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Flourishing Young Adults: Lived Lifelong Learning Experiences through Civic Participation

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Abstract: This phenomenological study aims to examine the lived learning experiences of eight young adults who participated in two AmeriCorps organizations and how those experiences impacted their civic engagement.

Keywords: lifelong learning, civic engagement, young adults, AmeriCorps

Problem and Purpose Statement

Civic engagement promotes responsible and productive citizens who actively participate within their community and beyond (Ballard, Hoyt, & Pachucki, 2018; Balsano, 2005; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Malin, Han, & Liauw, 2017). It is an important means through which to develop young adults to become engaged citizens in their adulthood. Because of this, it is both necessary and important that adolescents develop a sense of civic mindedness. While it is important that citizens remain active, aware, and engaged in terms of civic engagement, scholars (Flanagan, Levine, & Settersten, 2009) have found that young Americans are less likely to be engaged in civic activities than their parents, especially voting and political engagement. Interestingly though, young adults are heavily engaged and committed to volunteering. Scholars (Balsano, 2005; Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010; Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007) have scarcely explored the barriers that prevent young adults from participating in civic engagement; the truth remains that the lack of engagement of young adults is problematic for society at large. Existing studies highlights the benefits of such participation and their findings present a strong case for the usefulness of programs and organizations that actively promote these engagement activities (Astin & Sax, 1998; Ballard et al., 2018; Balsano, 2005; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Malin, Han, & Liauw, 2017; Yates & Youniss, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived learning experiences of young adults who participated in voluntary service programs and how those experiences impacted their civic engagement. More specifically, young adults in this study were involved in AmeriCorps, a voluntary service program that provides young adults awareness not only of community issues but also of the importance of active participation in community matters. This study addressed the following overarching research questions:

- (a) How did previous experiences contribute to their participation in the program?
- (b) How and what aspects of learning occurred through the participation?
- (c) How did participatory experiences influence their later life and meaningful learning?

Theoretical Framework

This study drew on aspects of three theories as a framework from which to analyze and view the data. First, lifelong learning through lifewide experiences touches on Reischmann's (2014) three types of learning, which include: unplanned learning in an activity, "life happening," and learning as a symptom of natural life changes (p. 295). The second theory is Illeris' (2003) process of learning involving cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. Finally, Newman (2012) proposes nine aspects of "good learning:" instrumental, communicative, affective, interpretive, essential, critical, political, passionate, and moral.

Methods

Following phenomenology data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this study gathered data through phone interviews from purposeful samples in which the participants were chosen based on pre-selected criteria for this research. Due to the study's focus on civic engagement, participants were recruited for the study based upon their participation in an AmeriCorps program during their young adult years of 18 to 25. Participants were identified through a process of contacting several well-established organizations that manage AmeriCorps programs to inquire about alumni volunteers. A representative of each AmeriCorps location searched sent study information to alumni and other potential participants who then contacted the research team directly. As a result, eight participants (seven females and one male, aged from 22 to 26) who participated in AmeriCorps VISTA programs from two organizations were included in this study. All interviews were conducted via phone and were recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

This study employed data analysis methods associated with grounded theory that provide us a systemic approach (Charmaz, 2014). Our analysis included open, focused, and axial coding. During open and focused coding, the researchers identified categories that are supported from the data based on our research questions. During the axial coding phase, the researchers developed sub-categories pertaining to each overarching category. Additionally, the researchers engaged in constant comparative analysis in which emerging data is continually compared with existing categories (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Findings

Data analysis of participant interviews revealed important findings about civic engagement. The emergent findings provide a furthered understanding of three separate areas of engagement: (a) how participants became involved, (b) experiences and learning during engagement, and (c) future plans. These areas were categorized into five main themes including several sub-themes: (a) connecting the dots, (b) unexpected frustrations, (c) successful supports, (d) stepping stones, and (e) impact on later life.

Connecting the Dots.

Previous indirect/direct volunteer experience. All the participants in this study were introduced to AmeriCorps through a family member or a friend. Most of these family members or friends were directly involved or had been involved in AmeriCorps previously. For some of the participants, this individual not only served as a point of exposure to the program but also the primary means of encouragement for them to volunteer with AmeriCorps. Interestingly, there were at least two participants who learned about AmeriCorps during their own volunteering activities.

All the participants had described previous experiences volunteering. One participant, C, got into the AmeriCorps program because of the GED program but stayed because he wanted to help others and share his story. Participant C believed obtaining his GED set him on the right path, which included transitioning to community college. Overall, the participants were actively looking for service opportunities, and AmeriCorps gave them this opportunity when they needed it.

