An "I" in Teen?

Perceived Agency in a Youth Development Program

Chelsea Frosini

As I reviewed participant feedback from the out-of-school time (OST) youth development program I managed at the New-York Historical Society Museum and Library (N-YHS), I was excited to recognize a pattern.

Many of the teen participants wrote responses like "I am proud of what my team was able to accomplish" and "I enjoyed being able to plan an event on our own and actually see it happen." These participants were reflecting a high level of ownership of their accomplishments in the program. They seemed to have experienced the youth development outcome known as *agency;* that is, they were "acting or exerting influence and power" (Mitra, 2004, p. 662). More specifically, Mitra (2004) says that *agency* "connotes a sense of confidence, a sense of self-worth, and the belief that one can do something, whether contributing to society writ large or to a specific situation" (p. 662).

The N-YHS OST program already had assessments to collect the kinds of outcomes research has shown to result from participation in youth development programs: academic success, initiative, personal responsibility, and the like (Jones, Bench, Warnaar, & Stroup, 2013). What we didn't have was a system for measuring whether the program improved participants' sense of agency. I had no evidence either to show that participants developed agency or to uncover any effects of an increase in their perception of themselves as active agents.

As a fellow in the National Afterschool Matters Practitioner Research Fellowship, I was in a position to investigate program participants' expressed sense of agency in relation to research in developmental psychology and youth development. My inquiry was significantly shaped by Dawes and Larson's (2011) study of engagement, which suggests that, in order to

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fully benefit from program participation and achieve intended outcomes, youth need to be psychologically engaged. They need to be motivated enough that their attention is absorbed in the tasks and challenges of program activities (Dawes & Larson, 2011). In addition to measuring program participants' perceived agency, I wanted to investigate whether that perception of agency was correlated with engagement and with achievement of intended outcomes.

Using instruments I designed myself, I found that participants in the N-YHS program who reported a moderate to high degree of perceived agency also reported improved academic, personal, and social skills over the course of their program—more than their peers who perceived lower levels of agency. Participants who experienced agency also expressed their engagement with the program. In this paper, I describe the program, provide context from the literature for the significance of agency, outline the methods I used to measure participants' sense of agency, and describe how perceived agency correlated with intended program outcomes and with youth engagement. Finally, I share lessons learned that OST practitioners can use.

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The Student Historian Program at the New-York Historical Society

The OST program in which I conducted my participant research is an internship for students in grades 10–12 offered by the education division of the N-YHS, an American history museum and library in New York City. The program serves the city as a whole, not individual schools; participants represent the city's socioeconomic, racial, and cultural diversity. Students learn about the program from their history teachers or through recruitment visits to their school. To apply, they submit a written application and a teacher recommendation. Title I schools are targeted for recruitment because at least 60 percent of participants must qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. These students receive an hourly stipend.

The two-tiered Student Historian program provides participants with vocational and academic training while fostering leadership skills and increasing students'

understanding of American art and history. In both tiers, participants work on an assigned project during their 75 hours in the program. Though the youth get basic prompts from program facilitators, it is up to them to develop the vision and content for the project. By design, the projects, which involve both individual and group tasks, provide opportunities for youth to act as agents.

Participants in the first-tier group are known as Student Historians. Their project is to use the collection of N-YHS to develop resources local students and teachers can use to prepare for the state-mandated Regents Exam in U.S. History and Government. The Student Historians develop and host a U.S. History Regents Review Night at the museum in late May, leading gallery tours and activities; they also publish their materials on the N-YHS website. The project is assigned, and the OST program provides training to set the teens up for success, but the Student Historians decide how to conceptualize, organize, and actualize the project. As one Student Historian put it in her end-of-year assessment, "The supervisors do a lot of work to steer us in the right direction and help us get resources for our research upon request, but our tours and the NY Regents review manual are done completely by the students."

The Teen Leaders in the second-tier program have an even bigger responsibility: curating N-YHS's summer satellite exhibit on Governors Island in New York Harbor. The topic of the satellite exhibit is assigned by N-YHS senior staff, and the program supports Teen Leaders with content instruction and with curatorial training and supervision, but the Teen Leaders are responsible for identifying themes, choosing content, and developing the narratives for the exhibit. During the seven months of the program, Teen Leaders leverage the research skills they learned as Student Historians to explore their theme in depth. The group assigns specific roles to members, who participate in various check-ins and peer reviews as they research, write, and make curatorial selections. They work alongside N-YHS staff designers, archivists, and curators to make the final decisions for the exhibit. One Teen Leader described the process in her end-of-year assessment: "Starting from nothing, we were able to

create a vision for our exhibit, select artifacts, write up and organize label text, and brainstorm activities for when the exhibit opens.… We have accomplished a lot as a group."

