

***WHO YOU ARE IS WHERE YOU ARE:
URBAN YOUTH'S CONTEXT-DEPENDENT
EXPERIENCES OF THE SALIENT ASPECTS OF THE
SELF***



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Identifying the problem

- Who young people are, how they feel about it, and how they enact their identities varies widely across different contexts of their daily lives.
- Problematic conceptions:
 - ▣ Young people as “possessors” of certain traits and identity features
 - ▣ Identity as an “achievement”, and “end point” of adolescence

Shift in the focus



- Looking at the interaction between the individual and the context/environment!
- Development inhibiting/promoting environments

Purpose of this study



- How different contexts influence the way young people experience who they are?
- How do we create environments that allow for positive growth and development of youth?
- How do we create environments “where young people can be their best selves” (Gloria, 20)?

Theoretical framework (in a nutshell)

- Development, as a “revolutionary activity”, is inseparable from understanding and creating environments for development (Newman & Holzman, 1999)
- The human essence is not something abstractly inherent in an individual but ‘the totality of all human relations’ (Marx, 1888/1955)
- Identity is *enacted* in real-life activities.
- Who we are is profoundly relational and context contingent.
 - Bamberg, 2008; Daiute, 2010; Lightfoot, 1997; McLean & Pasupathi, 2003; MacLean, 2010; Stetsenko, & Arievidh, 2004

Research questions

- What do young people from New York inner city communities perceive as the most identity-defining aspect/activities in their lives?
- What are the characteristics of environments that make young people feel good (comfortable) and bad (uncomfortable) about themselves?
 - ▣ What it is that makes youth feel good about particular activities in some environments and yet bad in some others?

Participants and recruitment

- Youth organization
- Thirteen young people (7 men and 6 women)
- Participants ranged in age from 14 to 20 years (mean age = 18).
- Ethnically diverse backgrounds: African-American (6), Hispanic (4), South Asian (2), and Southeast-European (1).

Theory-based Research Design

- Narratives and narrative analysis
- Why this approach to data collection and analysis?
 - Personhood (identity)
 - => embedded in the context
 - => enacted through the activities
 - Narrating as a tool for examining the process of doing self; narrating as identity in action.
 - Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; Daiute, 2010; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Stetsenko & Arievich, 2004

Theory-based Research Design

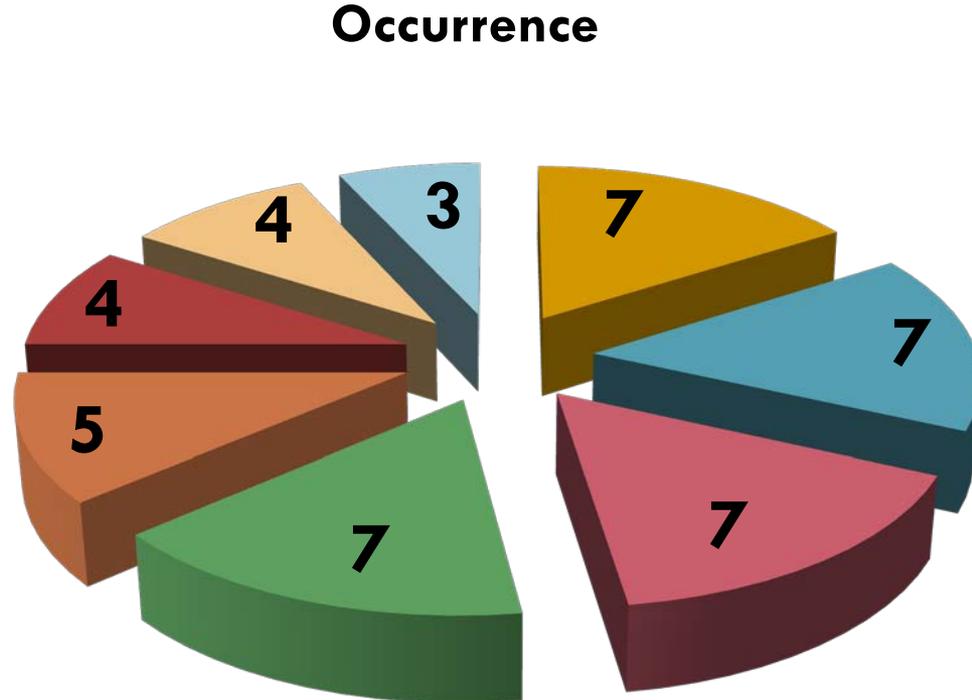
Research activities – methods	Theoretical rationale
Story-board	Elicits meaningful activities in a realistic context
Pie chart	Heuristic to aid participants' reflection about meaningful life activities
“Movie trailer” of good/bad times	Shifts audience from participant enactment (for the interviewer) to peers