Memorable moments. Participants had a difficult time selecting their most memorable moment of the AmeriCorps program. Almost every participant chose an experience that was not a part of his or her assigned daily VISTA program duties. Many of the participant's mentioned that part of their AmeriCorps contract stated, "no direct service," which seemed counter intuitive to their reasons for signing up for the program. Participants were looking for direct service; however,

most of them were not in positions where they are able to do direct service.

For example, participant B expressed that "usually I'm just at work at a desk and typing stuff and I don't get the interaction with students," but her favorite memories involved stepping in to substitute teach. The students now know her and will stop by to see her, which she is enjoying. Participant A described making connections with prospective families during student recruitment information sessions. The sessions seemed monotonous at first, but as she conducted more information sessions, participant A realized she was making connections with families and a lasting impression. In some cases, the participants' memorable moments have resulted in a better understanding of how participants wanted to engage in the future.

Unexpected Frustrations.

Job description. Although beginning the program was a source of excitement for a new adventure, areas of frustration emerged, particularly in areas of job description and pay. Because each VISTA's work assignments vary according to their volunteer organization, there is no true job description for VISTAs, which can lead to confusion about assignments they are tasked to do. Some participants also reported inflexibility in setting work schedules and utilizing their talents for other initiatives was not supported in the VISTA program. For one volunteer, even in down time, when the schedule was not as busy, she was not allowed to adjust her working hours to pursue other activities, even volunteering.

Pay. VISTAs are paid a wage that places them at poverty level, a point that is not hidden on the AmeriCorps VISTA website and in materials. The poverty income level of the state and county in which the volunteer will serve determines this living allowance (VISTA Subsistence Rates by County, 2017). Many interviewed understood the pay being as it is to help VISTAs understand the way of life for people who are served by this program. Meanwhile, A explains this, stating, "I think one of the main things is that as an AmeriCorps VISTA, with AmeriCorps you're really struggling on the financial side of things, and um that's kind of a really humbling experience." Many participants interviewed mentioned other benefits that the program offers, for example, food stamps, that help to make ends meet. This benefit, along with other benefits, such as childcare assistance, does help VISTAs live modestly; however, it has caused at least one participant to opt out of continuing in the program.

Successful Support.

Emotional support. All participants felt supported, at varying levels and in a variety of ways, such as emotional support, collaborative, autonomy, and physical support. Supervisors played a key role in the level of support that participants perceived. When supervisors had previous experience serving in the same capacity as the participants, the feeling of support was strong; however, those who had supervisors with no relatable prior experience or who did not fully understand the participant's responsibilities did not feel as supported in their engagement. Participant E illustrates this dilemma when she said, "my direct supervisor, she was a VISTA ... so she completely understands, and she is 100 percent very supportive ... VISTA is new for like our overall ... boss ... sometimes she gets kind of confused about what we are ... that kind of doesn't feel 100 percent supportive." Several participants also shared how their supervisor showed support through frequent meetings, encouragement, and personal relationships. For example, participant D stated, "my personal supervisor meets with me every week ... she is always willing to help me figuring out my priorities since that is the thing that I struggle with the most ... I know it's hard for her to find the space and time for her to talk to me, but she does and I appreciate that."

Collaborative. Collaboration in the work being done and within the program was a key point of discussion throughout the interviews. Participants felt they had a sense of ownership in their work and responsibilities but also fostered relationships with trust and a sense of belonging or fit in the program. Participant E states, “when I work with my direct supervisor, I don’t feel like she’s my supervisor ... just kind of the arena that she sets when we collaborate on things together.”

For several, the environment of collaboration also meant openness to voicing one’s ideas or opinions. Participant A shared, “my supervisor and my team members are very open to hearing what ideas I have, and I feel like my voice is valued ... so that’s made me feel very supported.”

Autonomy. Having autonomy over their work ensured a sense of trust and responsibility in the participant to complete the work. The most notable instance of autonomy came from participant G as she shared about her supervisor, “she gives a lot of support but ... she’s hands off enough ... let me do my work ... meet with me and stuff but then leave me alone and not be helicoptering, so she was great.” Autonomy in their work appeared to be an important component in the participants' feeling of successfully completing their work.

Physical support. Program staff was a source of physical support for participants during their civic engagement, though it was not frequently mentioned. Beyond everyday work resources, participant B acknowledged her program’s monetary support being able to send her to several conferences that produced further learning, “definitely helped, opened my eyes to a lot things...issues.” Yet not all physical support was work related. Participant C spoke about his program staff providing monetary support to help him survive during his first few weeks living in a new city, “They actually assisted me, before I got my first paycheck, to get home and get to work and get food and other resources like that.”

