The Impact of Council on Early Adolescents

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THE IMPACT OF COUNCIL ON EARLY ADOLESCENTS

A dissertation submitted
by
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to
ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY SANTA BARBARA
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY
In
CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

Throughout history, attempts have been made to influence children’s social behavior through programs and policies in schools. While well-intentioned, such programs are sometimes introduced and perpetuated without evidence about whether they fulfill their goals and objectives. Council is a program that has been implemented in schools since 1980 to foster tolerance and social connection. The Center for Council Training started more than 50 programs in California, Arizona, Washington, Colorado, New York, and Israel. The Council Practitioners Center started to integrate Council into schools in the Los Angeles School District (LAUSD) and has a goal of expanding Council throughout California and other states. Council is a type of group communication intended to encourage students to share stories that may lead to processing conflict, inspiration, skilled decision making, improvement in academics, and stronger relationships with others. These goals are based on the principles of deep listening and sharing in Council. This qualitative study represents an initial effort to explore the impact of Council on early adolescent children ages 11-13 years old. Nine middle school students were interviewed. Core findings included: (a) Council provides a safe environment in which one is able to share emotional and personal stories that promote healthy relationships, (b) Council is a positive experience for participants promoting an optimistic outlook on life and (c) Council promotes self-identity formation.
through fostering personal growth and valuing of life. Implications for further research and possible benefits of this study are discussed. The electronic version of this dissertation is available free at Ohiolink ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd.

Keywords: Council; Circle; group process; middle school; early adolescents; educational programs; qualitative; grounded theory; structured interview; narrative
Dedication

To Lawrence King, the first who inspired the author to study middle school students and the importance of fostering closer relationships among them. He was taken too soon from this world. May he rest in peace and may others learn from the tragedy that he experienced and learn to accept one another. This work is also dedicated to those who share the philosophy of being connected to nature and one another in a deeper and more meaningful way. Finally, this is dedicated to the inspirational students who participated in this study. Thank you for your insight, confidence, and passion for Council. You have inspired me to continue to embrace Council as a part of my life and have helped me understand why it is important to do so.
Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge and thank those who have helped make this study complete and meaningful. To my committee members: Juliet Rohde-Brown, thank you for your patience and guidance. Linda Holder, thank you for your great inspiration, being a lover and practitioner of Council. Betsy Bates Freed, thank you for so much, words cannot describe how appreciative I am of you and the amount of energy and time you gave me. Above all, I appreciate the friendship that has grown between us. Lewis Mehl-Madrona, thank you for your input and for the passion you bring to others with regard to indigenous practices and the role these traditions play in healing.

To my other friends and colleagues at Antioch, James Fortman, you have been my hero many times. Thanks for helping me to stay grounded and for your help with the tedious and technical issues. Alex, Jason, and Scott for your support and friendship along the way. Barbara Lipinski and Salvador Trevino, thank you for helping me to embrace my shadow side and to accept it as an equally important part of who I am. You continue to inspire me and help me believe in myself.

To those that helped launch this study in assisting with providing invaluable resources about Council and in gathering participants for the study. First and foremost, Joe Provisor, trainer of Council, director of the Ojai Foundation's Council in Schools Program, program expert for the Council
Practitioners Center, and great inspiration to many, the time and energy you have
provided towards this study is greatly appreciated. You continue to instill an even
greater passion inside of me to practice and teach Council. To Tara Peters, middle
school teacher and Council practitioner extraordinaire, thank you for your
dedication to this project and helping me gather participants for this study. It was
moving to hear how your students have been deeply touched by Council and how
many of them appreciate you for their connection with one another and with
Council.

To my many friends that have been so understanding, patient, and
supportive along my journey, your love and dedication to our friendship while I
put this program first many times means the world to me.

To my immediate family members, Mama, Daddy, Lisa, Ralph, Dee,
Nacho, Chris, Renee and all my beautiful babers. Thank you for believing in me
and for all the patience you provided me throughout the years of my academic
career. I appreciate the love and understanding you provided to me as well as
instilling in me the ability to reach for my dreams through hard work and
dedication. May my nephews and nieces be inspired to dream big and never give
up. To my extended family for believing in me and holding me close in your
hearts.

To My Love, Eli Villanueva, you are a great inspiration for what it takes to
dream big and to believe that reaching your dreams is possible. The sacrifices that
we have made along this journey together have thankfully brought us closer. I love you and appreciate your support, belief in me, and most of all your understanding and patience. To my other loves, Dulce for your wonderful companionship during the long days and nights of reading, writing, and studying, having you cuddled up with me made it more bearable. Last but not least, to my soon to be born child, we have already connected through Council like practices with one another as you have grown within me. May we carry on a tradition of family Council and be forever close. Thank you for providing me with strength and confidence as I walked and spoke in my graduation ceremony and when I presented my dissertation.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Purpose of the Study

History reflects many attempts to shape and influence children’s social behavior through policies and programs implemented in school settings, often with the aim of improving the overall education experience for students and ultimately influencing communities as a whole in a positive way. For example, since the 19th Century, schools have utilized corporal punishment as a way to change the undesired behavior of students (Middleton, 2008). In historic anecdotal accounts, those who suffered from corporal punishment recalled feeling that it was unjust and a form of accepted bullying. Many of the recollections also included the belief that corporal punishment did not do what it was intended to do, which was change undesired behavior, but instead, instilled hatred, fear and shame in the students. They also remembered how corporal punishment created notable tension between students and teachers (Middleton, 2008). As of 2008, corporal punishment remained legal in schools in 21 states in the U. S. This method is maintained mostly due to cultural and religious beliefs, despite studies that have shown alternative and more effective ways of promoting desired behavior (Dupper & Dingus, 2008). In 2012, corporal punishment persists as a legal form of discipline in 19 states (de Nies, Yunji, 2012).
Zero Tolerance, a modern social policy that generally dictates that students face automatic expulsion for any threat or a variety of other rule violations, has also been called into question for serious doubts about its efficacy. Schools that utilize a zero tolerance policy are continuously documented as less safe than schools that do not implement a zero tolerance policy (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). There is a fundamental criticism that zero tolerance conflicts with a school's mission to teach students to tolerate one another (Rice, 2009). D. A. R. E., a law enforcement-initiated program intended to dissuade children from becoming involved in drugs, gangs, and violence, has also shown mixed evidence about its effectiveness in schools (Singh, Jimerson, Renshaw, Saeki, Hart, Earhart, & Stewart, 2011).

These programs, although derived from good intentions, were implemented based on assumptions regarding their effectiveness, rather than on scientific methodology. Scientific methodology first entails investigating perceived problems or solutions through qualitative exploration, then by using the findings to infer hypotheses to be tested against a null hypothesis (Patten, 2007). It is pertinent to examine programs such as the three explained above, as well as newer programs implemented in schools, such as Council, to ensure that time and resources are utilized well. Studying such programs insures that resources and time are well-spent, and reduces the chance of the "boomerang effect", which occurs when targeted behaviors addressed by programs worsen rather than
improve (Byrne, 2007). The "boomerang effect" occurred with D. A. R. E., which was at one time implemented in 70% of the nation's school districts. In some cases, drug usage increased among participants in D. A. R. E. rather than decreased (Ennett, Tobler, Ringwalt, & Flewelling, 1994; West & O'Neal, 2004). It has been suggested that schools, instead of taking on these extreme measures that show questionable efficacy, could partake in preventative strategies such as behavior management and fostering a student's ability to learn conflict resolution (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Schools can also utilize primary prevention techniques such as screening troubled students by investigating warning signs, which may include social isolation or threats made by students. Perhaps Council could be seen as a way to partake in these preventative strategies as the themes facilitated in Council can focus on these particular topics.

Council was implemented in schools in 1980 in California, Arizona, Washington, Colorado, New York, and Israel (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). It is a form of group communication described as listening and speaking from the heart. It draws on Native American principles such as everything and everyone is interconnected (Robbins, 2012). Council is most prevalent in schools in the LAUSD; however, it is also implemented in various community and educational settings around the world (The Ojai Foundation, 2010a; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). It was introduced to schools with the mission that it would provide an avenue for addressing relationships/connection, as well as relevance/meaning in
education and promotion of healthy and joyful school communities (The Ojai Foundation, 2011). In 1992, during the racially tense trial of Los Angeles police officers accused of beating motorist Rodney King, educator Jack Zimmerman, one of the founders of Council in schools, envisioned that Council in middle schools could provide a place for students to learn how diverse the world is through sharing personal stories, and in turn cultivate understanding about living peacefully in a world that embraces many cultures (Provisor, 2009).

The Ojai Foundation is a non-profit organization whose roots go back to 1975 (The Ojai Foundation, 2010b). Its original purpose was to explore the relationship between science and spirituality. The organization was re-established in 1979 by anthropologist Joan Halifax and mythologist Joseph Campbell and the Foundation became more in tune with Shamanic and indigenous practices. The direction of Council changed once again in the 1980's with an emphasis on education. Two of the integral people at that time responsible for interfacing with schools were Gigi Coyle and Jack Zimmerman (The Ojai Foundation, 2010b). Today, Council participants from various schools enjoy the land that the Ojai Foundation calls home for yearly retreats. Trainings and private retreats are also regular events on the land. The Ojai Foundation is the hub for programs throughout the world, including in schools and prisons (The Ojai Foundation, 2010b). Ojai Foundation has played an integral role in providing Council to communities internationally for over 30 years. In particular, there are more than
12,000 students in over 60 public and private Southern California schools that are practicing Council weekly. Most of the public schools in Los Angeles that have incorporated Council into their curricula are funded by the LAUSD's Council Practioners Center. Other public schools and independent schools that utilize Council are supported internally through the Ojai Foundation (The Ojai Foundation, 2011).

As explained above in the mission and purpose of Council, and as will be explained in depth in the literature review, Council has well-intended goals and has respected culture and communication in schools. Therefore, it is worthy of scientific study to ensure that the intended goals are being met. Since little research has been done on the efficacy on Council in educational settings, and no hypotheses have been generated scientifically, a quantitative approach would be premature. Patten (2007) explains that, “When little is known about a topic, qualitative research should usually be Initially favored,” and, “Based on the qualitative results, theories might be developed and subsequently tested by using quantitative research” (p. 21).

For the purpose of this study, the focus is on Council practiced in schools. Although the effect of Council has been captured on video and expressed anecdotally (The Ojai Foundation, 2009; The Ojai Foundation, 2010c; & The Ojai Foundation, 2010d), and for evaluative and funding purposes (Dietsch, 2001; Dietsch& Abdulla-Welsh, 2007; Dietsch& Abdulla-Welsh, 2009), its impact has
not been considered clinically. This presents a missing piece in the psychological and educational literature as well as in regard to expanding our understanding regarding multiculturally informed approaches to primary prevention. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to explore whether and how Council impacts the lives of young adolescents who are at a developmental stage in which they are still forming their identity (Erikson, 1980).

Council traditionally has been a means of communication among Native American cultures. The practice of Council in schools is inspired by Native American tradition. As practiced in tribal settings, participants in schools typically sit in a circle and one person speaks at a time, utilizing a “talking piece” to ensure undivided attention. Specifically, the Council in schools program has been described as: "... training and consultation for educators who wish to integrate the practice of Council, community building practice of authentic expression and empathic, non-judgmental listening and receptivity, into mainstream school curricula, creative arts, instructional strategies, support services, and school communities" (The Ojai Foundation, 2010a). Council provides a way to speak and listen deeply. It offers an opportunity for those involved, to practice meaningful communication. Council is practiced in various settings by individuals representing diverse cultures and ages (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009; The Ojai Foundation, 2011).
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Council

Council is a type of group process that facilitates deep communication among participants (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). The mission of Council in schools has core components that involve 1) focusing on connecting through relationship, and 2) creating meaning or relevance in education (The Ojai Foundation, 2009). There are four basic intentions of Council described by Provisor (2009) and Zimmerman and Coyle (2009) as essential elements for participants to follow while participating in the Council process. These intentions are similar to what other Circle's would label “guidelines” as opposed to “rules”. The guidelines or intentions are used to remind participants about their shared commitment in creating a safe place to communicate (Pranis, 2005).