Agency and Youth Development

Selected research from the literatures in youth development, developmental psychology, and anthropology helped to inform my inquiry into agency, engagement, and outcomes in the Student Historian program.

Some youth development researchers refer to agency, belonging, and competence as the "ABCs" of youth development (for example, Carver, 1997). Larson and Angus (2011) argue that adolescence is a particularly fruitful period during which to study the development of agency because teenagers develop new potential for higher-order thinking, such as reasoning about the dynamics of complex systems and exercising executive control of their own thought processes. However, "these new high-order cognitive potentials, are just that: potentials. Their realization depends on adolescents having the requisite experiences" (Kuhn, 2009, quoted in Larson & Angus, 2011, p. 65).

Teens are developing the cognitive capacity for agency, but they have few opportunities to realize this potential in our society. An anthropological study conducted by Schlegel and Barry in 1991 revealed that American teens are given little responsibility to society or authority over certain domains of social life; they therefore "seldom act as autonomous groups in constructive, socially meaningful ways" (p. 202). Teens are not likely to be given full responsibility for tasks from beginning to end, from planning through implementation to evaluation (Larson, 2000)—even though they are developing higher-order executive abilities, including the ability both to think from means to ends and to organize actions over time to achieve a goal (Larson & Angus, 2011). Schlegel and Barry (1991) found that American and European adolescents have less responsibility than adolescents in most other societies; they also have fewer occasions to engage in consequential action that requires planning.

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ship. Ryan, Deci, and Grolnick (1995) explain the connection between the two terms: "To be autonomous means to act agentically and to experience a sense of choice and willingness in one's actions" (p. 623). Agency thus can be understood as the ability to undertake actions from which autonomy can be experienced.

The relationships among agency, autonomy, and engagement are illuminated by self-determination theory. As described by Dawes and Lawson (2011), this theory maintains that environments that support autonomy, belongingness, and competence can foster intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. Increased motivation and engagement occur when a person identifies with, internalizes, and integrates the activity's goals into the self (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Thus, if a program environment is structured to support autonomy by facilitating agency, it can also foster engagement. Dawes and Larson (2011) outline three "personal goals" that enable youth to integrate an activity's goals:

- Learning for the future
- Developing competence
- Pursuing a purpose (p. 259)

These three goals emerged in the data I collected from N-YHS program participants.

Methods

When I conducted this research, I was the director of the Student Historian OST program. The methodology thus falls into the category of participant research. Below I outline some of the benefits and pitfalls of participant research, describe the tools I used to gather data from program participants, and outline my analysis methods.

Participant Research

Conducting research as a program participant—in my case, as program manager—offers benefits as well as potential conflicts. I acted as a participant-observer to gather my data, fully participating in the program I was studying (Becker, 1958, p. 652). This position comes with implicit bias and subjectivity: The "observer is part of the context being observed, and [the observer] both modifies and is influenced by this context" (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955, p. 344). I know that my observation

could influence the students and activities I was observing, but I expected that influence to be minimal because I was already the program facilitator.

My goal was not to do a rigorous study but to understand my program better by conducting internal research. My experience with the program's existing assessment methods allowed for collection of new participant data to occur naturally; I could integrate both old and new measurements easily into established activities. DeWalt and DeWalt (2011) note that participant observation can enable a beneficial fluidity; it "encourages the continual reassessment of initial research questions and hypotheses, and facilitates the development of new hypotheses and questions as new insights occur" (p. 15). Though this method lacks the objectivity provided by an outside researcher, the conclusions I reached were valuable for internal program improvement.

Tools

The three tools I used or developed to study agency and its effects tapped into systems already in place in the N-YHS program.

Pre- and Post-Program Self-Assessments

I used previously developed pre- and post-participation self-assessments to assess student outcomes. Larson and Angus (2011) support the use of self-assessment to measure youth development outcomes, noting that the development of agency requires youth to be intentional producers of their own growth. Developed with the help of an outside consultant alongside a major revision to the Student Historian program in 2010, this self-assessment had been in use at N-YHS for five years. The results were used for program improvement and for reports to funders.

