

# Exploring Adolescent Learning Theory: A Service Learning Case Study

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to conduct interviews with middle level students and gain insight into the minds and attitudes of adolescent children. Three interviews took place over the course of the semester and were recorded for reference. Throughout this project, the interviews were child-centered and focused on theories and research presented in Sara Powell's (2020) *Introduction to Middle Level Education*. A reflection was written at the conclusion of each interview.

## Introduction

For the MLGE 3301 - The Adolescent Learner course at SFA, we were asked to pick a student in the middle levels of school and conduct three interviews with that student. I am a paraprofessional in the SPED Life Skills class at Poteet High School. I selected a freshman student in this class to interview. Matthew is a fourteen-year-old boy with autism and epilepsy. He came this year from a different middle school than our other freshman due to the other high school closing their Life Skills unit. He is incredibly gifted at solving math problems, writing, and art. He does like to pretend that he is less capable than he is so that he can be given the lower level work. Matthew misses school frequently because of his seizures, although he recently had surgery that has helped reduce them. Interviewing Matthew was successful and provided great insight into the minds of our students.

These interviews were conducted in the form of a convenience sampling. Like the name suggests, convenience sampling is intended to be effective because of its convenience. This study was conducted to garner information on the daily life, decisions, and mentality of a middle school student. I conducted this study using a freshman that I am already familiar with because of my occupation. There is likely a small amount of bias in this study because of the self-contained population that Matthew has experienced in his academic career. His school experiences are very likely to be different from a student in general education, which means that his answers may not be accurately "representative of the population of interest (Simkus, 2022)." However, his experiences as a student are still valid because the school experience is subjective.

## Theory and Methods

The theory that guided this entire project was adolescent learning theory. To engage with this theory on a practical level, I conducted three interviews focused on topics related to adolescent learning theory; specifically, body image, peer interactions, and the impact of home situations.

According to Powell, "socialization plays a major part in psychological growth" (Powell, 2020, pg 32). It is very clear throughout these interviews that the student highly values what other people think of him. His friendships, or lack thereof, affect every other aspect of his day.

This theory and the related topics are encountered by every middle-level aged student and directly influence their lived academic experience.

The student was selected based on a convenience sample. The students that we selected were students with which we engaged on a consistent basis. The student needed to be in the middle grades and engaged with me in either one-on-one or small group settings.

My student is a ninth grader in a self-contained Life Skills unit. He is a creative, hispanic male that loves legos, art, and music. Matthew was diagnosed with autism and has spent the entirety of his academic career in Special Education classes.