Speak from the heart. The first of the four intentions of Council is to speak from the heart, or, in other words, to speak authentically (Wasson, 2010) and honestly. Speaking from the heart entails talking about a topic that genuinely matters and is personal, as opposed to speaking in general or philosophical terms. A facilitator fosters the participants' ability to speak from the heart by providing a prompt for participants to reflect upon. While these prompts are intended to focus the group’s attention, the facilitator typically frames them in a broad way, enabling participants to reflect upon anything that comes to heart.
For example, a participant might present an observation reflecting the shadow side to the prompt. In other instances, the facilitator may choose to leave the topic open-ended (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). In an illustration of this concept, Provisor (2009) noted that a facilitator might provide the opportunity for the group to, “Tell a story about a time when you realized you had a true friend…or anything else” (p. 21). Offering reflection towards the shadow side, a facilitator could simultaneously offer a second prompt asking the participants to tell a story about a time when they realized that someone they thought was a true friend turned out not to be so.

**Listen from the heart.** The second intention of Council is to listen from the heart; that is, to listen attentively. When listening from the heart, one does not prepare a response, nor does one interrupt the speaker. The listeners are doing so without judgment (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). Clearly, there will be times when there are differing opinions; however, in order to attend to listening from the heart, instead of focusing on emotional reactivity, the listener simply tries to completely absorb what is being said (Provisor, 2009). There may also be times when the listeners agree with the speaker and want to express that the speaker is heard and understood. Rather than speak out of turn, those who want to express their deeply felt concurrence may do so by stating "ho", "ah-ho", or any other word or gesture that the participants have agreed upon to represent the feeling of understanding. This expression represents the Native American
practice of Council and communicates agreement and connection. Provisor (2009) explains that in the Lakota language this expression literally means “the shortest prayer”. Further, it is derived from "Ah Ho Mitakuye Oyasin,” which translates to "All my relations" (Provisor, 2009). One gesture that has been used with younger children has become known as the "twinkle." It is when participants put their hands in the air and wiggle their fingers, similar to the American sign language translation for applause (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009).

**Being of lean expression.** The third intention of Council is to be of lean expression or to be succinct when speaking. Speaking briefly enables sufficient time for all members to share. The speaker learns to choose words that are important and that will benefit both the speaker and the members of the circle (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009).

**Spontaneity.** The fourth and final intention of Council is for the speaker to be spontaneous. The speaker that allows for spontaneity will have been listening from the heart when other speakers were sharing and will genuinely be able to speak from the heart (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009).

**Confidentiality.** All Council circles, as in group therapy (Yalom & Leszez, 2005), also uphold the importance of confidentiality to instill trust among the participants (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). This enables a sense of safety for all participants to be their most authentic selves (Pranis, 2005).
Values. Whereas the four intentions of Council can be described as providing participants with a foundation and with guidelines, the values of Council as described by Zimmerman & Coyle (2009) are experiential. Values are formed through the process of Council (The Ojai Foundation, 2011). There is the experience and value of coming together to connect with others. Human beings have a natural instinct to be connected to community (McKibben, 2009). From this community gathering comes the value of communal awareness (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). This group wisdom and awareness differs from what many Westerners commonly value as individualism (McKibben, 2009). This value can be further described as a mutual endeavor among participants. For example, the four intentions of Council can be considered as the participants' mutual endeavor, since everyone has affirmed to speak and listen from the heart. Other aspects may emerge from listening from the heart as well, such as the values of empathy and respect (The Ojai Foundation, 2011).

Circles have been described as not having a prescribed set of values; however, a unified framework exists (Pranis, 2005). For example, a core feature of Circle as practiced in many settings is the belief that individuals possess a desire to be connected to other humans in a good way. Specific types of circles, like peacemaking circles that assist with the transition from incarceration to community, have experienced the following values: respect, honesty, humility, sharing, courage, inclusivity, empathy, trust, forgiveness, and love. Others also
include spirituality, open-mindedness, and responsibility (Pranis, 2005). One can relate some of these values to the four intentions of Council: speak and listen from the heart, be spontaneous, and speak leanly.

**Talking piece.** An essential part of Council involves using a talking piece. Talking pieces have traditionally been used in Native American cultures. The typical talking piece has meaning to the participants that are in circle together. Often times there are various talking pieces provided for participants to choose from. Should the person choose not to speak they can hold the talking piece and sit in silence and/or pass it to the next speaker (Boyes-Watson, 2008; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). The only time a person talks in circle is when they are holding the talking piece (Pranis, 2005). The holder of the talking piece is able to speak without interruption and with everyone's complete attention. The talking piece also provides an avenue for those that have a more difficult time speaking in front of others (Pranis, 2005).

**Talking circles.** Circle is a place where people learned to connect more intimately with one another. Since fire was discovered, people began sitting close to one another and communicating around the warmth and glow of the fire (Pranis, 2005; Wheatley, 2010). Many families today gather in circle formation around the kitchen table where they engage in discussion with one another (Pranis, 2005).

Council and “talking circles” are quite similar in both structure and function. Although there are facilitators or carriers of Council, participants are
seen as equals in what is intended to be a nonhierarchical environment. Likewise, in talking circles, the interaction among the participants is egalitarian. Equality is apparent not only with regard to the communication that occurs, but also in the physical formation of the circle (Brokenleg as cited in Boyes-Watson, 2008; Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). In Council, participants arrange themselves in a circle and typically sit on the floor to emphasize oneness, to give them the sense of being grounded, and to connect participants with the earth (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009; Watkins & Schulman, 2008). When sitting in circle, participants describe a sense of wholeness or belonging, as there is no beginning or ending in the form itself (Wheatley, 2010).

It has been noted that during business meetings, a transformation occurs when the meeting format is changed to enable colleagues to sit in a circle rather than in formal rows (Wheatley, 2010). Rather than a lecture simply taking place, meetings held in circle formations foster diverse discussion, as well as deep speaking and listening where members feel empowered and a part of a community (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010; Wheatley, 2010).

Talking circles have been described as a way to connect with others by talking in a way that incorporates one's important values and best self. They have been described as a way to strengthen not only relationships with others but with oneself as well (Boyes-Watson, 2008). One of the philosophical underpinnings of
circles addresses the need that everyone has for help, and how, in turn, helping others can help oneself (Pranis, 2005).

Talking circles have been conceptualized as a way to foster the development of peace and social justice. Much of the impact that these circles have had on the participants has been described in emotional terms, as "difficult to put into words" (Boyes-Watson, 2008). Council has been described this way as well; i.e., as transcending experience in an existential way. Communing in Circle has had such an impression on those involved that the impact has been described as extending to life outside the circle. People involved with "peacemaking circles," for example, have described learning how to live better lives, improving relationships well beyond the circle, and fostering better relations within the family, community, and other organizations. Participating in Circle has been described as learning a different way to "be" in the world, creating more just, respectful, and supportive ways of living with others (Boyes-Watson, 2008). Thus, Council has important systemic implications. This systemic influence on human development has been verified by Bronfenbrenner (1979) as he learned about the impact that ecosystems have on human development. Peacemaking circles have also promoted the experience of inner freedom in numerous ways (Pranis, 2005). For example, circles are places where people can speak their truth, to be their true, authentic selves, and to allow themselves the freedom inherent in being vulnerable (Pranis, 2005).
Carolyn Boyes-Watson is the founder of the center for Restorative Justice at Suffolk University. She has written books on how to use peacemaking circles to develop emotional literacy, promote healing, and how to build healthy relationships.

She has described the gift of Circle:

I talk, for example, about the power of the Circle to help young people to practice emotional literacy and heal emotional wounds; its ability to open spaces for youth empowerment, inspiration, and voice; and its practical power in teaching habits of respect, responsibility, an accountability.

(Boyes-Watson, 2008, pp. 10).

**Group Process**

Given that Council is a group process, benefits similar to those documented in group therapy may be seen in adolescents who participate in Council in school settings. For example, group therapy gains its strength partly from flexibility (Vinogradov, Cox, & Yalom, 2003). Council is adaptive, as facilitators take into consideration what topics are important to participants in the moment. A facilitator may begin Council by engaging participants to partake in a “weather report”, inquiring about the general well-being of participants, just as a group therapist might “check in” with members (Yalom & Leszez, 2005). Facilitators may also decide to change the focus of Council and “turn into the skid,” that is, to reevaluate what the needs of the group are and to focus on
perhaps a crisis that arises (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). In psychotherapy
groups, clients are able to benefit from working on an intrapersonal and
interpersonal level. In other words, they are able to confront their own issues
through interactions with other members in the group (Shechtman & Leichtentritt,
2010). Council may exhibit similar benefits, as participants share personal and
meaningful stories.

Participants in groups commonly describe their surprise at experiencing a
sense of unexpected intensity during profound encounters of verbal
communication, insight, and decision making (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). In
Council for example, members describe profound or "magical" experiences that
arise from speaking from the heart and being spontaneous (Provisor, 2009;
Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). These types of experiences have also been described
as synergy, where the effect is felt from being a part of the group as opposed to
stemming from the individual (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010).

The benefits from group process mainly occur in the context of a trusting
and safe environment (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). This trust enhances risk taking,
self-disclosure, openness to feedback, and an avenue to work through conflict
(Yalom, 1974). This trust is instilled in Council through highlighting the
importance of confidentiality (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009).
Storytelling

Circle has been described, in essence, as a storytelling process (Pranis, 2005). Sharing meaningful stories enables participants to connect with one another as they discover commonalities in their humanity and learn to appreciate the complexity of human experience. It is through stories that wisdom comes to the Circle. Those who engage in storytelling have described experiencing a multilayered awakening: emotionally, spiritually, physically, and mentally. This type of awakening has been demonstrated in studies that show how children reduce their emotional pain and increase personal growth through the use of a comfortable conduit, therapeutic storytelling (Carlson & Arthur, 1999). It is through stories that children can detach themselves and process themes more symbolically. Tappan & Brown (1989), describe narrative as a way that we make meaning out of our life experiences and how a child's narrative has been shown to enhance moral development. Looking at young adolescent African-American females, Gill (2008) also found that the narrative approach positively impacted the participants. The narrative approach included participants conducting a life history interview of a family member they felt was important to them and sharing an autobiography with an interviewer. The results showed that, following the creation and telling of a meaningful story, there was a significant decrease in psychological problems and an increase in racial identity. People find that personal life experiences are more important than advice-giving (Pranis, 2005). Storytelling
appears to influence both the storyteller and listener (Pearce, 1998) through being present, sharing a rhythmically patterned auditory experience, and experiencing connection as a relationship develops and evolves around the story.

The late child psychiatrist Richard Gardner utilized storytelling in his clinical work, based on the connection he identified between story, storyteller, and listener (Gardner, 1968). Children's stories, he concluded, provide important information about their lives, including inner conflicts, frustrations, and wishes. For example, he came to understand children through the stories they told verbally, through drawings, and through play. He believed that storytelling helped to foster communication skills and helped to decrease resistance. Specifically, Gardner comprehended the difficulty that many children have with speaking directly about personal issues and helped foster their ability to resolve issues through imaginary storytelling, play, or drawings. He witnessed how some children gain the capability of shifting from imaginary storytelling to speaking about personal issues more directly (Gardner, 1968).