The assessments ask participants to rate themselves on 11 academic, professional, and personal skills the program seeks to develop: public speaking, leadership, time management, group work, independent work, written communication, punctuality, and others. Participants rate their mastery of each skill on a scale ranging from "beginning" to "exemplary"; they then provide written explanations for each choice. For example, a student who assesses her ability to work with

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primary sources as "developing" at the start of the program might rate her ability as "accomplished" or "exemplary" at the end of the program, explaining that she is now "able to find the main idea in a primary source and analyze its conclusions."

Mid-Program Survey

To measure agency, I administered a survey to the 42 participants in both tiers of the 2014–2015 Student Historian program. Thirty students, 19 in the first-tier Student Historian program and 11 in the second-tier Teen Leader program, completed the survey, for a response rate of 71 percent. The survey, which I created for this project, asked participants to rate, on a scale of 1 to 5, statements about aspects of agency such as voice, responsibility, the impact of their work, and their sense of being part of a team. As on the self-assessments, participants were asked to explain each rating. I determined the degree of perceived agency based on students' numerical ratings; their explanations illustrated their ratings and helped me select participants to interview. The questions and samples of their explanations are shown in Table 1.

To understand in depth how teens experienced agency and engagement in the Student Historian program, I interviewed five participants, two from the first-tier program and three from the second tier. They represented different ages, genders, and schools. I also chose participants with varying levels of apparent engagement and of achievement: one who frequently took charge of group discussions, one who preferred to work behind the scenes, one whose survey indicated a low level of agency, one whose survey indicated a high level of agency, and one who struggled to complete her work in the program.

I chose an unstructured interview approach to allow the participants to tell me about their project. I started by asking just two questions: "How do you describe your internship to your friends? Teachers? Another museum professional?" and "Describe your last Student Historian or Teen Leader meeting." From there, I let the respondents direct the conversation and asked follow-up questions based on their responses. The average length of the interviews was about 20 minutes.

Table 1. Rubric for Coding Responses to Agency Survey

Survey Question	Description and Sample Student Explanation		
(Rated on a scale of 1 to 5)	Low Agency	Medium Agency	High Agency
How much of a voice do you feel you have at N-YHS?	1 = No voice 2 = Voice at (few) times *"I have little or no voice."*	3 = Voice half of the time *"I can provide input but I am not sure it would make a difference."*	4 = Voice most of the time 5 = Voice at all times *"I have the opportunity to influence every aspect of the exhibit we are curating."*
How much responsibility do you feel you have at N-YHS?	1 = No responsibility 2 = Low level of responsibility *"I have little responsibility at N-YHS."*	3 = Average level of responsibility *"I have an average level of responsibility, with some things I need to complete."*	4 = Above average level of responsibility 5 = Significantly above average level of responsibility *"I have the opportunity to have a group discussion with peers at each meeting to discuss … curating an upcoming exhibition."*
How much do you feel your work as an intern has an impact on the functions of N-YHS?	1 = No impact 2 = Low impact *"I feel like the work I'm doing is personally important but not significant to N-YHS."*	3 = Moderate impact *"I believe that our work forwards the mission of N-YHS, but I'm not sure how much it does outside of the education department."*	4 = Significant impact 5 = Extraordinary impact *"The quality of the exhibition is directly dependent on the work that we put in."*
How much do you feel you are part of the team at N-YHS?	1 = Never 2 = At (few) times *"We are student interns and aren't really included in the work at N-YHS."*	3 = About half the time *"I'm not sure that our work is related to the work of others at the museum."*	4 = Most of the time 5 = Always *"I have a special part to play at N-YHS."*

Analysis

Every student who completed an agency survey also completed a pre- and post-program self-assessment. Neither instrument was anonymous. The fact that I could identify (and knew personally) the survey respondents would be a limitation in more rigorous research. However, it did give me the ability to match each participant's agency survey with his or her outcomes assessment. I noted how each participant said that he or she had grown (or not) in the 11 skills on the self-assessment. I then connected that development to the level of agency indicated in the participant's survey.

To analyze the interviews, I isolated the parts where participants described making choices and having ownership of their projects in order to understand what agency looked and felt like to them. I used the same rubric I had used to code the surveys to look for patterns in the ways interviewees communicated that they had experienced agency and to see what program features or other factors influenced their perception of agency. I also looked for expressions of the three goals Dawes and Larson (2011) identified that can indicate engagement: learning for the future, developing competence, and pursuing a purpose.