Story-board instruction

- *Try to imagine that one of your friends becomes a movie director and wants to make a movie about you and your life. Think about what is it that you would like people your age to know about how you live your life. Think about the most important activities that you do in your life that show who you are. You can use this pie chart to draw what should be in that movie and how important it is.*

The most important identity enactments

□ *What is it that you do that shows who you are?*



■ Family

■ Social activism/
volunteering

■ School/learning

■ Leisure

■ Friends/dating/
relationships

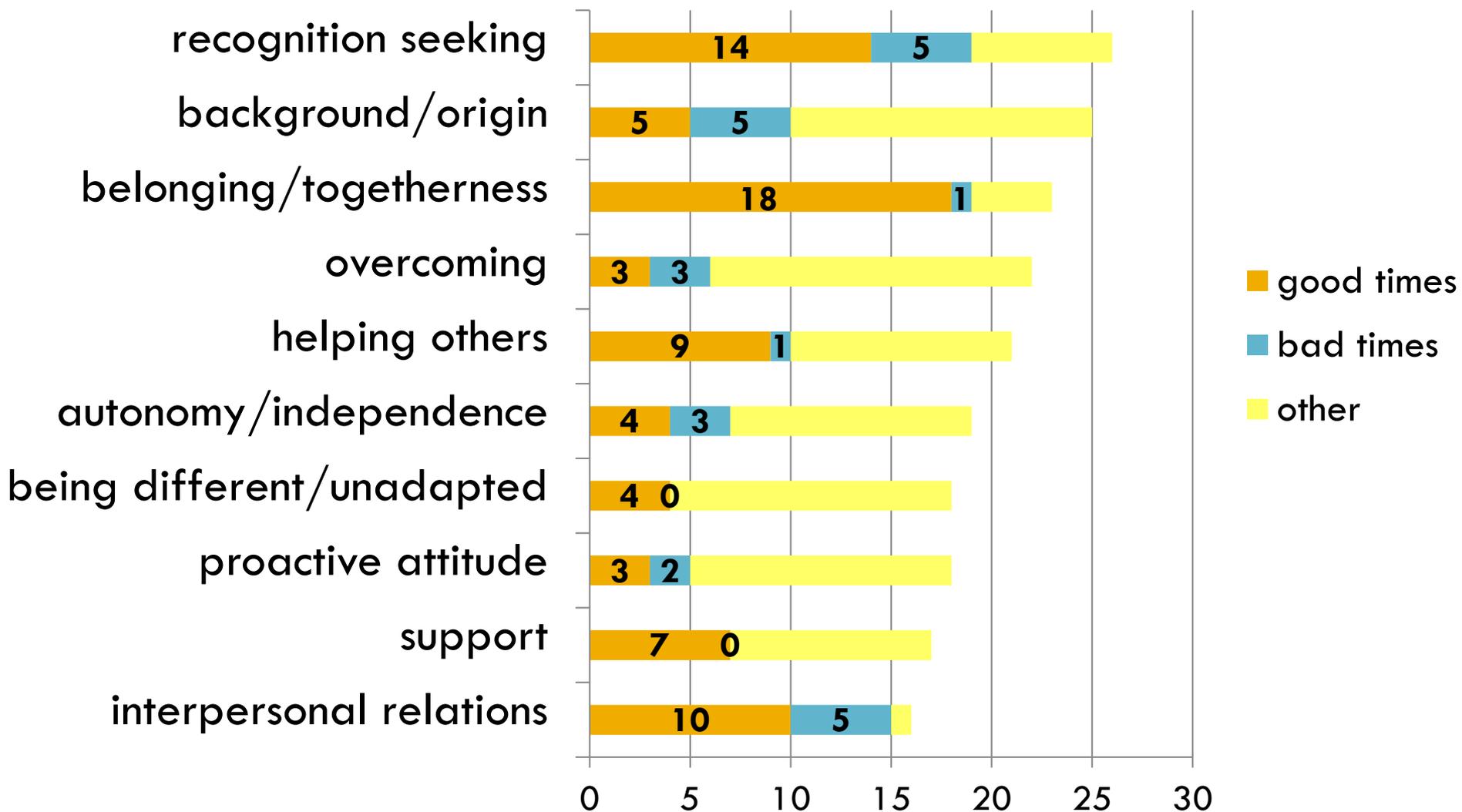
■ Arts

■ Work

■ Youth Organization

Major issues addressed in narratives

- *What the narratives are about?* -



‘(Not) meeting expectations’ code:

Blair; female; 18 years; February 2011

- *Cause even my dad, my dad is, he is Black, and he is English, but he thinks I'm...he doesn't think it anymore, but he used to think when he...cause he left...he left me and he came back, and, when he came back he used to think that I'm trying to be White and everything like that. And it's just, I don't know how they expect me, how do you expect someone to be. Like, why is, I think Black and acting White two different things. I don't know [laughs]. I don't know if I'm answering your question. But, I don't know.*

‘Belonging/togetherness’ code:

Stefan; male; 20 years; June 2011

- *And I had so many great relationships, and so many people that I met. And I had so many different great experiences. But, what really stuck with me most is the relationships and the friendships that I have over here [youth organization]. And that’s why I keep coming back and volunteering and joining different other programs. To get that exposure and experiences. Also to have that community, the sense of like you belong to something. You are part of something. And that really stuck with me. That’s why I’ve been here for so long. Because like, I just love the community.*

What is it that makes young people feel comfortable/uncomfortable?

□ What makes you feel good?

- belonging/togetherness
- recognition seeking*
- helping others
- interpersonal relations*
- support
- doing something constructive/productive
- background/origin*

□ What makes you feel bad?