The demonstrated impact of storytelling on children and adolescents sparked the author’s interest in studying Council, as it is a school-based program that uses personal storytelling to foster enriched social interaction and growth among youth. Because it relies on storytelling for communication, Council offers the potential to cultivate deep understanding, connection, empathy, and personal growth.
Ritual and Ceremony

There is a sense of ritual incorporated into the Council, as there are certain routine components. However, Council practitioners focus more on the process and do not see Council as a technique (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). Circles are generally described, instead, as a form of heritage or tradition (Wheatley, 2010).

The rituals of Council include a systematic approach to the opening and closing of the ceremony of coming together. There is usually a center focal point or altar in the center of the circle that can be adorned with various items to set the intention of Council. This focal point has been described as a symbolic way to remind participants of their common ground and shared values (Pranis, 2005). These items can consist of candles, bells, chimes, and talking pieces and are typically items of some importance to the participants. To begin Council, one or more participants opens by dedicating the Council. They can initiate this dedication by the ring of a bell or the lighting of a candle. The dedication can be a moment of silence, or a meaningful thought or idea can be affirmed (Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). The opening and closing rituals are used to help participants transition to enter or exit circle from ordinary life. This time is set apart as something special and different (Pranis, 2005; Provisor, 2009; Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009).

In the context of family therapy, ritual, in the form of verbalizations and acts, has been described as having the ability to change a person’s reality (Black,
1988). Some studies explain the term “ceremony” in a similar way. Ceremony has also been described as a formal and systematic act, meaningful to all those who take part. As symbolic of underlying and important themes, ceremonial behaviors have the potential to create changes not only in the individual, but relationally as well (Combs & Freedman, 1990).

Cultures that Embrace the Premise Council

The roots of Council are diverse, as many cultures have a tradition of storytelling and sitting in circle. The League of the Iroquois Native Americans from the Plains and Southwestern Pueblos, the contemporary Native American Church, Hawaiian, Greek, Australian Islamic, and Quaker cultures, are just a few examples of those worldwide that are practitioners of shamanic and indigenous circles (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009; Ingerman & Wesselman, 2010).

Native American Tradition

Council, as practiced in public schools, incorporates a significant amount of Native American tradition. To begin, Native Americans believe that one of the main reasons for partaking in ceremonies is to maintain good relations, including how one connects with one's self, or with family, friends, and community. This importance of relationship extends beyond the human world and includes nature and the spirit world (Achterberg, 1985; Hirschfelder & de Montano, 1998; Ingerman & Wesselman, 2010; Roszak, 1992; Villoldo, 2010; Watkins, 2003). When it comes to healing and protecting relationships, Native Americans get
direction from how they relate to nature and the earth (Brokenleg as cited in Boyes-Watson, 2008; Roszak, 1992). Native American’s also believe that it is best if healing and change occur within a community as opposed to individually (Garrett & Carroll, 2000). As stated earlier, Council utilizes ceremony and can also be considered a type of community based on its incorporation of peers. Also described above, is how, when in Council, those participating typically sit on the floor in circle formation. Native Americans believe that the circle is a symbol of power, unity, peace, and relation (Garrett & Carroll, 2000).

**Ecopsychology**

A key component of Council involves human connection to nature. As previously stated, Council entails participants sitting in circle formation, typically on the ground, connecting them with the earth. In Native American cultures it is strongly believed that there is deep relationship between humans and nature. Ecopsychologists hypothesize that humans have an evolutionary association with nature. They believe that there is an emotional bond between nature and humans which contributes to human evolution (Brown, 1995). Ecopsychologists strive to create a balance between human values that serve nature. They also seek to heal the soul or psyche within an environmental context based on the belief that humans are an essential part of nature (Brown, 1995; Hillman, 1995). In particular, ecopsychology incorporates the notion that there is a connection between how people cope with personal issues and how they project their feelings
onto the natural environment or how they comply with the treatment of the environment (Hillman, 1995; Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995). Ecotherapy evolved by incorporating growth and healing fostered by a healthy interaction with the natural environment (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009).

Philosopher, professor, and activist, Glenn Albrecht, developed a theory of human connection to ecology based on a concept he termed "solastalgia," (Conner, Albrecht, Higginbotham, Freeman, & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2010). Specifically, solastalgia contextualizes the relationship between human health, powerlessness, and ecological health. Articles by Smith, (2010), and Conner et al. (2010), clarify that Albrecht’s term stems from the Latin word for comfort, (solacium), and the Greek root meaning pain, (-algia). Albrecht described this concept as a kind of pain one feels when "... the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault" (Smith, 2010, p. 36). Solastalgia also incorporates the sense that one can have a sense of threatened identity, feeling as if he or she does not belong, due to environmental changes (Conner et al., 2004). In other words, Albrecht described a feeling of homesickness while still at home (Conner et al., 2004; Smith, 2010).

Identity Development

Council has been implemented as part of the curriculum in schools for the benefit of children as young as elementary age (The Ojai Foundation, 2010a). However, it would seem appropriate to begin to study the program’s efficacy in
middle school aged participants, based on their level of identity development. Children in this early adolescent stage are transitioning from a task of industry to the development of an individual identity (Erikson, 1980). Specifically, a child in early adolescence is moving from wanting to be busy and needing to refine skills to discovering an identity based on the various roles he or she has. One’s identity is based on what one learns and does at the industry phase (Erikson, 1980).

Erikson (1972) hypothesized that forming one’s identity was the main task of adolescence. He also introduced the idea that changes in identity are explained by developmental modifications that occur progressively during adolescence. A more recent study supports Erikson’s theory of identity development. Adolescents at the middle school age, averaging age 12, were found to be less stable regarding identity formation than older adolescents, averaging age 16 (Klimstra, Hale, Raaijmakers, Branje, & Meeus, 2010). Social environment, in addition to developmental timing, has been shown to influence identity development. In particular, a trusted teacher can influence an adolescent learning to be industrious (Erikson, 1968; Erikson, 1980). In the Council setting, the teacher and student are thought to have a unique relationship. By definition, during Council, a level of equality is cultivated among the students and teacher. The teacher’s hierarchical position is diminished during the time allotment for Council (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009). Council, then, may hold the potential of providing an environment that allows one to reduce perceptions of power differentials and other undermining
and/or prejudicial assumptions, fostering positive independent development of identity.

Looking at childhood development from a systemic framework, ecosystems such as family, school, culture, and community have been distinguished as factors that impact the quality of psychological growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Further, a person can be described as an active participant in each of the aforementioned groups. As described by Hetherington & Park (1999), identity development entails the interaction between a child and the various ecosystems. One can understand Council as one such system. Not only is early adolescence a time of identity development but a time when changes occur to the level of one’s cognitive ability, which is, in turn, also influenced by the environment. Further, transformations during early adolescence are highly influenced by socialization and cultural transmission (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Council can be identified as a place where socialization and cultural influences occur, making it a worthy environment to study for its potential as a nurturer of positive identity formation.

**Middle School Violence**

One criterion for focusing on middle school students in this study correlates with the great need for services in the schools during early adolescence to address school violence during this stage of development. Compared to 9th and 10th graders, the frequency of bullying was found to be higher for 6th through
The same researchers, found that both the perpetrators and those who were the victims of bullying demonstrated lower psychosocial adjustment. A recent national report was written to guide policy makers and practitioners in developing programs and policies focused on violence and school crime prevention (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2012). The report reviewed studies showing that violence was most prevalent for middle school students in multiple areas, including bullying, fights, student perception of personal safety at school, and victimization. For example, in 2009, researchers found that sixth, seventh, and eighth graders reported being bullied more often at school compared to high school students. Sixth and seventh grade students also reported being more afraid of being harmed or attacked at school compared to students in higher grades. The results regarding violent victimization at school, including serious crimes and simple assault, were also higher for students that ranged in age from 12-14 compared to older students ages 15-18. Specifically, students' reports of being threatened or injured with a weapon were more prevalent for middle school students than for high school students. Violent incidents, including rape, sexual battery, physical attack or threat of attack without a weapon, and robbery, were recorded at higher percentages by middle and high schools at 91% compared to primary schools at 64%. In particular, serious incidents of crime including rape, sexual battery, and physical attack or threat of attack with a weapon and robbery with a weapon, percentages were
higher for middle school students at 19% compared to primary school students at 13%. Theft was also reported higher for middle school, with 65% of students in this age group reporting to be victimized by theft, compared to 65% of primary school students. During the 2009/2010 school year, rates of racial and ethnic tension were higher for middle school students at 5% compared to high school students at 3% and primary school students, 2%. Cyber-bullying was also reported at higher rates in middle schools (19%) compared to primary school, 2%, and high school at 18%. Ten percent of seventh graders and 11% of eighth graders reported being targets of hate crimes compared to 6% of twelfth graders. The percentage of students that reported avoiding certain areas at school due to fear of being attacked was highest for sixth graders at 7%, whereas it was 5% for seventh and eighth graders, 4% for ninth and tenth graders, 2% for twelfth graders, and 1% for eleventh graders.
Chapter III: Statement of the Problem

Main Research Question

The question explored in this study is: How does Council practiced in middle school impact the lives of early adolescents?

Objectives

The objective of this study is to explore how Council impacts the lives of early adolescents and to formulate a hypothesis based on the collected qualitative data. The data could provide potential benefits should it illustrate that Council has a positive impact on adolescents, whereas if no benefits are seen, its inclusion in the crowded curriculum of public schools might be reconsidered. Specifically, results may illuminate how Council, introduced at a pivotal point of adolescent identity development, may influence formulation of relationships across cultures, enhance empathy, and/or promote respectful communication. Should such specific benefits be suggested, other schools might consider adopting Council as part of their curriculum. The outcome may also provide information that could potentially benefit the future funding of Council. Other possible benefits include contributions to the psychological literature about the application and value of Council as well as an overall deeper understanding of the meanings derived by youth who participate in such endeavors.
Chapter IV: Methods

Study participants included middle school students exposed to Council who were also a part of the school’s Council Club, which met outside of the regular curriculum that included Council in the classroom. The middle school that participated is near downtown Los Angeles and is located in the Pico-Union neighborhood. According to the LAUSD, (Los Angeles School District, n.d.), in the 2011-2012 school year, the student population was made up of 94.3% Latino students, 2.4% Black, 2% White, .6% Asian, .5% Filipino, .2% Alaskan, and .1% Pacific Islander. Out of the 1313 total student population, 580 were English learners. There were a total of 57 suspensions during the 2011-2012 school year, a figure that has steadily declined since the school opened in 2007. In that year, 404 suspensions were recorded. The crime in the community surrounding the middle school in the last six months consisted of 143 violent crimes including homicide, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery, and 325 property crimes consisting of burglary, theft, grand theft auto, and theft from vehicle. Out of 209 neighborhoods, Pico-Union ranked 41st for violent crimes and 148th for property crimes (Los Angeles Times, 2012).

Participants were recruited through a letter sent home to parents explaining the purpose of the study. Criteria for participation included exposure to Council for six months or more to ensure a sufficient amount of time for one to have
experienced Council. Criteria also included students that could read at a minimum of a fifth grade level to make certain that they could sign the student assent form as well as comprehend the demographic questionnaire and debriefing letter (Student Assent Form, Appendix D, Demographic Questionnaire, Appendix E, Debriefing Letter, Appendix F).