Findings

This informal research yielded three interesting observations:

1. Many students in both tiers of the Student Historian program reported a high level of perceived agency.
2. Perceived agency as reported on the surveys was correlated with self-reported positive outcomes on the pre- and post-program assessment.
3. Students who expressed a moderate or high level of agency in their program experience also frequently expressed at least two of Dawes and Larson's (2011) three indicators of engagement.

Perceived Agency

More than halfway through the program, participants reported a high level of perceived agency on the survey.

- **Voice.** Asked whether they had a voice in their program, 87 percent of participants said that they did, most or all of the time. No participant chose "a few times" or "never."
- **Responsibility.** A majority of participants, 57 percent, said they had an above average level of responsibility at N-YHS, with 17 percent responding that they had a significantly above average level of responsibility.
- **Impact.** Only 4 percent of participants felt they had a low level of impact on N-YHS; none said they had no impact. The remainder, 96 percent, said that they had a moderate to extraordinary amount of impact.
- **Teamwork.** Asked whether they felt like part of the team at N-YHS, 57 percent of respondents said that they were part of the team most or all of the time. No participants said that they were never part of the team.

These responses show that most participants experienced a high level of agency in the program.

Correlation Between Perceived Agency and Positive Outcomes

When I linked participants' development during the program, as reflected in their pre- and post-program self-assessments, to their responses on the surveys, I found a correlation between perceived agency and positive outcomes. Participants who ranked high or moderately high on the agency survey also were more likely to indicate growth from the beginning of the program to the end. High-agency participants typically indicated that they felt they had grown in 75 to 100 percent of the 11 youth development outcomes on the self-assessment.

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One Student Historian, an 11th grade public school student, indicated a moderately high level of agency on her survey: She said that she had voice in the program most of the time, felt an above average level of responsibility, and always felt a part of the team. Her self-assessments showed an increase in every one of the 11 skills, often moving from a rating of "developing" or "accomplished" to "exemplary." She cited examples of her work in the Student Historian program to explain her growth in each area. For example, to explain how her public speaking skills went from "developing" to "exemplary," she used as an example her ability to give museum tours.

Another Student Historian, a 10th grader, communicated a high level of agency in her survey, stating that she was always allowed to voice her opinions, that she had a lot of responsibility, and that she accomplished all of her work in a group. She also indicated improvement in all 11 outcomes on her self-assessment. To support her assess-

ment of her leadership skills, for example, she explained, "When no one steps up to take charge, now I will."

By contrast, the respondents whose surveys indicated lower levels of perceived agency also tended to show less development between the pre- and post-program self-assessments. For example, a Student Historian noted that she had a voice in the program half of the time, had a low level of responsibility, and felt a part of the team at N-YHS only a few times. This response indicates a low-moderate level of agency. Her self-assessments noted improvement in only three of the 11 outcomes—a much lower rate than that of participants whose surveys reflected higher levels of perceived agency.

Agency and Engagement

The student interviews provided evidence that program participants were frequently experiencing Dawes and Larson's (2011) three indicators of engagement: learning for the future, developing competence, and pursuing a purpose. Respondents who expressed a sense of agency in their interviews described at least two of these three indicators.

One 11th-grade Student Historian said that she felt like a part of the community at the museum because she got to do what she really liked: working on a team, writing, creating, and helping others with their exams. This response indicates a high level of agency, as the student felt like part of a team and could do something she liked. It also indicates engagement: She felt a sense of *purpose* in that she was helping others.

A 12th-grade Teen Leader expressed a high level of perceived agency and indicated that she was engaged with work that gave her a sense of *purpose*:

I took a painting and did heavy research on it. From then on, I made it my own. I told a story about it, I interpreted it on my own, and gave back and let everyone know what I learned.

This Teen Leader also shared another indicator of engagement, *learning for the future*, when she said, "I think I'd now describe myself as an up-and-coming curator."

All the participants I interviewed who indicated a high level of perceived agency also exhibited a high level of acquired *competence* as they described their internship projects. They spoke at length about history topics with which they had developed experience, saying that their projects had taught them new processes and skills. One Student Historian, for example, said, "As an intern, I have developed tours for families, written materials for the education department, and helped curate an exhibit."

