

Paxton Revisited: The Essence of the Lived Experiences of Urban Agricultural Education Students

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Abstract

The rapidly growing world population and need for more food and agricultural knowledge has inspired city dwellers to explore urban cultivation practices such as vertical farming and community gardening. Ultra-modern approaches to growing crops and livestock in urban high-rise buildings has sparked the imagination of scientists, agriculturists, and engineers as well as rural and urban citizens in recent years. With this new piqued interest for urban agriculture, secondary urban Agricultural Education programs are in a prime position for growth. However, more research is needed to inform the profession regarding quality Agricultural Education growth in American cities. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology was to discover the essence of the shared experiences of urban students who were persistently enrolled in Agricultural Education. The findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations associated with the study are reported as five interpretive themes of meaning including: (a) disorienting experience, (b) critical assessment, (c) shared experiences, (d) thoughtful planning, and (e) projected transformation. The essence of the shared lived experiences of Thomas High School Agricultural Education students was discovered through the lens of the Transformational Learning Theory and can be described best as a Journey Toward Transformation.

Keywords: urban agricultural education; urban agriculture; transformational learning theory

Thomas High School (pseudonym) serves the community of Paxton (pseudonym), a blue-collar inner-city district situated within a large Midwestern metropolitan area (Brown & Kelsey, 2013). While Paxton has a prosperous history rooted in early oil exploration, the community has fallen victim to the exodus of businesses and housing developments to suburban areas. As a result, Thomas High School serves a diverse population of students including third generation Paxton residents, immigrants, and transient low-income families who usually only attend the school for a brief period of time. A member of our research team and his colleague recently published an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) focused on understanding the chain of events that led to the creation of a new Agricultural Education program at Thomas High in 2005. While the purpose of the case study was to understand how the new program was created, our goal in

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revisiting Paxton was to discover the essence of the lived experiences of the urban students who had persistently enrolled in Agricultural Education at Thomas High.

Agriculture in the City – Literature Review

Agricultural Education has long been a staple in the American educational system (National Research Council, 1988; Talbert, Vaughn, & Croom, 2005); however, in order to meet the National Council for Agricultural Education's (NCAE) long range goal (Team Ag Ed, 2006), Agricultural Education stakeholders must continue to seek opportunities for expansion. Through the initiative, NCAE (2008) hoped to spur the growth of new Agricultural Education programs with the primary goal of obtaining 10,000 quality programs by 2015, a concept better known as 10 x 15. In recent years, this initiative appears to have been abandoned; however, NCAE (2013) remains dedicated to "...stimulating positive growth in agricultural education" (para. 1). In 2013, their toil yielded a bumper crop of National FFA Organization (FFA) members and Agricultural Education students; FFA membership exploded to 557,318 members, the largest recorded membership in the organization's history (Brodt, 2013). A major source of the growth can be credited to urban and suburban areas, where students were attracted to the organization's diverse opportunities (Ragland, 2013).

Urban programs are present in "New York, Texas, Arizona, Louisiana, California, Missouri, and others" (Esters & Bowen, 2004, para. 2); furthermore, Enns (2008) postulated urban areas could serve as a ripe source of growth for new Agricultural Education programs. Although three in four Agricultural Education students do not originate from farms, urban America still entertains potential to expand in terms of Agricultural Education programs (Niehaus, 2012). Yet, Martin and Kitchel (2013) suggested FFA's agrarian roots that form much of the organization's traditions do not appeal to diverse students, such as those in urban regions, and that Agricultural Educators should alter programs to be more inclusive. For these reasons, it is imperative to obtain a deeper understanding of the types of students who comprise urban programs.

With a rapidly growing world population, the need for more food and agriculture knowledge has never been greater (International Food Information Council, 2010; Simmons 2011). First Lady Michelle Obama (2012) helped bolster urban agriculture's appeal with the installation of a kitchen garden at the White House and called for other Americans to engage in locally grown gardening. Another budding trend in urban agriculture is the *vertical farming* concept (Despommier, 2008). Although vertical farming has been highly criticized, this ultra-modern approach to growing crops and livestock in urban high-rise buildings has sparked the imagination of scientists, agriculturists, and engineers, as well as rural and urban citizens (Venkataraman, 2008). With this new piqued interest for urban agriculture, secondary urban Agricultural Educations programs are in a prime position for growth.

Since the inception of urban Agricultural Education programs in 1952 with the W.B. Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, these revolutionary programs have merged Agricultural Education's three-circle model with unique courses designed to meet the students' and communities' needs (National Research Council, 1988). With urban sprawl transforming more and more rural areas into urban and suburban communities, the need for urban programs has never been greater (Esters, 2007; Predmore, 2004). A unique goal of urban programs is to attract students from all walks of life (Talbert, 1996), including minorities and students with little understanding of agriculture (Bowen, 2002).