Instrumentation used included a consent form (Parent or Guardian of Minor Participant Form Consent Form, Appendix C), a student assent form (Student Assent Form, Appendix D), demographic questionnaire (Demographic Questionnaire, Appendix E) and an unstructured interview consisting of 15 open ended questions (Research Interview, Appendix F). The researcher provided packets for a teacher to send home to students. The packet included the recruitment letter and consent form (Recruitment Letter, Appendix B). Parents or legal guardians sent consent forms back to the teacher and a day was arranged for one-on-one interviews to take place between the participant and researcher. At the time of interview, the researcher reviewed the student assent form and those interested in participating in the study signed the form. The unstructured interview followed the signing of the assent form. All interviews were recorded with a digital device to ensure accuracy of data collection and transcription. Participation concluded with the researcher reading and providing participants with a debriefing letter.
Each participant was interviewed one-on-one by the researcher using an unstructured interview of 15 questions. The interview questions were reviewed and approved by the dissertation committee prior to being finalized. The questions were intended to elicit data on the impact that Council has had on the participants. The interviews ranged from 5 minutes and 12 seconds, to 11 minutes and 24 seconds, with the mean 8 minutes and 9 seconds.

**Procedures for the Study**

1. Recruitment of participants was carried out with the help of LAUSD’s Council program expert, Joe Provisor, M. A., and Tara Peters, a teacher from the middle school where the study was conducted. Letters (Appendix B) were sent home to the parents or legal guardians of middle school students to acquire participants. Letters entailed an explanation about the purpose of interviews, details about what involvement will consist of, and an explanation about the potential benefits, and minimal risks. Along with the letter was a consent form (Appendix C) to authorize consent for participation. There were a total of 20 packets provided to the teacher to send home with students and nine students responded, indicating a response rate of 45%.

2. After consent was given by the parents or legal guardians, students provided assent (Appendix D). Participants also filled out a
demographic questionnaire (Appendix E) and participated in a one-on-one interview (Appendix F) with the researcher.

3. The interviews took place at the middle school in a private office setting to ensure confidentiality. Interviews lasted no more than 12 minutes.

4. Immediately following the interviews, the participants were verbally debriefed by the researcher and provided with a debriefing letter (Appendix G). Debriefing information consisted of a summary of the purpose of the study, an explanation about the potential benefits and minimal risks, and contact information for Tara Peters and the researcher, in case the participants had any questions or needed further support.

5. Data was collected via demographic questionnaire and interview. The interview was audio recorded so that material could be accurately collected and transcribed.

6. The data was analyzed using qualitative research techniques. In particular, grounded theory was used to code information theoretically by domain, and to formulate a hypothesis on the impact that Council has on adolescents.
Data Processing Techniques

This study used qualitative data to explain the subjective experience of middle school students. Due to Council being psychologically considered for the first time, this researcher viewed using a qualitative method as a necessary foundation based on the knowledge that qualitative methods create a basis needed to generate a hypothesis (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliot, 2001). Qualitative research allows the reader to have a greater understanding about the experience of Council and the impact that it has had on the students.

Grounded theory was used to gather and interpret data for this study. Grounded theory allowed a hypothesis to be developed from what students verbalized about their Council experience. Grounded theory utilizes questions rather than measures, and therefore generates a hypothesis using theoretical coding (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). It provides meaningful descriptions as a basis for a theory to be created (Barker, Pistrang, & Elliot, 2001). Based on grounded theory, the participants are the source of knowledge and regarded as the experts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), as they are the ones that experienced Council. This model was well suited for students practicing Council because, like in Council, it allowed their voices to be heard, about an area that has not been clinically researched. Most of what has been written on Council is based on how to practice Council (Zimmerman & Coyle, 2009), whereas this study focused on the impact of Council. It is important to study the impact Council has had on
students because Council has only been reviewed for evaluative and funding purposes (Dietsch, 2001; Dietsch & Abdulla-Welsh; 2007; Dietsch & Abdulla-Welsh, 2009).

Grounded theory was used to extrapolate meaning and to formulate a hypothesis from the interview data. Themes and commonalities from interviewing students resulted in a theory about the impact of Council. Keeping to the design of grounded theory, interviews were conducted until no more unique material was presented and all statements had been systematically and theoretically accounted for.

Analysis began during the interview process. In order to clarify what was stated by the participants, the researcher elicited more details by asking for further description or by reframing the question to ensure that the participant properly understood the question.

The second step involved transcribing the interviews from the digital recorder to a typed document. From the transcribed interviews, the researcher coded various themes and identified commonalities from within the student interviews. The coding method permitted organization of the data so that a hypotheses could ultimately be derived about the research concerns: in this case, the impact of Council, from patterns found in the transcribed interviews.

After the interviews were transcribed, the researcher read through the text with the research concerns in mind. In order to manage the amount of narrative,
relevant text and themes pertaining to research concerns were kept for further
coding and analysis, and the rest was set aside. In order to decide what was
considered to be relevant, the researcher also had to consider the theoretical
framework that she was working from. Based on the purpose for the study and the
population that was targeted, the researcher's framework entailed a developmental
and social constructivist perspective. These theoretical frameworks were chosen
based on middle school students’ stage of identity development and on research
demonstrating the influence of environment during this critical stage.

The researcher highlighted similar words or phrases describing the same
idea, called repeating ideas, which were relevant to research concerns. These
repeating ideas were considered for each individual interview question. As the
researcher pondered the relevant text, repeating ideas were simultaneously taken
into account. This method allowed for the researcher to track reasons for
highlighting relevant text and noting thoughts and ideas underscoring the
participants’ remarks. The researcher also collaborated with the dissertation
committee in developing and categorizing repeating ideas to ensure that all
important ideas were taken into consideration.

Themes were created based on commonalities and repeating ideas found in
the relevant text. The themes were then considered as well, and theoretical
constructs were generated. Creating theoretical constructs entailed three major
steps. The first step was separating the list of themes from the repeating ideas. The
attention of the researcher was then focused on the first, or starter theme, as she read down the list of other extrapolated themes to connect ones that related to one another. This process was continued until all themes were put into clustered, interrelated groups. The group of themes was then reflected upon to create the theoretical constructs. Theoretical constructs were generated from the developmental and social constructivist perspective and with research considerations in mind.

Finally, the subjective experiences described by the participants and the theoretical framework constructed by the researcher were bridged by the creation of a theoretical narrative. This portion of the data processing enabled the participant's own words to describe the theory that was constructed. The theoretical narrative was created by organizing the constructs into a personal story describing the experience of the participants.

This qualitative study provides a deeper understanding about the ways Council impacts students' lives, in their own words. It contributes to the field of psychology in a way that provides a better understanding about the benefits and possible risks of Council for those that are facilitators of Council, those participating in, or those interested in participating in Council. Looking at Council qualitatively showed how Council, being a group process, appears to share psychological benefits with other group processes. These findings not only point toward future avenues of research, but may provide a richer understanding of
Council for other schools investigating the use of Council as a part of their curriculum. In addition, benefits derived from the narratives of this study may assist with continuous funding of Council.

**Ethical Assurances**

Interviews were conducted in a private room at the middle school to ensure confidentiality, as per a proposal submitted to the Institutional Review Board of Antioch University, Santa Barbara. Participants and the information they provided was kept confidential. The identity of each participant was protected by using an alias instead of actual names. The data collected was kept in a secure location and only used for the purpose of this study. Once the study is complete, the data will be destroyed. Although the potential risks were minimal, significant care was taken into consideration regarding the possibility of harm. Parents, legal guardians, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at anytime. They were also notified and debriefed on how the interview could provoke an emotional experience. The researcher provided personal contact information as well as contact information for the onsite school counselor should students or their parents have questions or desire support.
Chapter V: Results

Nine middle school students were interviewed for this qualitative study to explore the impact of Council on the lives of young adolescents. Seven of the participants were female and two were male. They ranged in age from 11-13, four were 13 years old, three were 12 years old, and two were 11 years old. Two participants identified as African American, five as Latino, one as mixed ethnicity including African American and Latino, and finally, one specifically identified as Guatemalan. In regard to religious affiliation, four identified as Christian, three as Catholic, and two reported having no religious affiliation. Six participants were exposed to Council for 6-12 months, two for 1-2 years, and one for more than two years. See Table 1 for the descriptive data.
Table 1

Participant Demographic Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Time in Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>1-2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anica</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randy</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocelyn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>&gt; 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>African/Native American</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>&gt; 2 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher expected the interviews to take between 30-40 minutes and included this anticipated information on the Recruitment Letter and on the Parent or Guardian Consent form. The interviews in fact ranged from 5 minutes and 12 seconds, to 11 minutes and 24 seconds with the mean length being 8 minutes and 9 seconds.

**Participant Profiles**

Table 1 provides a visual description of all nine participants. Profiles are provided to give the reader context for the results, including themes and the generated theories that were acquired from the original transcripts. The information presented provides the reader with relevant text pertaining to how the lives of participants have been impacted by Council. Identifying information was changed to guarantee the confidentiality of the participants.
Sarah. Sarah is a 13 year old, African American, Christian, participant. She has been participating in Council for 1-2 years. When Sarah was first introduced to Council she had optimistic expectations, as she stated that she was curious and excited to begin Council and anticipated that it would be fun. Now that she has been involved in Council for some time now, she continues to describe Council as exciting; however, she now has more specific ways to describe what she enjoys about Council. For example, she said she likes that Council is a place that encourages her to tell her stories and that she can share an extensive range of feelings with others. She believes that Council has changed her as a person in that she is more environmentally conscious. Sarah describes this as "the beauty way". She also describes this environmental awareness as a way that Council has changed her sense of what life is all about. One of her favorite parts of Council is the playing of games that are incorporated. One game that she particularly enjoys is called, "The Wind Comes and Takes". She described this as a game that helps participants become connected with one another by finding out what they have in common. Like many of the participants interviewed, Sarah said she does not have a least favorite part of Council. Sarah expressed a desire to continue Council in her future at home or in school so that she can continue to understand the feelings of others. She would succinctly describe Council to someone who had no knowledge of it as a place to express your feelings.
Anica. Anica is an 11 year old, Catholic, Latina participant who has been participating in Council for 6-12 months. In the beginning, she was nervous about Council because she did not know the other participants and she expected that Council would consist of simple conversation amongst the members. Anica said she is no longer nervous about not knowing people in Council. She actually likes that it is a place where she can make friends and get to know others. In regard to what meaning Council has for Anica, she verbalized that it is a place where people can be genuine with one another, a place where the value of honesty is shared. She describes her experience of Council as emotional, in the sense that the prompts, or topics for Council, can evoke various feelings. Anica described how Council has provided a space for her to feel the sense of relief as she is able to share personal and difficult stories with participants. It has also helped her to be more compassionate towards others, as she now takes how she treats others into consideration more, because she is more aware of how her actions can impact a person. Anica most enjoys that participants share personal experiences during Council. One of her least favorite parts of Council is when she does not know how to respond to the prompt that inquires about how her day was, as she can have mixed emotions and is unsure of how to answer. Council has affected the relationships she has with her classmates in a positive way as she is able to trust them more. The experience of Council has also made her feel like she can form friendships with
her classmates. She stated that she believes Council has changed her sense of who she because she is able to connect with others. She added that she feels less lonely when she is able to understand that others are affected by similar life circumstances. Anica has a desire to continue Council in the future, specifically with her neighbors and family. She believes it will affect her future life because she will be able to understand the emotional experiences of others. She will also be non-judgmental of others and instead empathize with them as she now understands how she could be in similar situations with others. Anica summarized Council as having the potential to change one's life in a positive way and as a fun activity where you are not judged and you get to know people.

