talk with them and complement them on it. Youth saw that it was meaningful to community members.

But they also encountered challenges. Imani was responsible for spray-painting the African American girl, and she painted her over and over again trying to get her to look "natural." There were other challenges in the work they had to resolve (color scheme, choosing inspiring words). I'll discuss later how grappling with these challenges in projects builds real-world strategic skills that are important to purpose.

Youth also encountered emotional-motivational challenges that interfered with their work. Imani described getting frustrated with painting the girl for the mural and with having to stand in the hot sun for a long time: "Sometimes I felt like, 'I'm done! I quit!' I put the cans down and I just walk in and sit there pouting." But the group helped her re-motivate herself: "They would just make me laugh, and then I noticed I was laughing. I would forget the frustration and start doing what I was doing." Because the youth were highly invested in the mural, they developed strategies for being resilient to emotional setbacks. Desiree coached youth on some of these strategies.

When it was finished Imani and others reported being proud of their mural. It was meaningful to have it represent them on a major Chicago street. Toltecat held an end-of-year showcase event that helped youth celebrate. These showcase events serve important functions in validating youth's hard work and success in overcoming challenges (Smith, McGovern, Larson, Hilltaker, & Peck, 2016).

Gaining purpose. At the end Imani reported how her experiences at Toltecat had made

her into a different more purposeful person:

> Before I thought I was less than I was, and then when people started telling me what I could do, it was like 'I didn't know that!' They were telling me something about myself that I didn't know, and that *changed how I view myself completely* (emphasis added).

Her cumulative experiences – close bonds with peers and Desiree, her emergence as a leader, overcoming challenges, the success of the mural – all added up to give Imani greater confidence and self-efficacy. As was common among youth we studied, she discovered she could do remarkable things she never imagined she could do. She discovered the possible.

Interrelated with this increased self-efficacy, Imani developed multiple new competencies. She described acquiring a toolkit of new artistic skills. She had become less shy: "Now I feel like I can just walk up to somebody and have a conversation with them." She learned new "leadership skills, before I didn't really take charge of anyone, but I was given the opportunity, and that's what I did." She also gained skills for persevering through frustration, and for pushing herself to higher standards: "That was good, but you could do so much better." In addition, Desiree reported that Imani developed greater responsibility, and Imani said that the program had made her more responsible at home: taking care of her brothers and sisters. These are all competencies for acting deliberately in the world and likely contributors to purpose.

Indeed, Imani said her Toltecat experiences had given her more direction and purpose in life:

> Since being here, I am focusing more... It made me want to do something with my future. I don't want to be another girl that dropped out of high school and is sitting around doing nothing with her life… It made me want to do more

We did not follow youth in this study, so we do not know Imani's subsequent life trajectory. But

at the end of the program she described wanting to pursue a career in the arts. Overall, she said: "Being in Toltecat gave me the experience that I need and want for my future career."

III. Youth Programs as Intentional Environments for Purpose Building

I now examine how youth programs provide structures and supports that allow teens to have experiences like Imani's: How do they engender high motivation and support youth's active engagement in purpose-building processes? The short answer is that high quality programs are designed and intentionally cultivated by staff to facilitate members' engagement in youth-driven learning experiences (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Borden, 2005; Smith et al., 2016).

To go deeper, let's start with youth's answer to this question. When we asked them what motivated and engaged them in program activities, they attributed it to programs being "different," "new" and "more fun" than other parts of their lives. When they walked in the door they experienced an environment with distinct ways of being – new ways of thinking, relating to others, and acting that were shared norms among members (Larson, McGovern & Orson, 2019).

We found that this new and motivating shared environment consisted of both an interpersonal environment and work environment. I describe both, including how they were supported by program leaders.

A constructive high-functioning community. Across programs we studied, the interpersonal environment was that of a mutually-respectful and caring community. Youth said their programs were a place where anger was rare and "people won't make fun of me." As at Toltecat, members were committed to relating to each other in principled, high-functioning ways: "people stay positive," communicate honestly, and everyone was viewed as equal, different and important (Larson, McGovern & Orson, 2019; Smith et al., 2016).[3] As a result,

[3] There were times youth had conflicts. But the positive norms included expectations that conflicts be resolved.

youth reported feeling safe, included, and cared for. They also experienced strong bonds to the group, to the "we." The adult leaders were participants in these positive norms and bonds. As happened with, Imani, youth experienced leaders as atypical adults whom they came to trust as both friends (i.e., as equals and partners in the "we") and as program mentors (Griffith & Larson, 2016; Walker, 2011). This contributed to youth's motivation.