Building Agency and Engagement

In my surveys and interviews, respondents indicated that they experienced a high degree of agency in the N-YHS program. Participants with a high level of perceived agency on the survey also tended to perceive improvement in the 11 youth development outcomes on the self-assessments. Furthermore, interviewees with high levels of perceived agency tended to cite at least two of Dawes and Larson's (2011) three indicators of engagement. This finding is not surprising in light of the established connections among agency, autonomy, and engagement (Dawes & Larson, 2011).

My research was designed to inform program improvement and further my own professional development. However, my findings suggest practices other OST programs can adopt in order to cultivate agency. Though these practices stem from my work with a history museum, they can foster general youth development goals and are not specific to history-based or even humanities-based program content. They can be useful to any OST program that has agency as a program goal or wants to foster youth agency as a catalyst to realize other program objectives—at no additional financial cost.

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Develop Agency to Achieve Intended Outcomes

My research in the N-YHS program revealed a correlation between perceived agency and the positive outcomes the program intended to achieve, such as public speaking and time management skills. OST practitioners might want to identify intended youth outcomes to which participant experiences of agency

might contribute, such as self-efficacy, leadership skills, and ability to work in groups. Practitioners can then implement changes to facilitation styles and curriculum in order to foster agency.

Encourage Agency to Promote Engagement

Programs that want to foster both agency and engagement could look to the three personal goals that accompany engagement: learning for the future, developing competence, and pursuing a purpose (Dawes & Larson, 2011). These three indicators give program developers a clear menu of directions for curriculum, program design, and program structure. For example, the Student Historian program built in opportunities for staff from various museum departments to talk with students about their profession and their academic and professional trajectories. Another way the program encouraged agency was by making sure student clearly understood the purpose of their projects. For example, first-tier Student Historians got background information on the state history exam, such as current passing rates. Teen Leaders understood that the reason they attended a research methods training was to enable them to access resources they needed to curate their exhibit.

Use Youth Self-Assessments

The pre- and post-program outcomes measures I used in this study were self-assessment tools that required the teens to rate their own abilities. Larson and Angus (2011) found that self-assessments can allow youth to be intentional producers of their own development. Giving young people responsibility for setting their own goals and assessing how well they have met them encourages agency. Such self-assessments can also provide qualitative and quantitative data for continuous improvement and program accountability. The self-assessments used at N-YHS not only helped participants take responsibility for their own development but also provided data for funder reports and for ongoing program improvement.

Student Voice and Program Improvement

My research reinforced the importance of letting teens speak for themselves—giving them a say in fostering not only their own development but also the development of the program. Enabling youth voice both encourages agency and gives practitioners tools for program improvement. When program leaders reflect on possible improvements, and before making additions or revisions, they should listen to the youth as they speak about their experience and what engages them. At N-YHS, we started to present proposals for educational programming, including the Student Historian program, to the students. Collecting their feedback helped participants to feel a part of the N-YHS team and provided valuable insights to inform program development.

"Soft-Touch Adult Support"

My inquiry leads to many more questions, but I believe one is most urgent: How do OST educators facilitate youth agency while still "steering the ship"? One study describes the role of educators as "leading from behind" (Grossman, Campbell, & Raley, 2007, p. 40). Larson and Angus (2011) theorize that youth are most likely to learn skills for strategic thinking when they experience agency but also receive "soft-touch adult support that helps them keep on track, stretch, and exercise agency in expanded domains" (p. 292).

What does "leading from behind" or "soft-touch adult support" look like, especially from the perspective of youth participants? Student Historians and Teen Leaders provided some insights in their responses to my survey and interviews. On the agency survey, 90 percent of participants said that the balance of responsibility between youth and the adult supervisor was "good" or "exemplary." Describing her work to me during an interview, one teen described "soft-touch adult support":

> [The manager of visual arts programs at N-YHS] would help us a lot with the art-making part of our project, and it would be viewed as collaboration. It was part of his job to put together [an art] program for the museum, and he was helping us with our job, which was to do the same thing.… [We] were contributing to the same projects.

This participant appreciated the sense that she was working alongside an adult professional who also served as activity facilitator.

This response underscores an important point about youth agency: Cultivating agency in youth programs requires capable facilitation. Adult leadership that fosters agency is considerably more difficult than traditional models where adults tell youth what to do. Soft-touch adult support requires caring and highly trained facilitators who can help youth tap their own strengths. Only then can youth develop the agency that can lead to engagement and to positive youth development outcomes.

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