**Leah.** Leah is an 11-year-old, Catholic, Latina participant who has been participating in Council for 6-12 months. She recalled feeling nervous about Council when she first started because she did not know the people in Council very well. She anticipated that Council would involve simple conversations amongst students and now feels that Council has given her an opportunity to share her feelings. Leah describes Council as fun and sharing stories. Being a part of Council for Leah has been fun and has helped her feel like she is a part of a big group. She has noticed that Council has affected her life because it has provided an outlet to share her stories whereas before she felt like she held them inside. It also helps her relate to others when she learns that others have similar issues. Council has also helped Leah regulate her emotions as she stated that it
has taught her to be calm when she feels stuck. Leah's favorite part of Council is the sharing of stories because it helps her feel more connected with others. The least favorite part of Council for her involves dedications (a part of the opening of Council). She said she likes to provide dedications but she doesn't always have one in mind. Leah's relationship with classmates has been affected because she has become more connected with them and in fact she has encouraged at least one of her classmates to participate in Council. The reason she invited this particular classmate to be active in Council was because she saw him going down a wrong path and described him as doing "bad stuff". She told him that he would learn to relax if he participated in Council. In describing how Council has changed her sense of who she is or what life is about, Leah stated that she is more conscious of the environment as she learned to respect nature more. Although Leah does not participate in Council outside of school, she would like to continue being a part of Council circles in her future and imagines that she would ask future teachers if they could incorporate Council in their classrooms. In describing Council to someone that is not familiar with it, Leah stated that she would describe it as a place where kids and adults meet to witness.

**Randy.** Randy is a 12-year-old, Latino, Catholic, male participant that has been involved with Council for 6-12 months. Randy, like many of the participants, remembers feeling nervous when he first began to participate in Council, since he said he was unfamiliar with the other participants, students
and teachers. He believed that Council would just involve simple conversation like discussing school issues or more specifically, what students liked and did not like about school. Now, Randy enjoys council because it offers a way for him to connect with others, he enjoys socializing and that everyone gets along. When he pondered about what Council means to him he stated that it means “freedom in the sense that when in Council you can share any stories that you want,” or stories that are related to what others share. Randy believes that Council has provided a good experience because he is more self-confident. He described himself as shy before he participated in Council. Now he notices that he raises his hand more in class and speaks out more in general. He sees how council has changed him as a person because he isn't rude like he used to be. He sees himself as more patient as he has learned to listen to others and wait his turn to speak. Randy's favorite part of Council includes both telling and listening to the stories that are generated from the prompts. The least favorite part of Council for Randy is the end, because he desires to continue sharing and listening to stories. In regard to how Council has influenced his relationship with classmates, Randy said he has seen that they are more connected, as he is able to talk more with them when they are put into groups to do assignments. He added that he was not very helpful to others prior to Council, but that he now tries to help others and enjoys it. Randy sees life differently in the sense that he is less selfish, he thinks of others more, and he thinks about how he can help
them. Randy practices Council outside of school with his family and neighbors in a community setting one Friday a month for 3 hours. Randy said that he sees that Council can impact his future in a good way as it provides him with a positive and fun environment where he can socialize with others, rather than to be at home where he describes himself as doing nothing. He described Council as a place where you can share stories, one can meet others, and you can learn to be less shy and more self-confident.

Michael. Michael is a 13-year-old African American male participant who said he has no religious affiliation and has been practicing Council for 6-12 months. In interviewing Michael, the investigator got a genuine sense that Council has strongly and positively impacted his life. He said that in the beginning, he felt uncomfortable because he didn't know anybody. He had anticipated Council to involve simple conversations about what was on people's mind but he soon learned that he would meet people and learn to feel more comfortable and trusting as participants shared deep secrets and their feelings. Michael described Council as "amazing", a place where you can trust others, and where you can feel comfortable to tell your stories and feelings. Michael's frequent themes throughout the interview involved trust. He said he would encourage those beginning Council to try and trust others even if it was difficult, because he remembered how difficult it was for him and he realized the positive impact trusting others had on him. Being a part of Council for
Michael has been "awesome," he said, because he has met new friends and has been able to share stories that he previously wasn't able to with others. Michael said that Council has affected his life emotionally and gave two examples of how. He stated that he used to keep secrets inside and when people used to bring up certain topics he would shut down. Now he said he knows how to express his emotions more. He also reported learning to trust others in Council, which he sees as an emotional change. Michael described himself as doing his own thing before Council and keeping to himself. Now he is more connected with others. He learned that in Council people are non-judgmental, allowing him to feel more comfortable. Michael's favorite parts of Council include the games and hearing the stories of the participants that can involve various emotions. Michael, like many participants, does not have a least favorite part of Council. He expressed how Council has changed his life. Not only has he learned to trust others but others trust him. It has impacted his relationship with his classmates in a beneficial way because he met one of his best friends through Council. He joined a basketball team because of that friendship, and there he met even more friends. Michael says that joining the basketball team has changed his life forever. Council influenced how Michael's outlook on life, he said, since before he used to see life as “all bad”. He said that through people's stories he learned how you can make life better and he learned to appreciate what he has in life. Michael shared an inspiring story of how he
began to practice Council outside of school. He began providing Council for the people in his building and they meet every other Sunday. He noticed that the children who are his neighbors were sad and mad and he wanted to help. He involved them in Council and his mother began Council with the parents. The parents and children have Council together on occasion as well. Michael explained how he first asked the landlord for permission and how she, her children, and her friends also became involved. Michael remembers that she thought his idea was "awesome" and believed that she needed an outlet to express her feelings about some of the negative issues happening in the building. I asked if he only does Council with friends and he clarified that he will even ask strangers to join. His manner of recruitment is simple and non-threatening. He simply asks people if they are having problems at school or anywhere else and asks them to join his Council circle. He tells them to simply call his name or number and they can connect. Michael informed me that he had been practicing Council for less than 6 months when he decided to start his own community Council. Based on knowing what is going on in the world through Council, as Michael explained, his future will be affected because he will gain a better perspective on what kind of job he desires and it'll help him become who he wants to be. To provide an example of how Council has influenced Michael's optimism, the following is a direct quote from his interview.
No matter who I am, it can just happen since I've been in Council. If I wanted to be a counselor that does stuff with the community? I can do that. I can be the captain. I can help people's lives, everybody's.

(Participant Michael)

If Michael were to describe Council to a newcomer he would say that it's a place where you can trust others, where you can express your feelings, and where you will not be judged. He would also say that participants in Council understand one another's pain because everyone has experienced it. One final topic that Michael wanted to emphasize regarding his Council experience again had to do with how he learned to trust. He stated that Council helped him trust his teachers more. In particular, he became closer to Ms. Peters, who leads Council club and assisted with recruitment for this study. He advised others to attempt to be a friend before you judge someone or believe you can't trust them. During the interview, the researcher wanted to recap the themes expressed by Michael to let him know that he had been heard. She restated what he had verbalized about the effect of Council on his life and on others’ lives. Following this exchange, he was asked how he felt. After deep consideration, Michael answered by saying he feels like a hero. He ended the interview by stating that Council can make the world shine, meaning that it can help everyone feel happy.
Jocelyn. Jocelyn has been participating in Council for more than two years. She is a 13-year-old Latina who said she has no religious affiliation. She recalled feeling nervous and confused when she first began Council because she did not know the other participants well and was concerned about how they would react to her story. She remembers being self-conscious when prompts were given and it came to her turn to share. She thought that Council would involve simple conversation. In the beginning she was not aware that Council would involve people telling personal stories. What she did know was that everything shared in Council was confidential. She remembered confidentiality being an emphasis early on when she was introduced to Council. Now Jocelyn said she sees Council as a good thing and as a place where she can share her emotions with others, which was once difficult for her to do. She sees is it as a good opportunity to share with others and to compare one another's lives. When asked what Council means to her, Jocelyn stated that it means a group of people coming together to share stories. She described being a part of Council as good because she has gained self-confidence to the point where she no longer sees herself as shy and now knows how to talk to others. It's also positive, she said, because she has learned to trust others and she feels like a leader. In fact, Jocelyn leads Council on occasion. Jocelyn has seen Council affect her life as she believes it has created a stronger family bond between her, her parents, and siblings. They all attend family Council at school and this makes Jocelyn feel
closer to the members in her family through sharing and listening to one another's stories. It also helps her to feel supported, happy, and more confident. Jocelyn has seen how Council has changed her as a person because it has enabled her to overcome her shyness and to become a leader. She described her favorite part of Council as the stories because through them, she gets to know people better. Jocelyn said Council has influenced her relationships with classmates; for example, she reached out to a student who she described as not nice to her by asking her to participate in Council. Their relationship is closer now and Jocelyn believes that her new friend did well at sharing her stories and she informed Jocelyn that she was happy that she now participates in Council. She says that Council has changed her sense of what life is all about because she has seen how her stories can influence others. She explained that when she shares a story about the poor decisions she has made, others can learn from her mistakes and not make the same ones. She believes that the decisions people make can be influenced by listening to another person's stories because they learn about possible consequences for their choices. Jocelyn sees Council as influencing her future life because she desires to continue it in her future schools by leading others in Council. She hopes to teach others the way of Council by teaching them how not to be shy and how share emotions and stories with one another. If Jocelyn were to describe Council to someone new to it, she said she would explain the logistics of Council first, then normalize some of the
anxiety they may have about being involved by encouraging them to give it a try. She described Council as a really nice experience in which you get to share with and learn about others. She ended the interview by sharing her final perspective on what she believes has been important about participating in Council and what she learned. She learned that it's not hard to be a leader, as she is no longer shy or nervous. It has also been pleasant for Jocelyn to meet new people and become more connected with them.

**Jasmine.** Jasmine is a 12-year-old, Guatemalan Christian female who has been involved with Council for 6-12 months. Jasmine remembers thinking that Council would provide a good opportunity for her to learn how to relax because she used to be angry often, especially with her sister. Her initial memories about Council also included thinking that she would be safe and feel confident about sharing her stories. Her current thoughts about Council do not differ from what she initially thought. She still sees Council as a place where she can relax. She also sees it as beneficial for other students and for her family members. Being a part of Council has brought about good feelings for Jasmine. She said she sees how Council has changed her as a person and improved her relationships, particularly with regard to how she relates to her sister. She sees that it has made her a calm and relaxed person. She remembers how she used to be short tempered with her sister before she engaged in Council. She gave an example of how her sister would aggravate her to the point where Jasmine
would hit her. Now she has noticed that she is much calmer and is able to be kinder to her sister, often asking her how she is doing when she gets home. She notices that they get along better. Jasmine's favorite part of Council is telling her stories. She remembers one special time in particular, during a family Council at school which her mother attended. Jasmine told a story about how her mom is a very important person in her life and she remembers how good it felt to share that in Council. Jasmine does not have a least favorite part of Council. She did not have a response to a prompt about how Council may have influenced her relationships with her classmates. Jasmine was able to reflect upon how Council has changed her sense of what life is about, since she said she has gained a better perspective of hardships in the world through hearing other peoples’ stories. Although Jasmine does not practice Council outside of school, she would like to continue Council in her future. She believes that if she continues Council it will affect the lives of others and they, too, will want to pass Council on to others. She described this as a generational process, in that Council can continuously be passed on to others. If Jasmine were to describe Council to someone that has never known about it before she would like to provide great detail about the way of Council. She would also tell them that it is a good opportunity to communicate better with others. Jasmine's final words about Council concerned how Council can help a person change from being in a negative mood into a positive one.
Sandra. Sandra is a 12-year-old, African/Native American Christian participant who has been involved with Council for 6-12 months. Her initial feeling about Council was excitement. She remembers being excited to let her feelings out and to say whatever she felt. She thought it would be a peaceful place where she could share everything she needed to. She said she has found that she really likes Council and that it is fun. She understands that it is good for her to have others hear her feelings and for others to tell about theirs. Sandra thought deeply about what Council means to her as she expressed how it means a lot to her. She went on to further explain how Council helps her find her peaceful and happy place where her friends can support her. Sandra discussed what it means to find her peaceful place. It is a place, she said, where she can think, relax, breathe and control her anger. She answered firmly that indeed Council has changed her as a person. She described being more talkative and expressing her feelings more. She feels she has less anger because she has learned how to relax. Her favorite part of Council is the forum it provides for participants to express what they most love, appreciate, and are grateful for. Sandra occasionally has a least favorite part of Council: one of the opening prompts often referred to as the rose and thorn. She explained that the rose represents the most happy moment or joyful part of the day and the thorn as representing the most sad or mad moment, the things that you didn't like. Sometimes she does not like this prompt because she likes when the prompts are
more spontaneous. She said she is often unsure if her day was sad or happy. Sometimes she feels like she cannot reflect on both a positive and negative aspect of her day. Sandra has noticed that, since she began Council, her relationships with her classmates have changed. She sees herself as happier and not “mean,” like she used to be to them. She is able to be more polite to them by regulating her anger and is more considerate of them. She believes Council has changed her sense of what life is like through the trust she has gained for others, and through learning about others without judging them. Sandra believes that being a part of Council will affect her future life because it will help her to continue to regulate her emotions. The example she gave was that it helps her control her anger as she knows how to calm down and think of her happy place. She anticipates that this will help her in her future career as she will not be distracted by her emotions and will focus on her work. If Sandra were to describe Council to someone unfamiliar with it, she would say that it is something that you feel inside of you and that it is a peaceful, relaxing environment where you are not judged. She would also encourage someone curious about Council to join.