These collective norms and bonds among youth – and with leaders – resemble those of learning communities that support moral development (Snarey & Samuelson, 2014). We found that they also served as powerful catalysts for youth's active developmental processes, including building purpose. Because youth felt safe and respected, they were able to share new ideas, be honest about feelings, construct meaning, and learn collaboratively (Larson, McGovern & Orson, 2019; Larson, Raffaelli, Guzman, Salusky, Orson, & Kenzer, 2019). This kind of support network can be valuable to purpose development (Sumner et al., 2018).

In high quality programs, this positive principled community is cultivated by staff, following shared professional practices (Smith et al., 2016). Leaders do not impose community norms on youth. On the first day many leaders ask youth to decide on norms *they* want to follow, which inevitably lead to the positive interpersonal norms just described. Leaders also use icebreakers and group activities to help youth build positive group norms and relationships (Orson, McGovern, & Larson, submitted). Then as needed later, they remind youth of these norms and ensure they are maintained.[4] In short, staff facilitate youth's ownership of this new and different interpersonal environment, which helps catalyze youth's purpose building.

A work environment that supports successful projects. Damon and Malin (2019) suggest that programs contribute to purpose development by providing "integrated supports" that

[4] Leaders also modeled these norms in their relationships with youth.

help youth engage in purposeful activities. High-quality programs, like Toltecat, provide an intentional work environment that does this (Larson, McGovern & Orson, 2019). To begin with, programs draw on the norms for positive high-functioning relationship just discussed. Youth describe these relationships as contributing to their motivation and to their doing high-quality work. Projects are often done collaboratively and youth report benefiting from working in an effective, principled team: They are able to pool ideas, grapple with challenges, and learn together. Even when youth work separately, they often exchange feedback and support each other's projects (Larson, Jensen et al., 2013; Orson et al., submitted).

The long-term arc of project work is often the vehicle for youth-driven learning processes (as discussed in next sections). Our research identified consistent norms across programs that supported youth's learning over this arc. Like other norms, these are cultivated by leaders and embraced by youth. First, leaders in all programs we studied supported youth's agency in their projects (Larson, Izenstrak, Rodriguez, & Perry, 2016). As at Toltecat, it was recognized that youth had input and make decisions. Youth said that experiencing this agency contributed to their motivation and experience of responsibility for their projects. A second frequent shared norm was that people took their work seriously ("we do good work"), which seems valuable to building purpose. A third norm was that mistakes and setbacks are viewed as normal and as valuable opportunities for learning (Smith et al., 2016). Episodes of ups and downs are expected in pursuing goals.

But although setbacks were expected, the ultimate success of projects appeared to be important to validating youth's developing capacities for long-term work. As with Imani, we found that experiencing success and pride helps build youth's confidence; and it provides confirmation of skills they are developing for purposeful action (Larson & Angus, 2011a; Smith

et al., 2016). Success helps transform a youth's arc of hard work and grappling with challenges into a narrative of successful struggle that achieved meaningful goals. But how do programs make it possible for youth – often novices in the project work – to experience success?

This is another domain where experienced staff play a skilled role in providing structures and supports (Larson et al, 2016). As I have said, the professional goals of staff put a high priority on supporting youth's agency. However, leaders' provide this support within an intentional framework of short and longer-term goals: they try to maximize youth's agency over decisions, but they also provide supports for the long-term success of youth's work. How do they do this? They have a partnership of mutual respect with youth, in which their greater experience and knowledge is valued, but is used sparingly. For example, they may use their experience to set realistic initial limits on projects and to coach youth on reachable goals. When youth want assistance with a challenge they can't solve, leaders are available to help them think it through, so that youth regain the experiences of control over their work. Youth in our research gratefully reported that leaders provided this assistance in situations where they needed it: "when ideas wouldn't work" or "if we get stuck." The delicate skill here is that staff provide help in restrained ways that support youth's ongoing ownership of their work and learning processes. This can include soft-touch assistance that keeps their projects on track, helps youth finish on time (no small thing, even for adults!), and that allows youth to experience success and learn from the affirmation that success provides. This limited assistance (we called it "the art of restraint") both supports youth's ongoing experience of agency and contributes to youth's development of competencies for agency (Larson et al., 2016).