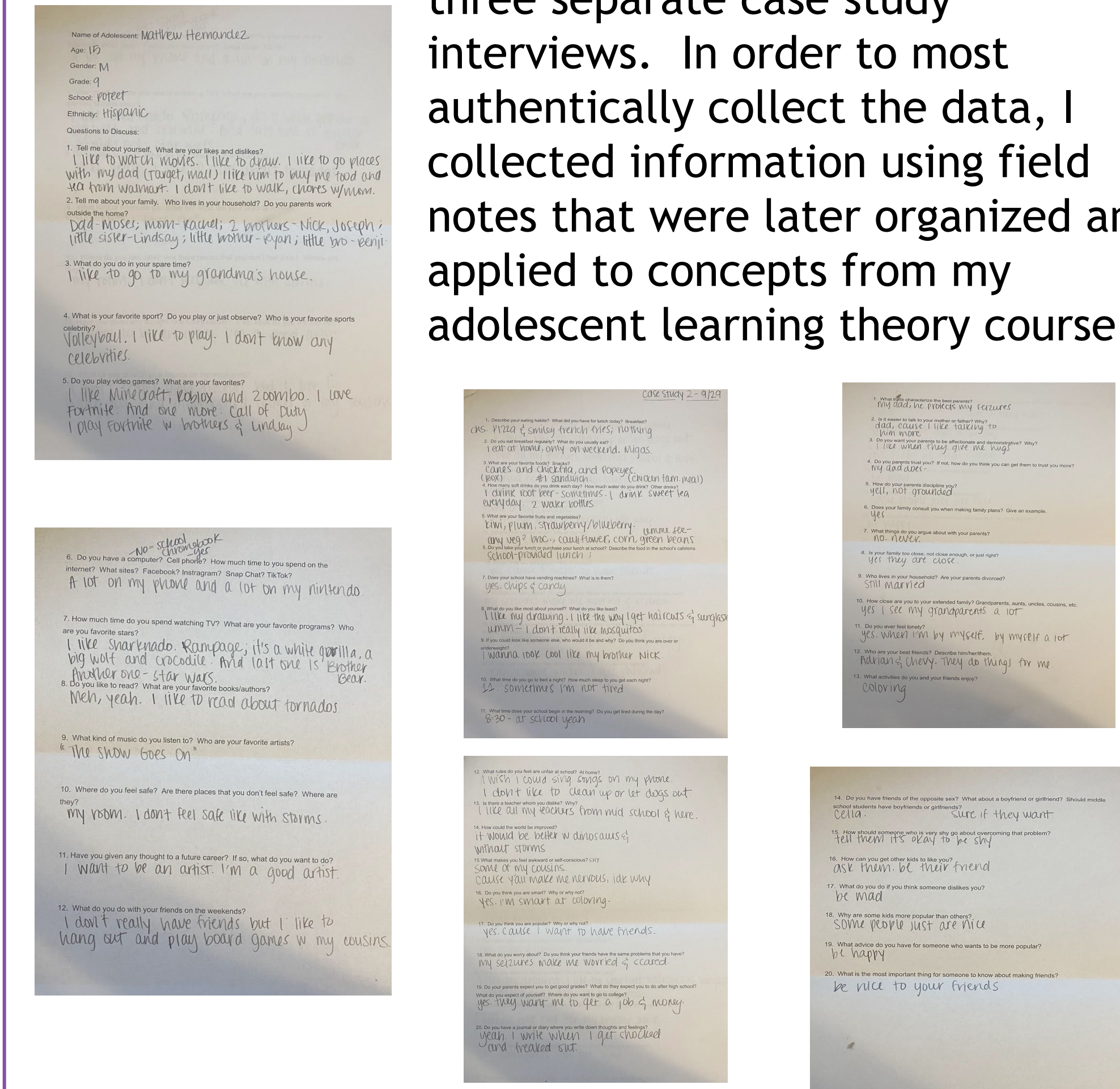
The study included three structured interviews. There were set questions related to each of the topics and the interviews happened per scheduling availability at the required intervals. Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one setting and met ethical considerations with parent/guardian approval and in an open setting.

After each interview, the field notes were taken and I used these notes to draw parallels between the adolescent learning theory that we were exposed to in class and the lived experiences of a traditional middle level student. Field notes were used to ensure organization and proper documentation of the three interviews.

Each interview included a reflective piece where I shared those conclusions.

## Materials

This case study was completed in three separate case study interviews. In order to most authentically collect the data, I collected information using field notes that were later organized and applied to concepts from my adolescent learning theory course.



## Findings

The student's body image is largely determined by his understanding of his own weight. He is aware that he is a heavier-set student and constantly refers to the need to work out, be healthy, or exercise. These phrases are derived from what he is hearing at home about himself.

Family systems largely impact beliefs. Powell says that "worry, fear, and anxiety are common emotions" for middle-level students (Powell, 2020, pg 31). It is likely that some of those emotions derive from self image stemming from health matters frequently discussed at home.

The student is an exceptional student who benefits from validation, independent creative time, and structured social engagement. These interviews resulted in the understanding that each middle-level student is capable of exceeding expectations, engaging in higher level thinking, and developing a sense of self when they are met in "developmentally appropriate ways" (Powell, 2020, pg 2).

## Conclusions

The textbook started out with the biggest takeaway for my situation personally which was that the philosophy of middle level education is to "meet them in developmentally appropriate ways" (Powell, 2020, pg 2). Since Matthew is a freshman student in a Special Education Life Skills class, it was important for me to interview and interact with him in the lens of that setting. Something that my mentor teacher would say a lot this semester when dealing with problem behaviors or really anything that caused us to need a reminder, was that "these students are in this class for a reason." Matthew is an incredibly intelligent and charismatic student, but there are reasons that he has found himself in Special Education. If I would have conducted these interviews asking for more in depth thinking, longer responses and no distractions, then it is likely that Matthew would not have felt comfortable with continuing that interview and would not want to engage in another one. He needed explanations, patience, and a little grace during these interviews. "Developmentally appropriate ways" has really stuck with me and influenced my outlook on entering a career in Special Education. My future classroom is almost guaranteed to have students on varying developmental levels so carrying this philosophy with me will make me a better teacher to my students.

This semester has been incredibly beneficial to my learning and overall desire to be a teacher. It has been repeated throughout the course and I am constantly reminded that an effective middle school is one that is inviting, provides opportunity, and ensures that everyone will be cared for. I hope to be a teacher that incorporates this ideology and teaches with the students in mind.

## References

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