**Tonya.** Tonya is a 13-year-old Latina Christian participant who has participated in Council for 1-2 years. She remembers that she was not fond of Council in the beginning because she was shy and she was reluctant to speak. Her initial understanding of Council was that games would be played and
simple conversation would help everyone know one another better. Now that she has been in Council for more than a year, she enjoys it and is happy to participate. Tonya said that Council means a lot to her because it is a place where she can express her emotions and tell her stories that previously she had not shared with anyone. She now feels comfortable telling her stories in Council, she said, because of confidentiality. Tonya explained how Council has affected her in a positive way because she is able to express herself more. She sees how Council has changed how she is as a person because she is more comfortable showing her emotions and talking about them. She remembered how before Council, she was shy and would keep everything inside. She used to cry often but would not discuss her emotions with anyone. Now she is able to embrace her emotional experiences and depend on others for support. Tonya said she enjoys everything about Council. She mostly enjoys the introduction of new games and the sharing of stories. She believes that Council has changed her relationship with classmates because she has made more friends with them. Prior to Council, she said she wouldn't try to get to know some students because she was judgmental. Now she really tries to get to know them before she judges. Council has changed Tonya's sense of who she is and what life is all about. She is more self-confident and has a more optimistic view on life. Specifically, she stated that before, she didn't really know who she was and would feel like different people and various times. Now she is more comfortable with her sense
of self and knows that she always has to be herself no matter what. In regards to life, she no longer sees life as "all bad", so she is positive more often about life in general. Tonya hopes to continue Council and believes that it will help her to maintain a good life. If she were to describe Council to someone that was unfamiliar with it, she would say that it is a place where people are helped in expressing their feelings to other people. Her final words about Council encouraged others to join and expressed the hope that field trips to the Ojai Foundation would continue to be funded. She hoped that the field trips would be even more frequent, she said.

**Themes**

Based on relevant text and repeating ideas extracted from the interviews, a number of clear themes were evident (Table 2). With regard to the feelings of participants when they first started Council, the theme that established was *anticipation*. This was expressed by the participants as nervousness and excitement. A second theme, *easy conversation*, exemplifies what participants thought Council would be like, since many of them thought it would consist of simple conversations and games. Contrasting with the anticipation and uncertainty that participants felt in the beginning of treatment, they consistently described their present sense of Council as being a *place to connect with others*. The theme formulated in response to a prompt about the meaning Council holds for participants was *safe emotional sharing*. Within this theme, participants
emphasized that Council was a place to express feelings and share personal stories. All participants described the experience of Council as a positive experience. Some used a simple word to explain this, like “good” and some expressed gratitude for being provided with the opportunity to participate in Council. When participants were asked how they believed their lives had been affected by Council, the theme that emerged was self-identity formation. Some of the repeating ideas and relevant text that contributed to this theme included: “learned to trust others”, “strengthening of family bonds”, “more confidence”, “more connection with others”, and “expressed emotions more”. Asked whether Council has changed them personally, participants’ responses consolidated around the theme emotional growth within the context of community. Children used similar words in responding to questions 6 and 7. In addition to consistently worded answers, participants verbalized that they were more connected to nature, more compassionate towards others, and more able to regulate their emotions. The researcher felt it important to include the words in the context of community because there was a common thread among the participants that reflected how the changes occurred based on the connection with others in Council. The majority of participants expressed that their favorite part of Council pertained to how personal stories provide connection to others. However, some participants expressed a mild ambivalence about prompts they
found confusing, or difficult to respond to. For example, some participants stated that they desired to partake in the opening prompt about how their day was, but they felt conflicted about how to describe what may have seemed to them an abstract concept: the idea that a day could be both good and bad. Perhaps this confusion is due to the developmental age of the participants. Therefore the theme that emerged from this prompt reflects bewilderment as well as a reluctance to name a least favorite part of council: no least favorite part of Council, but ambivalence about certain prompts. Connection with others was the theme that emerged when participants were asked about how Council influenced their relationships with classmates. Their responses reflected verbalizations about learning to trust their classmates, and desiring to help classmates. Participants also learned to develop a sense of value and appreciation through positive life changes as evidenced by responses to the question about how council has changed their sense of who they are or what life is about. Participants said they learned to appreciate nature, each other, and themselves. They described being more optimistic about life. Many of the participants do not practice Council outside of school; however, the majority of them desire to continue Council in the future. All of the participants also participate in Council more than what is offered in the regular curriculum as they are in Council club. The participants expressed the belief that by participating in Council there will be a positive impact on their future.
Participants believe they will continue to be empathic with and connected to others. They will continue to reach out to others and help them. Their awareness of the environment will continue, as will their ability to regulate their emotions. Participants said they have gained a passion for practicing Council and believe they will continue participating in Council in the future. When participants were asked to imagine describing Council to someone that is unfamiliar with it, their explanations reflected *emotional sharing that promotes community*. They said they would explain everything from how Council flows to how it fosters self-confidence, trust in others, and relaxation skills.

Table 2

*Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Repeating Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anticipation</td>
<td>Excitement, nervousness, uncomfortable, confusion, emotion regulation expectancy, shy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy Conversation</td>
<td>Fun/games, small talk, safe place/confidentiality expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place to Connect with Others</td>
<td>Excitement, place to connect with others, place to express feelings, place to trust others, fondness towards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Emotional Sharing</td>
<td>Place to express feelings, place to be honest, fun, place to share stories, place to emotionally regulate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Experience</td>
<td>Interesting, exciting, place to express feelings, place to share stories, place to connect with others, good, place to build confidence, place to trust others, gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Identity Formation</td>
<td>Provided relief, more connected to others, more confident, learned to trust others, more bonded with family, more emotionally regulated, express emotions more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Constructs</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Growth within Context of Community</td>
<td>More connected to nature, more compassionate towards others or empathy, more emotionally regulated, more trust in others, more connected to others, more confident, closer to family, more emotionally expressive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Stories Provide Connection to Others</td>
<td>Games that provide connection to others, sharing personal stories, dedications to express gratitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with Others</td>
<td>Connection to others, builds trust in others, emotion regulation, self confidence, desire to help others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop Sense of Value &amp; Appreciation Through Positive Life Changes</td>
<td>Connection to nature, connection to others, optimism, realization that shared personal experiences can impact others, fosters empathy, trust in others, self confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Impact</td>
<td>Desire to practice Council in future, empathy towards others, connection to others, awareness of environment (meaning what's happening in the world), awareness of future goals, desire to help others, continue w/ emotion regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Sharing that Promotes Community</td>
<td>A place to express feelings, fun, non-judgmental, a place to connect to others, a place to share stories, fosters self confidence, a place to trust others logistics of Council, a place where others can learn from stories shared, relaxing, an internal experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theoretical Constructs**

Based on the research question proposed for this study, relevant themes reserved for creating theoretical constructs are the following: *Place to Connect with Others, Safe Emotional Sharing, Positive Experience, Self-Identity, Stories Provide Connection with Others, Connection with Others, Developing a Sense of Value and Appreciation through Positive Life Changes, Positive Impact,* and *Emotional Sharing Promotes Community*. Connecting the themes
that shared commonalities led to the creation of the following constructs: (a) *Council provides a safe environment in which one is able to share emotional and personal stories that promotes healthy relationship*, (b) *Council is a positive experience for participants promoting an optimistic outlook on life*, and (c) *Council promotes self-identity formation through fostering personal growth and the valuing of life*.

**Theoretical Narrative**

When considering the impact that Council has had on their lives, early adolescent participants had to ponder upon their initial feelings and reactions to Council before they discussed what Council is like for them presently. These two reflections were important areas of inquiry for the researcher. They were used to compare the initial and present perspectives of the participants to assess for any ways that their lives have been affected. The participants had to consider what they anticipated in the beginning, whether it be nervousness or excitement, and later in the interview, consider the knowledge that they gained about Council from their 6 months or more of participation.

Common ideas were expressed by participants in similar, and yet unique ways. For instance, the following quotes from the interviews on key, salient topics have been extracted to demonstrate how the constructs were created.
Based on these themes, the first theoretical construct that was conceptualized is *Council provides a safe environment in which one is able to share emotional and personal stories that promotes healthy relationship.*

“It could help you make friends 'cause you get to know more about other people.”

"I get to hang out with my friends here and we get along."

"Council has given me a big opportunity for like letting my feelings, like sharing my feelings."

"Now I know people. . . it makes you feel better like expressing all your feelings, telling your stories, sharing with people, being able to like, to like share with them, compare your life, you can trust people like when you tell your story your emotions."

". . . it helps me to tell my stories to other people."

"It means like freedom like everybody can say whatever like things they want."

"Open heart. . . Council means. . . you can express how you feel."

"It means. . . a group of people being together, sharing stories."

". . . it like means a lot because for me at times when I'm like sad or mad or I have mixed emotions, I could like express myself in Council."

"My favorite part of Council is like when we share like a personal
"My favorite part of Council is. . . hearing people's stories."

"The favorite part of Council is to share my stories. . . , I shared a story that she (referring to mother) was one of the best moms and like she was . . . a very important person."

". . . when you know about the person like you can trust them a bit more than when you didn't talk to them, when you didn't even know them. It feels like you can start like a friendship."

"Now I talk to everybody in my group and I help. . . now like I really just like help them out."

". . . Council, it changed my whole life. Like to trust people and they all trust me. It changed my life 'cause one of my best friends now, he taught me how to play basketball and he made me um join the basketball team and it changed my life forever."

"I had a friend that she was not. . . nice to me. . . and I brought her to Council. . . my relationship with her is better."

". . . I got to. . . know them better. . . I got (to be) friends with them not just because of the way they look the way they seem or just because of
their outside I got to really... see how they really are and... I've been (making) friends. "

Participants also used similar descriptive words in their narrative when pondering upon how they would describe Council to someone unfamiliar with the Council process. The descriptions consisted of connection to others, safety, and sharing of stories.

The second theoretical construct created from the common themes reflecting how participants experienced Council and their thoughts on how it will impact their future is *Council is a positive experience for participants promoting an optimistic outlook on life*.