To summarize, staff in high-quality programs do many things, from cultivating positive group norms to providing guard rails for youth's work and ongoing coaching. Youth report that

these practices support their motivation and learning. As a whole the program and staff curate a social and work environment that, as we'll see next, provides favorable conditions for developing purpose.

IV. Youth's Processes Building Competencies for Purpose

We found that youth's experiences in these high-quality environments generates a cascade of social-emotional learning processes. Youth's intense investment in their projects drives learning in many social and emotional domains (including teamwork, empathy, problem-solving, time-management; also project-specific skills, e.g., arts skills; Larson, 2011; Smith et al., 2016)).

In this section I focus on youth's development of two competencies for pursuing purpose: strategic skills and skills for regulation of emotion and motivation. In the next section, I will describe processes that influenced the direction of purpose.

Developing Strategic Skills for Achieving Real-World Goals

Purpose often involves pursuing goals. But achieving goals in real-world contexts is hard. Whether your aim is excelling in a career, creative achievement, or community service, the pathway is not likely to be linear. Numerous unruly challenges and obstacles are likely to stand in the way or emerge unexpectedly (Hill et al., 2013). Pursuing purpose can require figuring out how other people think, navigating the contradictions and complexity of human systems, and anticipating unintended consequences (Larson, 2011).

We found that program projects provide youth valuable learning experiences grappling with these kinds of unruly real-world challenges. Imani discovered that painting a girl who looks "natural" to others was more difficult than she thought. Youth who were lobbying officials, teaching children, and planning events encountered challenges that involved ill-structured multi-

dimensional problems, catch 22s, and "adults who tell you yes, and later say no" (Larson & Angus, 2011a, p.283; Larson & Hansen, 2005).

How did youth learn from these unruly real-world challenges? Often youth's learning process started with brainstorming to figure out what the challenge or "problem" was that they needed to solve. Then they developed plans, experimented with different solutions, and learned from their mistakes and successes. Throughout these steps, new youth learned partly from observing peers with experiences from prior projects. Adult leaders sometimes suggested new ways of viewing situations and provided coaching, but in restrained ways that supported youth's agency (e.g., by posing questions rather than solving the challenge). Over the arc of projects, youth learned through repeated cycles of brainstorming, trying out strategies, and evaluating what works (Heath, 1998; Larson & Angus, 2011a & b).

Xavier (an African American) in a media program illustrates this processes of learning through cycles of challenges. He and a friend wanted to make a film that communicated the passion of a Chicago folk singer they liked. An early challenge they grappled with was how to get their viewers' full attention. To do this, they decided to start the film with a gunshot. But the program leader asked if gunshot effectively drew attention *to the singer*. Their next idea was to use footage of the singer talking about his passion. But they tried it and discovered that film clips of him saying "making music makes me happy" were not convincing. They decided they needed to "show" his passion. So they picked out footage of him playing where: "You can see how emotional he gets. He's making hand gestures, you can tell it's what he loves." This worked somewhat better. But in a next iteration, they discovered that interweaving shots of the singer talking and singing with passion worked best: it synthesized the power of his personality and his music. From addressing these challenges, Xavier reported: "We learned how to say things

without actually saying it: to get at the meaning under it." Through this arc of interactive cycles, Xavier and his friend had an impactful experience of becoming more creative and purposeful artists.

What competencies did youth learn from this process? In analyses of accounts from 108 youth, we identified a skill set we called "strategic thinking." It included three components: active anticipation of future scenarios, using knowledge of how people think, and flexible if-then planning (Table 1). These are not rote skills that can be directly taught, they need to be (at least partly) learned from experience. They are "process skills" for navigating the diverse, unpredictable challenges encountered in pursuing real-world goals. Some of youth's learning was specific to the domain of youth's projects (e.g., learning to think like a child you are teaching or an official you are trying to influence), but many had more generalizable applicability. Youth in this study described transferring these strategic skills to goal pursuits in other domains of their lives; and when we interviewed them two years later, many reported that they were applying strategic skills learned from the program to pursuing educational, career and civic goals (Larson & Angus, 2011a). The programs had provided an apprenticeship in purpose.

Building Competencies for Dealing with Emotional-Motivational Downturns

Exceptional people who pursued noble life purposes (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, Nelson Mandela, Ruth Bader Ginsberg) had to overcome intense experiences of frustration, disappointment, and self-doubt. Less ambitious forms of life purpose can also require competencies for overcoming these internal emotional-motivational obstacles. We found that youth's projects helped them learn skills for dealing with these downturns. Even though staff encouraged them to see setbacks as normal, many encountered at least one episode of negative emotions accompanied by self-doubt and reduced motivation (Larson, McGovern & Orson,

2019). For Imani it was triggered by frustration with not getting her painting of the girl right. For others it happened when they performed poorly in a theater rehearsal or realized that the work required was much greater than they could handle.