Encouraging the expansion of urban programs has been a priority for Agricultural Education stakeholders since the 1980s (National Research Council, 1988). For instance, in 1980, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education of the Department of Education (OVAED) developed a handbook to help bridge the dichotomy between vocational education and urban students (Rice, 1980). Moreover, in 1995 Iowa State University began the National Forum on

Agricultural Education in Urban Schools aimed at boosting enthusiasm and addressing concerns regarding the development of urban programs (Esters & Bowen, 2004).

Agricultural Education has recognized that cooperation among all players is needed to expand the number of program offerings (Boone & Boone, 2009). Yet, while studies have been conducted to understand urban students' career choices (White, Stewart, Linhardt, 1991), attitudes and motivations (Anderson, 2013; Frazee, Wingenbach, Rutherford & Wolfskill, 2011; Pate, 2011; Talbert, 1996, 1997), perceptions (Frick, Birkenholz, Gardner & Machtmes, 1995), mentors (Bird, Martin, Tummins & Ball, 2013), level of agricultural literacy (Hess & Trexler, 2011), enrollment influences (Esters, 2007; Esters & Bowen, 2005), beliefs about agriculture (Trexler, 2000; Thompson & Russell, 1993), impacts of urban service-learning (Webster & Hoover, 2006) and the establishment of urban Agricultural Education programs (Brown & Kelsey, 2013), little attention has been devoted to understanding the lived experiences of urban students who persistently enroll in Agricultural Education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology (Creswell, 2012) was to discover the essence of the shared experiences of urban students who were persistently enrolled in Agricultural Education. The study aligns with Priority Five, Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs, of the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education (Doerfert, 2011). Two research questions guided the study:

1. What are the lived experiences of urban students who persistently enroll in an urban Agricultural Education program?
2. What factors influenced the lived experiences of urban students who persistently enroll in an urban Agricultural Education program?

Methods

When determining an approach to pursue the research questions, phenomenology provided a unique opportunity to captivate the essence of the shared experiences of urban students who persistently enrolled in Agricultural Education. "Phenomenology is [used] to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence" and captures "meaning for several individuals for their lived experiences" (Creswell, 2012, p. 76).

Two types of phenomenology exist, hermeneutical and transcendental (Creswell, 2012). Transcendental phenomenology was utilized for this study because we were interested in discovering the essence of the shared experiences of urban students who persistently enrolled in Agricultural Education. Transcendental phenomenology required us to disregard previous knowledge and experiences in an effort to better understand the phenomenon more completely through a process called *epoche* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Transcendental refers to the viewpoint that "everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34) while *epoche* "is a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Bracketing was also utilized to neglect previous knowledge and experiences (Creswell, 2012). Bracketing assists in reducing bias by bracketing out ideas and emotions regarding the subject related to the phenomenon so we were able to better describe the participants' experiences. Throughout the research process, it was extremely important for us to bracket our experiences as agricultural educators and former FFA advisors. We report this research from an *emic* (Creswell, 2012) perspective, telling the story from the participants' perspective in order to attain *epoche*.

Reflexivity

Self-reflexivity is one of the most celebrated exercises of qualitative inquiry, as it “encourages writers to be frank about their strengths and shortcomings” (Tracy, 2010, p. 7). We maintained reflexive journals to record our biases toward the study and attempted to bracket out our own personal ideals and focus exclusively on the participants’ experiences. Reflexivity requires a sense of “honesty and authenticity with one’s self, one’s research, and one’s audience” (Tracy, 2010, p. 7).

Honesty and authenticity include divulging our relevant, previous experiences and our *worldviews* (Guba, 1990) to the reader. We are former Agricultural Education teachers, having taught in urban, suburban, and rural programs with culturally diverse populations. Our worldviews are as follows:

1. *Constructivists* – specifically social constructivism where, “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work...relying as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation” (Creswell, 2012, p. 24)
2. *Emancipatory* – where “research should contain an action for reform that may change lives of participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21)

While we constantly worked to bracket out our biases, we expect our experiences and worldviews influenced data collection and analysis, and might have prejudiced our interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Polkinghorne (1989) recommends researchers interview five to 25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon. We purposely chose 12 Thomas High School students (including all six FFA chapter officers) who were enrolled in Agricultural Education for at least two years and varied in their level of FFA participation. The sample was ethnically diverse including African Americans, Hispanics, Caucasians, and multi-racial students.

Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant (Creswell, 2012) during the summer and fall months of 2013. The interviews were channeled by the two central research questions. Additional sub-questions were included when needed to help guide participants. Interview times ranged from approximately thirty minutes to one hour, depending upon the comfort level of the participant. Interview audio was captured with a digital recording application on an iPhone®. Triangulation is a tactic to establish validity or credibility in qualitative research, which combines multiple data sources to yield the same results (Tracy, 2010). Data triangulation was accomplished as we captured and analyzed photographic images, scribed field notes, and observed documents including school and governmental websites.

Interview audio files were downloaded to a faculty computer for the purpose of verbatim transcription. Horizontalization is “the process of laying out all the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight; that is, all pieces of data have equal value at the initial data analysis stage” (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). We scrutinized each statement, or horizon, of the transcription equally to identify significant statements. Bounded horizons were then clustered under codes using a qualitative analysis software, atlas.ti®. When coding was completed, “...nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping constituents were clustered into themes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 180). Five themes were established and utilized to develop textural descriptions that focused on describing *what* was experienced and structural descriptions that focused on describing *how* it was experienced. The essence of the lived experiences of urban students who persistently enroll

in Agricultural Education emerged from the confluence of our textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

Building Quality into the Study

Respectable and credible qualitative research is trustworthy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility “refers to trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings;” therefore, credibility became a top priority during our research process (Tracy, 2010, p. 842). Quotations were used to further the reader’s understanding of each theme, and finally, the essence of the experience. An extensive audit trail was retained throughout the study that reflected thoughts, viewpoints, and past experiences grasped in data collection, coding, and the reporting phases of the study. Our audit trail enhanced our ability to present thick descriptions and provide concrete details (Tracy, 2010). We accomplished member checking by asking participants to read their transcripts and submit feedback and remarks regarding accuracy. Upon the completion of the study, the final draft was sent to the participants to ensure the true essence was achieved and all information was factual.

Throughout the study, we remained sensitive to ethical considerations required of qualitative researchers. *Procedural, situational, relational, and exiting ethics* (Tracy, 2010) were engaged to ensure we, as human instruments, maintained responsible and cautious behaviors. Procedural ethics refers to “ethical actions dictated as universally necessary by larger organizations, institutions or governing bodies” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). We accomplished procedural ethics by keeping all documents confidential and ensuring propriety among participants. For the purpose of this study, all participants were given pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Situational ethics is described as “ethical practices that emerge from a reasoned consideration of a context’s specific circumstances” (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Simply put, are the data worth exposing? The findings were cautiously analyzed and statements were contemplated before being subjected in the final draft. Relational ethics are achieved if both the participant and researcher(s) develop a mutual respect and the researcher remains mindful of his or her actions pertaining to possible negative consequences on others. Reciprocity was achieved because both parties benefited from the study; the participants agreed to recount their lived experiences, and we agreed to accurately convey the findings to the Agricultural Education profession in an effort to cultivate understanding of urban students and Agricultural Education programs. Exiting ethics involves the consideration of how to best present the data in order to avoid unjust or unintended consequences (Tracy, 2010). To prevent unjust interpretation of the data, we provided direct quotes within thick descriptions (Tracy, 2010). These ethical considerations were sincerely observed to protect the participants and to provide an accurate description of the essence of their experiences.

Depiction of the Participants

Although this qualitative research is not generalizable (Creswell, 2012), we encourage the reader to critically consider the descriptions of the community of Paxton and Thomas High School. Most importantly, each participant should be observed to determine if the findings of this study could be transferred to a similar situation in a different United States metropolitan area. As such, a description of each participant was warranted:

- **Aaliyah** — Frequent quarrels with her single-parent mother leave Aaliyah wanting to be anywhere but home. Her mother’s iron-fist parenting mentality has become her primary motivation to become as involved as possible in the Agricultural Education program.
- **Aaron** — While neither of his parents finished high school, Aaron was encouraged to enroll in the program by his two older sisters because Agricultural Education is a major contributing factor to their achieving high school graduation.