"It feels good being in Council. It says that you are a part of a big group. "

"It's been really good. "

"Awesome. Meeting new friends. . . You can trust in the group. "

"I actually learned how to not be shy how to talk in front of people. I've learned that you can trust many people. . . it actually feels. . . nice because you feel like a leader. "

"It's a good feeling being in Council. "

"Like when I get out of this school, I can ask some of my teachers like if I'm already in high school or if I'm still in middle school, I can ask them if we can do Council. "

"(It's) a very grateful and happy moment. "
"It's been good and I've been happy to participate in it. . . I'm glad I have the opportunity to participate in it because it's a really good chance."

"(It will help me to) understand others, instead of going home and like doing nothing I get to stay after school and talk with other people and socialize and have more fun instead of going to my house."

"It will affect my future life 'cause you know what kind of things are going on in the world. You know what kind of jobs you want and kind of jobs you don't need to make you successful."

"It will affect my future life because. . . I could do the same thing with other people and it will affect their life."

"I think that it will bring. . . me to my happy place and I'll just calm down."

"(It) would actually help me is to take Council to other schools cause I already know how it goes and I can help lead, like I could show people how to do it. . . I can lead it in high school or I could take it to other schools and that would help others."

The final construct that was established through the themes of identity formation, personal and emotional growth, and the valuing of life is Council promotes self-identity formation through fostering personal growth and valuing of life."
"Then you feel like a relief like that you said it (something private) and you'll feel better inside."

"I used to be shy a lot and I didn't like to speak out in the classroom. Now that I'm like in Council I speak out and raise my hand more."

"It affected me... emotionally 'cause I used to have all these secrets inside. . . I really didn't trust nobody. I used to be by myself, doing my own thing, but now when Council came along, I trusted mostly everybody around."

". . . sometimes there is a family Council and they're right there. . . sometimes I need it. . . (it) feels good having support from your siblings and family. That makes me feel more confident and makes me feel. . . happy and. . . it makes me want to share more stories."

"I could be more relaxing with myself and I don't have as much problems with my sister."

"It brought peace to me, it helped me, it was very quiet and it just made me like think, relax, and breathe more, and just control my anger."

"I express myself more now; it changed me. . . because I learned the beauty way which is like pick up trash."

"It makes you feel more compassion towards others, like you should think before you act because you don't know if it could affect a person emotionally."
"Council has taught me to be more calmer like when I get stuck in a problem or something, I feel like Council has helped me relax and chill out."

"I used to be... rude or... like talk when people were talking and now I... wait... because when we're in council we have to wait until everybody talks and (now) I'm patient."

"It allowed me to trust more people. . . I made new friends, awesome new friends"

"(It) showed me... how to... lead people, not to be shy, to know that you can trust certain people."

"When I came to Council... I feel like if I'm better like when I get home I tell my sister "oh how are you?" like we start(ed) getting along; it made me a little more talkative. . . (I) share my feelings with everybody... it changed all my anger and... when I speak it out I feel more relaxation."

"Before I used to be shy a lot and like I used to cry but... I always kept everything inside me and now that like I'm in Council, I... express my feelings more and I cry and share my emotions more often and I found a way that it does help me a lot."

"It made me more aware of... the beauty and nature and... just like the beauty in... the world."
"I didn't know a lot about nature or how to treat it but... I learned that nature is a big part of the world and not to destroy it."

"I see life different because I just used to think about me, myself, and I now I like think about more people."

"I thought life was all bad... but if you hear peoples stories you get to know how... you can make it better... you could make it happy or you could make it sad. I'd take happy better than anything else and you get to appreciate what you do have."

In summary, the final theoretical constructs were elicited from the following themes extracted from the interviews with children who participated in Council at a Los Angeles County middle school: (a) *Council provides a safe environment in which one is able to share emotional and personal stories that promotes healthy relationship*, themes: place to connect with others, safe emotional sharing, personal stories provide connection with others, connection with others, and emotional sharing promotes community; (b) *Council is a positive experience for participants promoting an optimistic outlook on life*, themes: positive experience, positive impact; (c) *Council promotes self-identity formation through fostering personal growth and the valuing of life*, themes: self identity formation, emotional and personal growth within the context of community, developing a sense of value and appreciation through positive life changes.
Methodological Assumptions and Limitations

This research study has limitations, as it gathered qualitative data from an exclusive group of students and cannot be extrapolated to the general population. The students that were interviewed were all from the same school in the Los Angeles Unified School District and the majority of participants were female. The participants were also voluntarily a part of the school's Council Club which meets steadily outside of Council practiced regularly in the classroom, so that it may offer a favorable interpretation of Council than would be found among the general student body. The majority of students were also of Latino ethnicity, which is another limitation. The only demographic questions asked of participants were about age, gender, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.
Chapter VI: Discussion

Nine middle school students were interviewed about their experience with Council and how it has impacted their lives. Reflections on this topic were elicited from open-ended questions during individual interviews with the researcher. Ultimately, theoretical constructs were created from using grounded theory. The process entailed highlighting text directly relevant to the research question in consideration; i.e., how Council impacts the lives of early adolescents. The researcher also collaborated with her research committee to determine repeating ideas and themes. Finally, theoretical constructs were paired with quotes from the subjective experience of the participants to bring life to the data.

It has been demonstrated that individuals in a safe group environment who share personal stories can build healthy relationships. The Council experience was described as positive by participants. They described developing more optimism about life. Statements also reflected enhanced self-identity formation as fostered by personal growth and the valuing of life.

Overview of Findings

The relevant text and repeating ideas that emerged from interviews with nine schoolchildren contributed to extrapolated themes, leading to theoretical constructs and finally, forming the basis of a theoretical narrative. The theoretical concepts reflected statements made by the participants in interviews about how
They initially felt and what they thought about Council and how their thoughts and feelings changed after 6 months or more of participation in Council. Three theoretical constructs emerged: (a) *Council provides a safe environment in which one is able to share emotional and personal stories that promote healthy relationships*, (b) *Council is a positive experience for participants promoting an optimistic outlook on life*, and (c) *Council promotes self-identity formation through fostering personal growth and the valuing of life*.

**Construct 1**

*Council provides a safe environment in which one is able to share emotional and personal stories that promote healthy relationships.* Through the words of the participants, it was revealed that children learned to perceive Council as a safe environment, evidenced by the trust that emerged among the participants and the process itself. Through this feeling of safety, participants were more inclined to share personal and emotional stories. Based on what participants shared in the interviews, it was also discovered that positive relationships were nurtured once children felt safe and shared stories. These enhanced relationships, as described by participants, were with teachers, other students, and family members. Children also spoke of enjoying the occasional games that were played in Council that also promoted connection among the participants. Participants said that they are more likely to reach out to others and to help them when they are in need. A sense of community was gained, as evidenced by statements referring to
Council as a place to connect with others and to share stories, a place that is safe, fun, and non-judgmental. Relationship climate in groups has been shown as an important therapeutic factor for group participants (Holmes & Kivlighan, 2000). This trust and connection has been shown to be an important construct in other studies as well. For example, willingness to self-disclose in a group counseling setting has been found to be associated with positive relationships with other group members (Hsu, 2011). The participants in this study discussed initial wariness about Council until they became more familiar with the other group members and were able to trust them through shared stories. Participants in groups have been found to work on their own personal issues through the interaction with others in the group as well as the therapist (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2010). Participants in this study also reported that they experienced personal growth as a result of listening to the stories of other participants. One child in particular was insightful about how others can learn from her stories, expressing the hope that they would not repeat the mistakes that she made. Group functioning, including group interactions like sharing personal information, and understanding and supporting others, (Shadish, 1984; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) have also been correlated with positive rapport-building between children and therapists (Holmes & Kivlighan, 2000) and with other group members as well (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2010). Similarly, in this study, participants talked
Construct 2

Council is a positive experience for participants promoting an optimistic outlook on life. Council overall was described in positive terms by participants. Although there were a few participants who referred to specific parts of Council as their “least favorite parts” of the experience, their actual answers reflected ambivalence as opposed to negative attitudes toward Council. For example, one participant stated that her least favorite part of Council was the dedication portion of the process where participants have the opportunity to open the space of Council by honoring what they have in their minds or hearts. A participant may dedicate the Council to something lighthearted and simple (i.e., summer beach days), or to something more personal or deep (i.e., a dedication to those away at war). The participant who stated that this was her “least favorite part” explained that she often felt like she wanted to share a dedication but occasionally could not find one in her heart to share at that opening moment. The other two participants who spoke of having “least favorite parts” of Council also voiced examples seemingly more representative of ambivalence than dislike. One expressed a similar difficulty pertaining to a particular part of Council: the prompt asking for a story on the positive and negative events of a person's day. The participant stated that this was her least favorite part for reasons similar to the participant above,
because although she wished to express herself, she occasionally was at a loss for words because she had mixed feelings about her day or it was difficult to pinpoint what was most negative or positive during her day. The last participant that mentioned a “least favorite part” stated that his least favorite part was ending Council because he had a desire to continue. Based on the desire that these participants had to partake in these "least favorite" parts of Council, it was concluded by the researcher that the consensus of the participants was that Council was an overall positive experience. Participants expressed gratitude for Council and expressed how it was exciting and interesting. The impact of Council was positive enough that it instilled a desire for the majority of the participants to continue Council beyond middle school with future classmates, community members, and family. Children were also positively affected in a way that made them more aware of their environment, meaning what was happening in the world outside of their own lives. They also became more aware of their future goals in life. It was through this positive experience expressed by the participants that they also spoke of gaining an optimistic outlook on life. Optimism has been positively correlated with group interventions. For example, adolescent, urban, females gained the ability to cope transformationally with a positive outlook after being exposed to a group focused partly on increasing the personality quality researchers termed challenge. Challenge refers to the ability to view transitions in life as opportunities for growth (Butke, 2006).
Construct 3

*Council promotes self-identity formation through fostering personal growth and the valuing of life.* During the interviews, participants disclosed various ways that their lives had changed since being involved with Council. Their statements reflected identity development; for example, they said they had learned to value life and gave examples of personal growth. Some of the highlights that revealed this construct were statements describing how participants gained self-confidence, achieved the ability to be more connected with and to trust others, and how they learned the skills of emotion regulation and feeling identification. They spoke of being more connected with nature and being more compassionate and empathic towards others. Participants learned to be more optimistic, about not only their present lives but about the future as well. They learned to value their own lives through listening and learning from the stories of others. Finally, they discovered how their life stories can impact the lives of others. Previous literature coincides with these findings. The identity of adolescents has been shown to be systemically influenced by the environment surrounding them and in group settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Erikson, 1968; Erikson, 1980; Hetherington & Park 1999). It is understood that humans are social beings who mature over time, and this maturity is influenced by groups (MacDonald & Leary, 2005).
Research Implications

There have been programs implemented with good intentions into school systems with the goal of developing positive social skills or improved behavior; however, in some cases, little evidence demonstrated that these programs have efficacy. This initial exploration of Council suggests that early adolescents are sincerely moved by their participation in this unique school program. The responses gathered from this study indicate how Council influences attitude and behavioral change in early adolescents, including promoting healthy relationships and an optimistic outlook on life, as well as self-identity formation through the fostering of personal growth and valuing of life. Although this study does have limitations, the implications suggest participants of Council are impacted positively by the time they spend in Circle with one another. In future research, to heighten generalization of the study, one would want to include a more diverse population and to query students who participated only as part of the general school curriculum, rather than restricting the cohort to students who voluntarily participated in a Council Club. An optimal study would include a control group as well as observation of the impact of Council on groups reflecting broader demographics in terms of socioeconomic status, academic standing, and history of behavioral or emotional problems at school. It would also include a more diverse population, including students from various schools practicing Council, students of different ages and from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as
students from rural/suburban/urban neighborhoods and public/private schools. As explained in the literature review portion of this study, Council is incorporated into a variety of community and cultural settings. One could study the impact Council has within these settings and on a variety of couples, families, and prisoners, to name a few. Quantitative assessments could also be considered for future research. One could administer pre-tests prior to exposure to Council and a post-test after experiencing Council to test a variety of variables. Reliable measures that consider relationships or attachment could be used to further assess Construct 1; a measure on optimism could be used to test Construct 2; and identity measures could be used to test Construct 3. Based on some of the repeating ideas that were extracted from the interviews, quantitative research could also be done to test levels of empathy, self-confidence, self-regulation, and one's connection or concern about the natural environment.