Stepping Stones.

Personal growth and development. Everyone interviewed for this study was asked to reflect on the most important things they had learned during their service and how they believed it would impact them later in life. Themes include personal growth and development, practical skills and experience, and impact on the future. Individuals learned more about their own strengths and weaknesses, discovering that they could grow and adapt when challenged. Participant E described a time when she was contacted for information about conference sponsorship, something that she did not usually handle. “For a while those calls kind of flustered me, but today I was like ‘no problem.’ It’s really taught me to think on my feet and handle situations.” Other areas of personal maturity related to the necessity of managing their own finances and learning to advocate for themselves in the workplace. Participant D concluded that her AmeriCorps experiences “allowed me to have a better understanding of my skill set and to better articulate my needs and dislikes as an employee.”

Practical skills and experience. The skills learned and practiced throughout their AmeriCorps service were highly valued by all interviewees. Various aspects related to “how to run a non-profit,” such as grant-writing, networking, and the design, development, and coordination of projects and programs, time management, learning how to get along with others in the workplace, and “just learning how to communicate better” were frequently mentioned as skills that had been developed during their AmeriCorps service. Individuals also noted opportunities to teach and give presentations as valued experiences.

Impact on Later Life.

Encouraging myself: Further education and volunteering. In addition to these great

outcomes of engagement, participants made other important connections between their experiences and plans for the future. These connections included plans of graduate college, volunteering, and encouraging others to volunteer for the VISTA program. Five participants communicated their interest in pursuing a graduate degree following their civic service. Additionally, another participant noted some interest in further education but said she would only do so if she knew exactly what she wanted to do. In addition, seven of the participants had plans or the intention of volunteering in some sort of capacity following their civic engagement service, even though it was occasionally difficult to schedule and plan due to time limitations. Participants reported potential volunteering opportunities as serving at an animal shelter, church, food pantries, music school, sustainability events, elderly care, and voter registration. Several participants also listed volunteer opportunities that were outside the scope of their work-related service. For example, participant A said she would volunteer at an animal shelter, said the following, “I just thought that was kind of a meaningful activity I could do that was also just like unrelated to the current work that I’m doing ... allows me to kind of explore a different interest.”

Encouraging others. All eight of the participants said they would encourage someone else to participate in VISTA, even though one of them recognized the experience wasn’t for everyone and another suggested a part-time participation instead of full-time based on her experiences. Many of them cited benefits as the main reasoning for encouraging others, which included skill development.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the findings, this study not only reveals that meaningful lifewide and lifelong learning of young adults can occur through their civic participation but also provides clues to better organizational supports of encouraging their learning. The findings revealed the importance of several factors related to civic engagement of young adults: friends and family members, a sense of security and safeness, collaborative environments, knowledgeable and understanding supervisors, team-building, life experiences, and the development of civic-mindedness. While there are other findings in this study that have not been fully addressed in existing literature, they remain important in the consideration and understanding of civic engagement.

The findings of this study not only contribute to the literature illustrating the benefits of civic engagement but also validate findings of existing literature. This study had several findings relevant to the literature on barriers of young adult participation. A reoccurring theme throughout existing literature is that young adults consider their most significant barrier of participation to be a lack of belief that one’s voice is heard and valued (Balsano, 2005; Harris et al., 2010; Kaid et al., 2007; King & Hustedde, 2001). Several participants in this study felt supported because their voices and ideas were valued and utilized in a collaborative environment.

An additional finding is a lack of meaningful opportunities as a barrier for civic engagement (Balsano, 2005; Kaid et al., 2007). This study both validates and contradicts this finding. Most participants cited a direct service activity as their most meaningful experience. However, very few, if any, discussed experiences that were a part of their primary responsibilities. This suggests, as well as participants verbally stating, they had initially expected more meaningful interactions with patrons. This study contradicts the literature in that the participants did not disengage because there was a lack of direct service opportunities, and yet it validates the literature because participants suggested they would be searching out more direct service-oriented opportunities in the future.

Furthermore, the study’s findings echo the importance of ongoing learning through civic participation such as time management, communication, working with others, and social

networking as relevant, existing studies' findings, which suggest civic engagement strengthens professional skills, such as social networks, and develops social capital (Ballard et al., 2018; Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

While there are other findings in this study that have not been fully addressed in existing literature, they remain important in the consideration and understanding of civic engagement. Further research should be conducted to validate whether the findings continually remain true for young adults.

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