How did youth learn to manage these strong emotions? Some youth learned through experimentation or analyzing the situation: They tried out different strategies for self-talk and reframing the cause of their distress. Many benefited from others' help. Like Imani youth got help from peers to distract themselves, laugh off their distress, and try different coping strategies. Leaders were also valuable sources of modeling and coaching on self-regulation of emotions (Rusk, Larson, Raffaelli, Walker, Washington, Gutierrez, Kang, Tran, & Perry, 2013; Smith et al., 2016). In instances when youth showed signs of spiraling distress, leaders helped them better understand the emotions and learn strategies for managing them. They helped youth turn emotional setbacks into learning experiences (Orson & Larson, in press).

Across multiple studies, youth described developing a range of knowledge and strategies for regulation of emotions and motivation in goal pursuits (Table 2). These include not just learning to manage these downturns, but also learning to use emotions constructively (e.g., for motivation, as sources of information, Rusk et al., 2013). Program members describe gaining psychological knowledge for recognizing emotions and understanding their causes and effects. They also described learning problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies and strategies for managing emotions in groups. Some also described learning skills for managing their motivation. These skills are important to purpose (Livner et al., 2018).

Further research is needed. But these findings suggest how projects and the supports provide by staff can help youth develop competencies for dealing with both the external real-world challenges and internal emotional challenges that can accompany a life purpose.

V. Developing Direction

Youth in programs also reported developing direction (or aims) for purpose. They described how programs helped them shape ideas about what they wanted to do for their career – for their life's work. Some also reported developing moral direction.

Career Direction: Finding Fit

"Wow, this is something I would love to do," this is what Maria reported after a program experience in industrial design, "It has everything I'm looking for: the business aspect, people interaction, painting, being an innovator, and a different challenge every week." My former student, Aimee Rickman (2009), found that many youth like Maria, used program experiences to discover, explore, and narrow down the work they wanted to do as adults. They described benefiting from real-world experiences enacting roles within a profession. This helped them see how the daily work of an occupation fit (or did not fit) their personal interests and sensibilities.

Many had doubted their abilities to succeed in a desired profession; but program experiences addressed their doubts. For example, Jake was interested in ministry, but was unsure he had the needed interpersonal skills. In a theater program he had experiences practicing those skills and developing confidence in using them. As a result, he said: "Theater's definitely made [ministry] a viable option for me." Rickman reported that program experiences helped youth get beyond idealized and glamorous images of a career, and provided them a more realistic understanding of the day-to-day challenges and rewards of an occupation. It helped them align their occupational choice with their emerging purpose.

Moral Direction: Embracing Responsibilities Beyond the Self

Malin et al.'s (2014) suggested that the *roles* youth hold in programs can contribute to formation of purpose that is meaningful beyond the self – a significant moral function. Youth in

our studies described the process through which this occurs. We found that many youth in programs take on roles (e.g., cameraperson, dance captain, teacher) in which they experienced moral accountability to others. Holding these roles (like conducting a project) appears to be a powerful vehicle for learning and self-change (Larson, Raffaelli et al., 2019; Salusky et al., 2013). These roles entailed substantial and challenging responsibilities to peers and sometimes to people outside the program (e.g., community members, youth they were mentoring).

An important finding, from a sample of 73 youth with roles, was that they chose or voluntarily accepted these positions and were committed to carrying out the role's responsibilities (Larson, Raffaelli et al., 2019). Even when youth discovered that these responsibilities were more demanding than they expected (which happened often), they remained faithful to fulfilling them. As with projects, program leaders provided coaching when youth asked for it; and peers were helpful with support – including giving them a nudge when needed to complete the role obligations.

The most important finding was that many teens not only embraced their role, they internalized it. They reported transferring the responsible ways of acting they had learned from their role to relationships outside the program. In other parts of their lives they were now more proactive in "thinking about, anticipating, and responding to situational needs of others" (Larson, Raffaelli et al., 2019). But why? Aren't teenagers supposed to abhor responsibility? The answer is no. Like Imani, they were proud of what they contributed to the group and to others through their role. They also liked the mature, responsible, and ethical self they experienced in the role. Riley, an African American, who was mentoring middle school students, discovered that: "Helping people feels good. You can help yourself while you're helping someone else." This fits Damon's (2008) definition of purpose as an aim that is "meaningful to the self and consequential

beyond the self" (p. 33). Through their role experiences, youth appeared to develop a moral identity, as someone who is responsible to others.