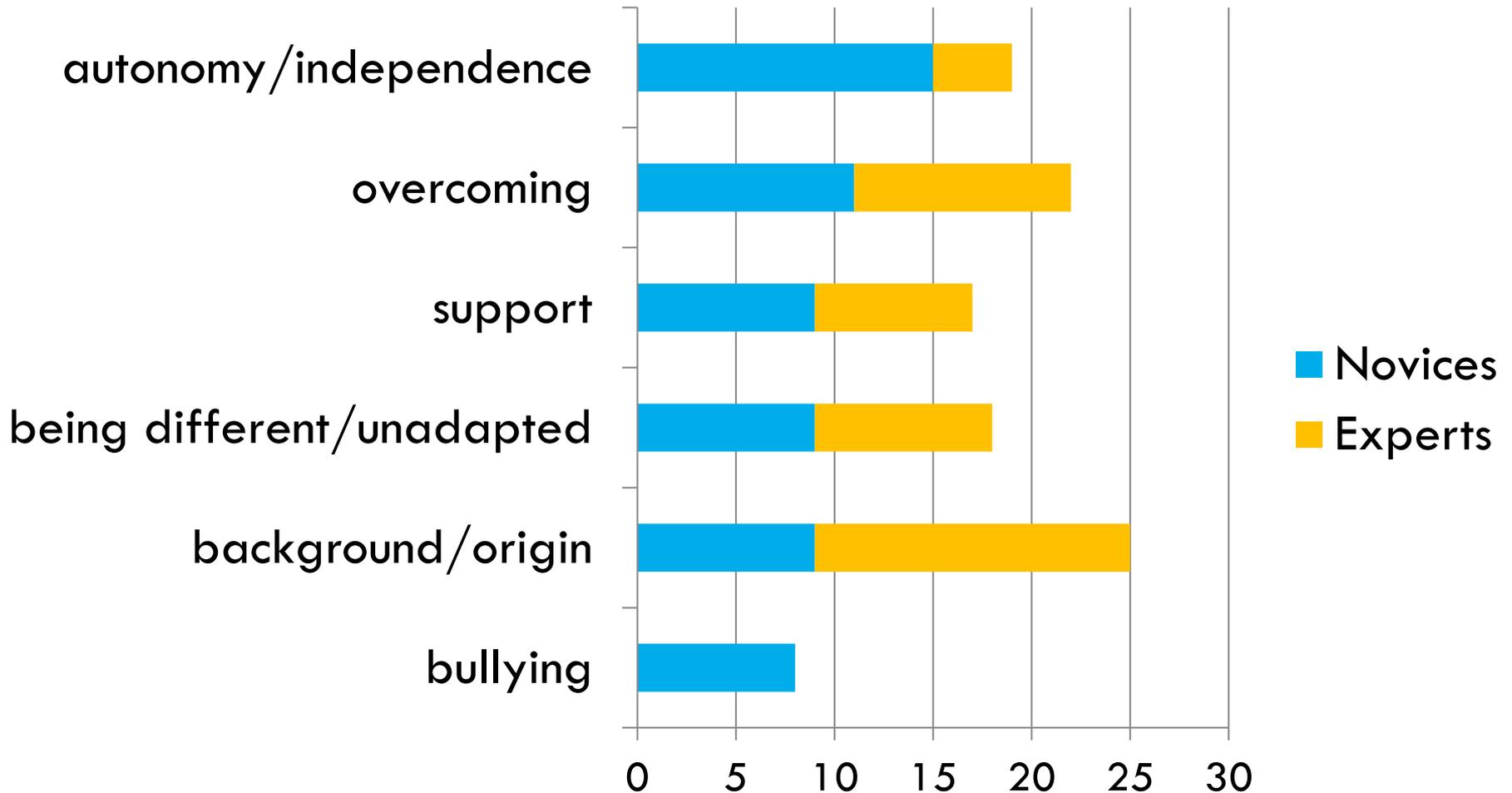
- (not) meeting expectations
- exclusion/rejection
- background/origin*
- recognition seeking*
- interpersonal relations*
- lack of freedom
- betrayal/loyalty

What the Youth Organization is about?

