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ΙΝΥΤΙΤΥΥΕ

Search

Overview and Purpose

Faith communities across religious traditions have been shown to be a setting for **positive** youth development as well as spaces that encourage young people's spiritual development or faith formation (Roehlkepartain, 2003). Research has shown that spiritual development occurs across religious affiliations and cultures globally and can be considered to be "a core process of human development" that can take place within or apart from a specific religious tradition (Benson, Scales, Syvertsen, & Roehlkepartain 2012). Identity formation and development of personal meaning and purpose have been observed in relation to religious engagement among young people (Furrow, King, and White 2004; Roehlkepartain, Benson, and Scales 2011).

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) demonstrates the ways in which being part of a social group, such as a faith community, informs identity development. Much of Western literature focuses on identity development as an individual process or through interpersonal relationships between individuals; this approach explores identity development in relation to and as a result of group membership (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje 2002). This study explores the ways youth experienced identity development outcomes in relation to their participation in faith communities.

Research Questions

Methods

•What do youth in faith communities experience that contributes to their identity development?

Data Collection and Participants

Data was collected at **13** congregations in Minnesota and North Carolina.





8 Christian

2 Muslim

3 Jewish

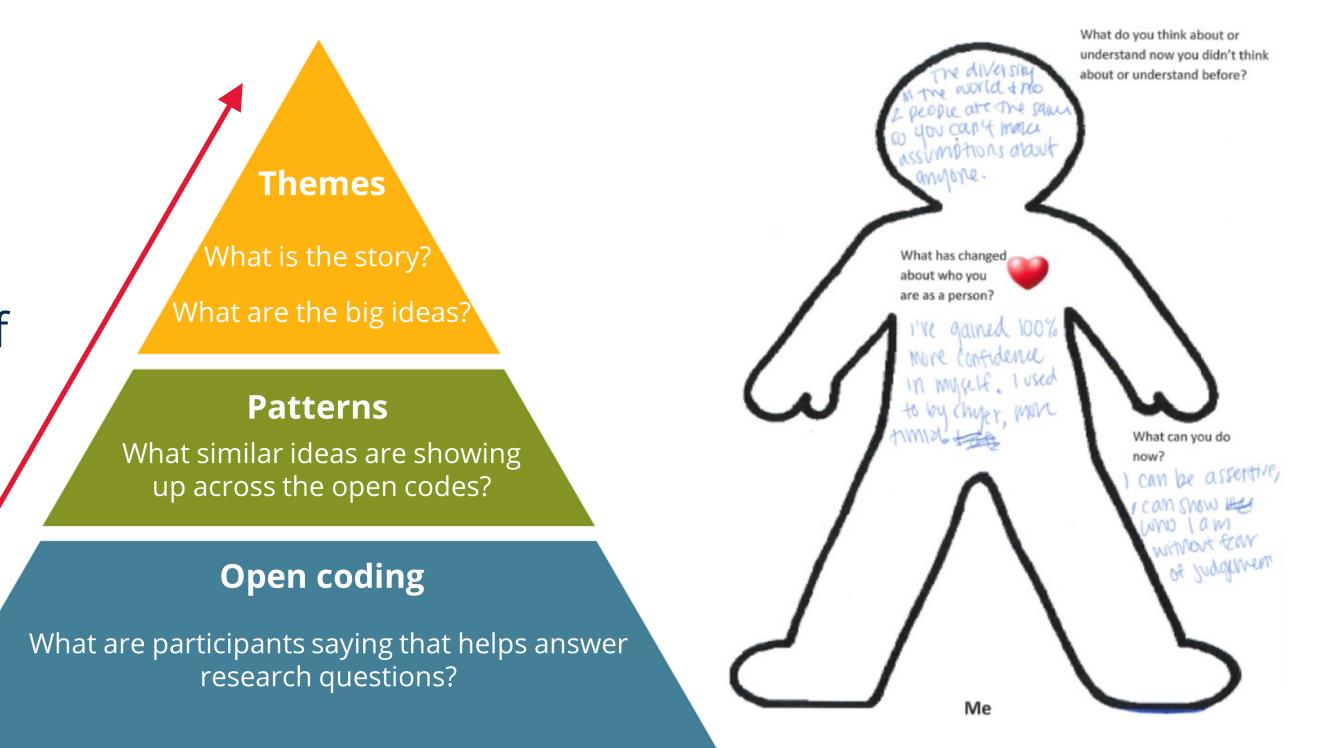
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218 focus group and interview participants were asked about the relationships they experience in faith-based contexts, including the actions or words that adults or peers use to help youth grow and thrive. Participants also shared the outcomes they experienced as a result of these relationships. The **82** youth participants used a graphic organizer to write and draw experiences in their faith communities that helped them grow.

Analysis

Focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analysis of the qualitative data used a grounded theory approach, facilitated by Nvivo software (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Charmaz, 2008).



Faith Communities as Contexts for Holistic Youth Identity Development



Initial Findings

How Youth Experience Faith Community Group Membership

Many participants shared that their congregations were strong communities that provided both individual and group connectedness, often comparing their congregations to "family." Young people talked about ways their faith communities actively encouraged youth engagement and the ways in which the community was welcoming to everyone. Faith communities provided a unique opportunity for youth to build intergenerational relationships that contribute to their identity.

Identity Development Outcomes

Youth shared ways they felt they had changed or grown in relation to their participation and relationships in their faith communities.

Stronger sense of purpose and positive future vision

Many youth shared that they felt a stronger sense of purpose in life in addition to increased confidence in their abilities and accomplishments as a result from being involved in their congregation community. One said, "I'm thinking more about the future"; others said they had more "hope" for the future. Faith communities also served as a support system for youth when they went through hard times.

> "I also have come to understand that I have a purpose in life... I can fight for myself and I know what I'm capable of."

"These are your people and you can go and meet new people, and not everybody is here and not everybody's gonna remain Jewish, but you still have these core values you can come back to and always have."

"Having the other people there that you can share a common purpose and be encouraged by it is what makes it such a great place."

Stronger understanding of self as religious or spiritual

Young people reported having a better understanding of religious teachings and texts and a stronger ability to talk about religion with others as a result of participating in their congregation.

They also talked about feeling closer to their faith tradition in general or specifically to God. Youth also mentioned making decisions based on the teachings or values of their faith.

Increased confidence in expressing identity

Religious

Youth participants shared that they felt increased comfort in talking to others about their religion and religious identity due to their relationships within their congregations. Multiple young people shared examples of self-advocacy based on their religious identity.

Jewish and Muslim youth in particular talked about feeling more confident and motivated to educate others about their religious beliefs and traditions.

"Every day, I think about my religion and being a good person; am l following these guidelines to be the best person I can be?"

"I'm not scared to tell anyone that I'm Muslim. I'm proud of who I am. I'm] not as nervous about my identity."

"They supported the heck out of me."

"This is a place where I can always feel safe."

"We have grandparents and the older people, we have parents and those who mentor us, and then you have those who we help along, who are younger than you, or less far along in their faith."

Secular

Many youth said they became more confident in themselves as a result of relationships within their faith communities. One young person said, "I understand more about who I am."

Others shared that their congregations were places where they felt they could be themselves without fear of judgement. One participant shared that although they did not feel a connection to their religion's beliefs, they felt comfortable expressing that and were still actively included in the community.

> "[The youth minister] made me want to be the best version of myself. And just embrace the qualities that make me, me."

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