In programs focused on service, youth also developed a sense of responsibility to the community. We studied two youth activism programs (whose members were youth of color), and some described developing a long-term commitment to working for social justice. These youth were following a path to purpose that is catalyzed by reactions to injustice and discrimination (Summers at al. 2018). Xiamara, an African American, described how the program had opened her to seeing the injustices experienced by different groups (e.g., Latinx, GLBT youth), and she became interested in becoming a community activist to fight injustice. Two other teens in this program wanted to become lawyers and defend people's rights (Watkins, Larson & Sullivan, 2007).

Again, we did not follow these youth into adulthood, so we don't know whether these aims became life purposes. Nonetheless, the findings illuminate how youth's experiences in programs can provide opportunities for youth to work on and develop moral direction.

VI. Conclusion: Purpose Development in Youth Programs

I think it can be very difficult growing to adulthood in the complex and disorderly world of the 21st century (Larson, 2011); and developing purpose can be even more daunting. The world we live in is incredibly heterogeneous, often chaotic and unjust, and mostly outside our control. No wonder teens tune out. It can take a lot of mental bandwidth and support from others for them to develop an empowered self to pursue purpose, especially goals "beyond the self."

Project-based youth programs are intentional settings designed to provide conditions for teens to experience empowerment. Viktor Frankl (1959) describes how WWII concentration camps were radically *inhospitable* to prisoners' experience of meaning and purpose. Youth

programs provide what might be seen as mirror-opposite *hospitable* conditions for purpose-building experiences. These include:

1. A culture of safety, inclusion, and principled relationships – caring bonds among youth and staff that provide a positive learning community.
2. Opportunities to undertake projects – time-limited experiences of purpose that require grappling with real-world challenges, but that ultimately allow youth experiences of success.
3. Norms that support serious, high-functioning collaboration with peers, which allows youth to provide mutual support, pool resources, learn to together, and develop purpose through collective meaning-making.
4. Opportunities to hold meaningful roles in which they have substantive responsibilities and experience moral accountability to others.
5. Staff who are skilled in practices that sustain these conditions for youth, including practices for cultivating positive relationships, facilitating youth-driven projects, and providing restrained assistance in ways that supports youth's agency while also helping them succeed and develop their skills for agency (see also Smith et al., 2006).

In providing these conditions, programs deliberately accommodate teens who are tuned out, wary of adulthood, and doubt their capacity to influence the future.

When youth have these opportunities and supports, we find, they come alive pursuing project goals, in ways that are outside many adults' conception of teens. The mostly African-American and Latinx youth in our study became actively engaged in processes that built foundations for purpose. To be supportive of youth, it is essential that we understand and respect these processes – as teens experience and enact them. Let me postulate three processes that I think are central, based on findings from youth programs:

1. A key is that youth become highly invested in their projects, as individuals and collectively. Because they have support, feel connected, and their projects have meaningful goals, youth experience a high level of intrinsic motivation and cognitive engagement. This state creates energy and cognitive bandwidth for youth to engage with complex problems (Larson & Rusk, 2011). For some it may be the first time they have thrown themselves into a long-term purposeful venture.

2. This high investment and bandwidth enables youth to take on the difficult challenges inherent in pursuing goals. These include multidimensional real-world challenges and periodic internal emotional challenges created by setbacks or being overwhelmed. Youth learn through repeated episodes of grappling with complex tasks and situations: through brainstorming, experimenting, and assessing solutions. Through these processes they develop strategic skills and self-regulation skills that I suggest are vital to purpose.

3. Another important process occurs when youth voluntarily take on substantive program roles. Having a position of responsibility to (and for) others is an opportunity to be in charge of something that matters – that is meaningful to both the self and to others. Through embracing these roles, youth have positive experience of enacting a moral identity and purpose, which they find powerful. Many report transferring this new responsible way of thinking and acting to other life contexts.

I have described the outcomes of youth's learning as "competencies and dispositions." But it may be that what youth most carry forward and use in the future is the narratives they obtain of successful struggle: narratives of working toward goals, solving challenges, holding consequential roles, collaborating effectively, and succeeding in their goals. Such narratives are tangible evidence to oneself (and to others) that you can pursue a purpose and succeed.