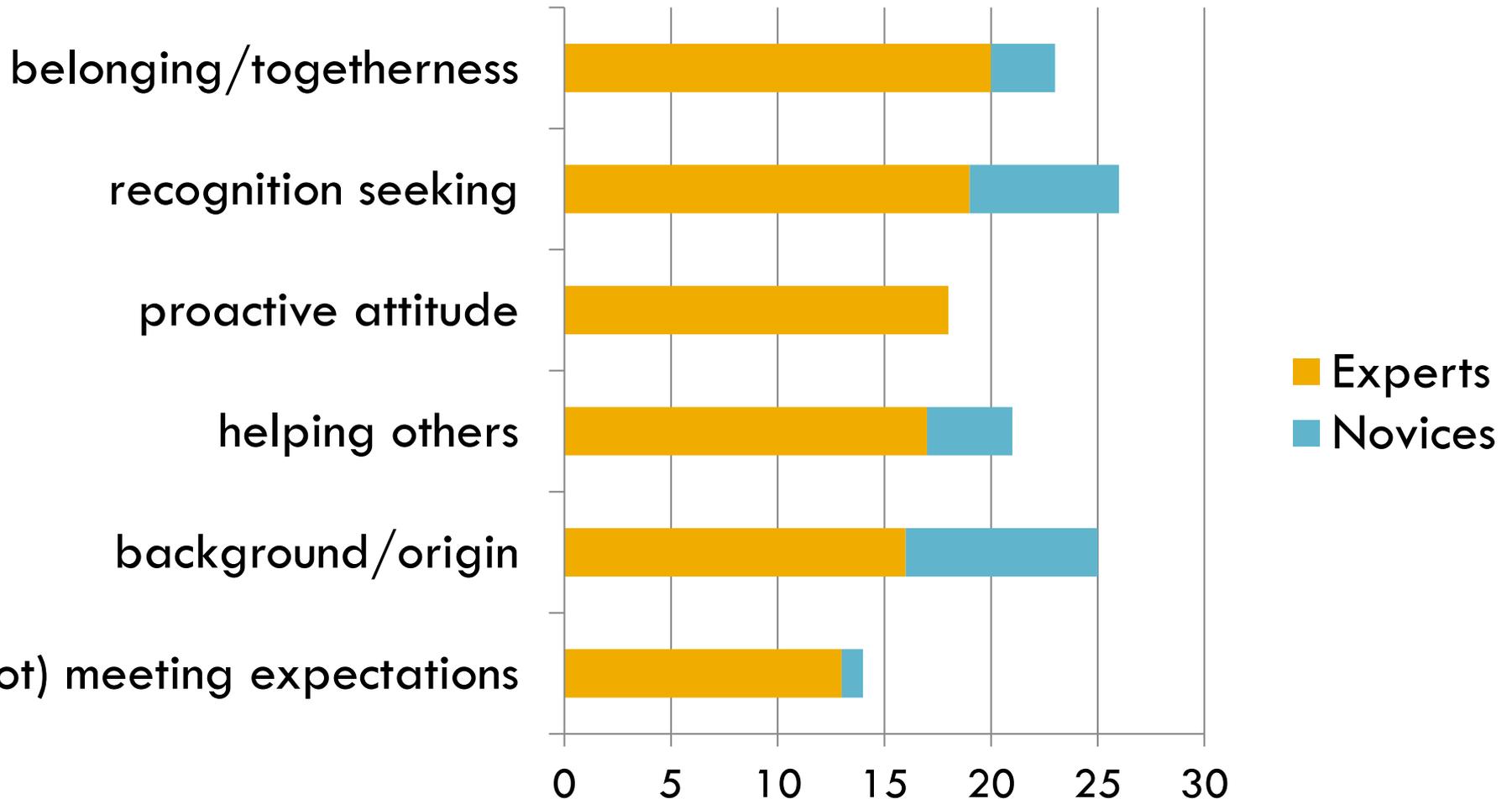


- 1) Proactive attitude
- 2) Helping others
- 3) Doing something constructive/productive
- 4) Belonging/togetherness

Youth Organization 'novices'



Youth Organization 'experts'



Bad times/good times stories (comfort/discomfort)

- Narratives about good times shorter but richer in psychosocial dimensions

	Number of narratives	Word count	Number of issues – psychosocial dynamics
Bad times	58	10446 (180 per narrative)	65 (1.12 issues per narrative; 1 issue/161 words)
Good times	83	10853 (130 per narrative)	102 (1.23 issues per narrative; 1 issue/106 words)

‘Data meaning-making’

- Qualitatively different sets of criteria for defining “good” and “bad” environment
 - ▣ One is not simply the opposite of the other; good/bad times are not mirror images.
 - ▣ Implications?
- What people *say* and *feel* about themselves changes as the context changes.

‘Data meaning-making’, cont’d

- Harder to make meaning out of negative experiences
- Emphasis on positive experiences
 - ▣ Downplaying negative ones?
- Strong appropriation of positive values once the sense of community and belonging are developed

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