Conclusion

Based on the promising outcome of this qualitative study, Council appears to have a profoundly positive impact on young adolescents in terms of their identity development, social connection, and optimism. These findings merit deeper investigation into these constructs and other potential benefits in early adolescents and other children in diverse settings. There were no indications that children were harmed by Council. While Council deserves further study, other schools may now be open to implementing it as a program with reassurance that it
appears to be developmentally and socially appropriate as a way to introduce children to deeper communication and understanding of others. Assuming these positive findings can be replicated or elaborated by other researchers, they would affirm efforts to continue funding Council. This study also forms a foundation within the psychological literature for the study of Council, its application and value to those youth who participate.
References


Appendix A: Informed Consent

FORM B

THIS FORM IS TO BE COMPLETED BEFORE RESEARCH BEGINS

Insuring Informed Consent of Participants in Research:
Questions to be answered by AUSB Researchers

The following questions are included in the research proposal.

1. Are your proposed participants capable of giving informed consent? Are the persons in your research population in a free-choice situation? or are they constrained by age or other factors that limit their capacity to choose? For example, are they adults, or students who might be beholden to the institution in which they are enrolled, or prisoners, or children, or mentally or emotionally disabled? How will they be recruited? Does the inducement to participate significantly reduce their ability to choose freely or not to participate?

The participants are minors so they will provide assent and informed consent will be provided by the parents or legal guardians. For the purpose of this study, in order for participants to sign the assent form, he/she must be able to read English at a 5th grade level to ensure they understand what to expect for participation. Participants will be middle school students who are as young as 11 years old. The participants will be students who have been involved with Council regularly for six months or more. Participants will be recruited with the help of LAUSD’s Council program expert, Joe Provisor, MA. They will be able to choose freely whether or not they wish to participate.
2. How are your participants to be involved in the study?

Participants will be asked to provide assent, to fill out a demographic questionnaire and they will be asked to partake in an oral interview conducted by the researcher. The interview should take no more than thirty minutes per participant and will be audio recorded.

3. What are the potential risks—physical, psychological, social, legal, or other? If you feel your participants will experience “no known risks” of any kind, indicate why you believe this to be so. If your methods do create potential risks, say why other methods you have considered were rejected in favor of the method chosen.

The general risk could be psychological in that the participants may have an emotional experience during the interview. The interview questions might trigger an emotional memory that the participant experienced. Contact information for the researcher and school counselor will be provided during debriefing.

4. What procedures, including procedures to safeguard confidentiality, are you using to protect against or minimize potential risks, and how will you assess the effectiveness of those procedures?

Interviews will be conducted in a room with limited access from the outside to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality will also be upheld by keeping participant's identity protected by using an alias instead of actual names, by keeping the data in a secure location for 5 years in a locked file, and then destroying it. Researcher can remind the participant that they may withdraw from the study if the content is too emotionally charged for them. A referral may be made for students who are emotionally triggered to see the school counselor. I will also leave my contact information for participants. Participants will be debriefed verbally and in a letter. Debriefing information will consist of a summary of the purpose of the study, an explanation about the potential benefits and minimal risks, and with contact information for school counselor and researcher should the participants have any questions or need further support.

5. Have you obtained (or will you obtain) consent from your participants in writing?

Researcher will obtain assent from participants and consent from parents. See attached forms.
6. What are the benefits to society, and to your participants that will accrue from your investigation?

It is important to find out how the diverse student population is impacted by the experience, especially because Council is a part of the curriculum in LAUSD schools. If Council is found to have a positive impact on students, perhaps other schools can adopt it as a program. The outcome may provide information that could potentially benefit the future funding of Council. Other possible benefits include contributions to the psychological literature about the application and value of Council as well as an overall deeper understanding of the meanings derived by youth who participate in such endeavors. Participants may also have a positive experience discussing their experience with Council.

7. Do you judge that the benefits justify the risks in your proposed research? Indicate why.

The benefits that may come from the study are justified since the anticipated risk to the participants is minimal.

Date: _________________________ Signed: _____________________________
Student

Date: _________________________ Signed: _____________________________
Dissertation Chair
RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Parent or Legal Guardian of Potential Study Participant,

I am a doctoral student in clinical psychology at Antioch University, Santa Barbara. I have a strong general interest in Council and I have also participated in specific Council trainings and meetings through the Ojai Foundation. As part of my Psy. D. requirements, I am conducting a dissertation study on how Council impacts the lives of adolescents. My research is supervised by my Dissertation Chairperson listed below.

I am seeking individuals in middle school who have been participating in Council regularly at school for 6 months or more. Participation in this study will involve completion of certain required forms and an in-person interview with me. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. I will ask your child questions regarding how Council has impacted her or his life. Your child’s name and any other identifying information will be kept strictly confidential. For the purpose of this study, in order for your child to sign the assent form, he/she must be able to
read English at a 5th grade level to ensure they understand what to expect for participation.

If you are open to your child participating in this study, please complete the attached parental consent form for your child and return it to your child’s primary instructor. If you should have any questions, please call me at (805) 456-9431 or email me at djaimes@antioch.edu.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Denise Jaimes-Villanueva, M. A.

Researcher: Dissertation Chairperson:
Denise Jaimes-Villanueva, M. A. Juliet Rohde-Brown, Ph. D.
Antioch University, Santa Barbara Antioch University, Santa Barbara
(805) 456-9431 (805) 962-8179
Appendix C: Consent Form

Parent or Guardian of Minor Participant
Consent Form

Project Title: The Impact of Council on Young Adolescents

Project Investigator: Denise Jaimes-Villanueva, M. A.

Dissertation Chair: Juliet Rohde-Brown, Ph. D.

This is to certify that I, (print parent/guardian name)______________________________ hereby agree to have my son/daughter volunteer as a participant in a study under the supervision of researcher, Denise Jaimes-Villanueva. This study has been defined and fully explained, in the recruitment letter, by Denise.

1. I understand that the study will involve my son/daughter completing an informational questionnaire for statistical purposes and participating in an audio recorded interview about my their experience with Council. Participation in the study will take between 30-40 minutes.

2. I understand that the interview will be conducted in a room with limited access from the outside to ensure confidentiality. Confidentiality will also be upheld by keeping my son/daughter’s identity protected by using an alias instead of actual names, by keeping the data in a secure location for 5 years in a locked file, and then destroying it.

3. I understand that the potential for risk or discomfort for participating in this study is minimal. The possible risk could be psychological in that the participants may have an emotional experience during the interview. The interview questions might trigger an emotional memory that the participant experienced involving Council. If the participant wishes to discuss feelings with a counselor, referrals will be provided. However, my son/daughter could also have a positive experience during the interview. The other possible benefits of the procedure might be to provide information to other schools interested in including Council as a part of their curriculum. The information gathered from the study can also potentially help with future funding of Council.

4. I understand that the researcher in charge of this project wants to learn about the impact of Council and that is why my son/daughter is participating in this project.

5. I understand that I or my son/daughter may refuse to participate if I/they wish and that they can withdraw from the study at anytime.

By signing the consent form, you are indicating that you have read the description of the study above and in the recruitment letter. You also agree to have your son/daughter participate in this research and communicating that you understand what the study is about.

_________________________________
Child’s Name (Please print)
The undersigned has defined and fully explained the study involved to the above parent or guardian.

Investigator’s Signature          Date
Denise Jaimes-Villanueva, M. A.         Juliet Rohde-Brown, Ph. D.
Antioch University, Santa Barbara       Antioch University, Santa Barbara
(805)456-9431                                    (805)962-8179
Appendix D: Student Assent Form

Student Assent Form

Project Title: The Impact of Council has on Young Adolescents

Project Investigator: Denise Jaimes-Villanueva, M. A.

Dissertation Chair: Juliet Rohde-Brown, Ph. D.

1. I understand that this study is for research. It may offer no direct benefit to me.

2. Participation in this study is voluntary. I may refuse to enter it or may withdraw at any time without creating any harmful consequences to myself. I understand also that the investigator may remove me at any time from the study.

3. The purpose of this study is to find out how Council impacts adolescents.

4. As a participant in the study, I will be asked to take part in the following procedures:

   - To fill out an informational questionnaire
   - To complete an audio recorded interview that will take a minimum of 30 minutes and a maximum of 40 minutes
   - The study will take place in a private room to guarantee confidentiality

5. The potential for risk or discomfort for participating in this study is small. The possible risk could be emotional in that the interview questions could possibly produce a sensitive memory that I experienced involving Council.

6. The possible benefits of the study could provide information to other schools interested in including Council as a part of their curriculum. The information gathered from the study can also potentially help with keeping Council in our schools. Talking about Council may also be a positive experience for me.
7. Information about the study was discussed with me by Denise Jaimes-Villanueva, M. A. from Antioch University, Santa Barbara. If I have further questions, I may contact Denise at (805)456-9431, or the dissertation chair, Juliet Rohde-Brown, Ph. D. from Antioch University, Santa Barbara, at (805)962-8179.

By signing this form, you are showing that you have read the description of the study above, and agree to participate.

Date: _________________________ Signed: _____________________________
Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age? __________

2. What is your ethnicity?
   - [ ] African
   - [ ] Asian
   - [ ] Caucasian
   - [ ] Latino
   - [ ] Native American
   - [ ] Other (Please specify) _____________

3. What is your gender?
   - [ ] Female
   - [ ] Male

4. Current religious affiliation
   - [ ] Catholic
   - [ ] Jewish
   - [ ] Protestant
☐ None
☐ Other (Please specify)_____________________

5. How long have you been participating in Council?

☐ Less than 6 months
☐ 6-12 months
☐ 1-2 years
☐ More than 2 years
Appendix F: Research Interview

Research Interview

1. What do you remember feeling about Council when you first started?

2. What did you think Council would be like?

3. How do you feel about Council now?

4. What does Council mean to you?

5. What has being a part of Council been like?

6. How has Council affected your life?

7. Has Council changed how you are as a person? If so how?

8. What is your favorite part of Council?

9. What is your least favorite part of Council?

10. Has Council influenced your relationship with your classmates? If so how?

11. Has Council changed your sense of who you are or what life is about? If so how?

12. Do you participate in Council outside of school? If so where and how often?

13. How do you think having participated in Council will affect your future life?
14. If you were to describe Council to someone who has never heard of it before, what would you tell them?

15. Share any other thoughts you would like to about your experience with Council.
Appendix G: Debriefing Letter

Debriefing Letter

Dear Participant, and Parent or Legal Guardian of Participant,

Thank you for participating in this study. Your participation provides a greater understanding about how Council impacts the lives of adolescents.

Should the study show that Council has a positive impact on the lives of adolescents, other schools may want to also adopt it as a program. The outcome may also provide information that could potentially benefit the future funding of Council.

Participation in this study may have caused an emotional experience. If you desire further support, please do not hesitate to contact researcher, Denise Jaimes-Villanueva at (805)456-9431 or email at djaimes@antiochsb.edu or contact your school counselor (name and contact information will be provided after school grants IRB approval)

Sincerely,

Denise Jaimes-Villanueva, M. A.