Taking Stock: Limits and Future Research

Our research leaves a lot of gaps to fill. Let me highlight just a few. First, I have described processes as experienced by staff and youth, but I have not tested their impact. Second, youth who join programs are not a representative sample of all youth. It is possible that youth who don't join may not be as ready to become motivated and throw themselves into purpose-building projects as these youth. Third, it is important to conduct longitudinal studies, and examine how teenagers' program experiences influence further purpose development as they get older. What happens when they attempt to pursue purpose *without* the structures and supports described here? Do programs provide a valuable stepping stone to successful engagement in purposeful projects in contexts that are less accommodating?

Fourth, it is critical that we ensure that these experiences are available to all youth. Teens from different backgrounds may bring to programs different assets, assumptions, and experiences with challenges, which, for example, could affect how they respond to and learn from project challenges (see: Rose & Paisley, 2012). The pathways to purpose and the components of purpose development (e.g., competencies, aims) may differ for youth with different lived experiences and cultural backgrounds (Sumner et al., 2018). These questions are critical to helping programs provide equity in purpose development (Simpkins, Riggs, Ettekal, & Ngo, 2017).

Implications for Practice

Despite incompleteness, these grounded-theory findings, based on many hundreds of interviews suggest practices that support purpose in youth programs, and possibly in other youth serving organizations. They indicate that purpose development can be facilitated when adults help create a positive culture, support teens' engagement in meaningful youth-driven projects,

and support youth's ownership of their work while helping them succeed. Youth's accounts show us the importance of understanding their learning process, for example, understanding how they develop investment and sustain motivation in projects, recognizing the importance of their experiences grappling with and solving challenges, and supporting youth's experience of responsibility, pride, and purpose in taking on substantive roles. All youth need opportunities for apprenticeships purpose: for discovering the possible.

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Table 1. Skills for strategic pursuit of goals that youth report learning through experiences in program projects

1. **Active anticipation**. Forecasting how different scenarios might unfold. Imagining and critiquing the risks and possible payoffs with each

    - A member of Youth Action, an activism program, reported learning: *"to be more critical and really understand your situation, "Well this can work; this might not."*

    - In a 4-H leadership program, where youth led activities for younger 4-H members, a youth learned: *"to visualize being a kid and what they would like."*

2. **Using knowledge of how people think and act**. Understand others' perspectives and shaping communications and courses of action accordingly.

    - In a leadership program where youth dealt with school officials, store owners, police, a youth learned: *"how [these] people act about being who they are."*

    - At Nutrition Rocks where youth developed learning games for children, a youth learned that with younger children: *"You have to make it so they'll understand and want to keep playing, so not too hard. But with older kids, you have to make it to where it's a challenge… We had to change the way we do the games for different age groups."*

3. **Flexible planning**: Monitoring work, adjusting, and incrementally improving your strategies. Use of if-then thinking.

    - At Youth Action, members learned that, at the same time you are holding rallies protesting officials' policies, you should cultivate back-channel relationships with them.

    - Nutrition Rocks: *"Even though everything is structured, things can get out of hand and then you need to know how to deal with it."*

    - Learned skills for dealing with Murphy's Law: "*Allow extra time,"* "*Always have a backup plan," "Just go overboard with it.*

Note. These findings are reported in: Heath, 1998; Larson & Angus, 2011a & b; Larson & Hansen, 2005)

Table 2. Knowledge and skills for managing emotions and motivation that youth report learning through experiences with projects

1. Knowledge of Emotions (Larson, 2011; Larson & Brown, 2007)

- Causes of emotions, e.g., personalities, physical states (like tiredness), different types of situations
- Effects of emotions, e.g., frustration "blocks out ideas," anger is contagious, emotions can provide useful information (Rusk et al., 2013)

2. Strategies for managing negative emotions (Larson & Brown, 2007; Rusk et al., 2013)

- Use of problem and emotion focused strategies
- Learning to limit expression of negative emotion to avoid emotional contagion in a group
- Learning to seek support and advice from others (Orson, McGovern & Larson, submitted)

3. Strategies for managing motivation (Larson, McGovern & Orson, 2019)

- Self-encouragements. Using self-talk to counteract self-doubt.
- Maintaining a balance between the challenges of the work and ones skills
- Learning that good work leads to authentic pride (Rusk et al., in process)
- Using emotions for motivation (Rusk et al., 2013)