- **Addison** — Initially unhappy in Agricultural Education class, Addison was not allowed to switch out. Even so, her family told her to stick it out. Then, as the class began incorporating more hands-on activities, it grew on her. Now, she hopes to become an agricultural educator.
- **Brittany** — A self-described spunky attitude has caused Brittany to clash with those closest to her, resulting in an unstable living arrangement. She no longer communicates with her father after he abandoned her in a dangerous neighborhood and told her she wasn't allowed to come home.
- **Jamie** — Growing up in a poor, single parent home, Jamie spent her childhood bouncing in and out of various school systems. Yet, these setbacks have not hampered her positive attitude or determination to graduate from college and become an agricultural educator.
- **Manny** — Manny is a Mexican immigrant who arrived in agriculture class on a whim. His parents were educated in Mexico; however, they are not able to obtain secure jobs in the United States. For this reason, he must work after school to help support his family who lives paycheck to paycheck.
- **Natasha** — Facing homelessness, Natasha and her cancer-stricken single mother were forced to move to Paxton. Now her life revolves around her family's financial strain and caring for her bed-ridden mother.
- **Sakura** — Proud of her unique talents and eclectic interests, Sakura chose Agricultural Education because she wanted to be different. Raised by a single father who didn't finish high school, she now wants to follow in his footsteps and become a mechanic.
- **Sasha** — Sasha, a Mexican-American student with agrarian ties in Mexico, now feels like FFA is where she fits in best. Her financially strapped parents with no high school education have slowly bought into the program.
- **Serenity Lee** — Self-conscious about living with her mother and her mother's life partner, Serenity Lee always feels like an outsider. To combat these feelings, she has found her tranquility through being extensively involved in extracurricular activities.
- **Tyler** — Now an energetic entrepreneur looking to further expand his operation, Tyler didn't initially choose to be enrolled in Agricultural Education. Despite growing up in a traditional home with both parents having high school diplomas, it was through transformational experiences in the Agricultural Education program that he was inspired to become a veterinarian.
- **Yvette** — Raised in an immigrant household of Hispanic origin, family is everything for Yvette. In her family of six, she and her younger brother are the only fluent English-speaking family members. Neither of her parents graduated from high school; consequently, they are only able to obtain low-paying jobs. For Yvette's family, every penny counts.

Emergent Theoretical Lens

Jack Mezirow's (1991, 2000) Transformational Learning Theory (TLT) offers a critical explanation of how unique learning experiences can radically alter a person's perspective. TLT emerged as the optimal theoretical lens in which to examine and interpret the findings of this study (Creswell, 2012). Developed through an analysis of "re-entry women returning to college after a long hiatus from school," Mezirow (1978, p. 107) believed his theory appropriately captured the metamorphosis that occurred when participants experienced a transformational learning experience.

Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2000) claimed that in order for transformational learning to occur, it must be initiated by a *disorienting dilemma*. This phenomenon transpires after a critical incident or event acts as a trigger or catalyst (Mezirow, 1990). Conversely, he opined these

instances could spark learners to “reassess taken-for-granted assumptions, values, beliefs, and lifestyle habits and, in some cases, completely alter their lives” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 24). The Transformational Learning Model is comprised of the subsequent non-sequential learning phases (p. 22).

1. a disorientating dilemma
2. self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. a critical assessment of assumption
4. recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. planning a course of action
7. acquiring knowledge of skills for implementing one’s plans
8. provisionally trying new roles
9. building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. a reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective

Today, TLT offers an empirically based concept to provide more “socially responsible, self-directed, and less dependent individuals shaped by false assumptions” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 319). With these ideals and principles in mind, Mezirow’s TLT has various implications for urban Agricultural Education. A synthesis of the lived experiences of urban students coupled with Mezirow’s TLT more accurately explained the evolutionary process urban students underwent as they persisted through the Agricultural Education program at Thomas High.

Findings, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

The findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations associated with this study are reported here as five interpretive themes of meaning (Moustakas, 1994) complemented by an expressive icon, which will be incorporated into a model at the conclusion of this report. Each theme is presented generally in the order in which the participants experienced transformational learning. However, themes two, three, and four are not necessarily sequential.



Disorienting Experience

The Agricultural Education program at Thomas High is populated with new students every year. New learners either elect to enroll in the introductory course or, more than likely, find themselves assigned to the class with no expressed interest or option to leave. Serenity Lee reported, students “don’t enroll themselves. They just kinda get pushed into it like I did” [746:748]. Addison expressed resentment over her experience; “I did not choose to enroll in it at first; it just was on my schedule, and I hated it the first semester” [1350:1351]. Aaliyah expressed the same early frustrations; “I didn’t choose to enroll. I kinda hated it at first” [954:955]. Although most of our participants were forced to become Agricultural Education students, some elected to enroll in the course. “Well, first of all, I was in here because my friends were in here. I was like, oh that would be a nice time to have friends [Yvette, 2282:2283]. Our findings are not congruent with the literature regarding enrollment influences of urban Agricultural Education students (Esters & Bowen, 2004). Previous researchers found parents and guardians to be most influential when students elected to enroll in an urban Agricultural Education program in Pennsylvania (Esters & Bowen, 2004). In fact, none of the participants in our study referenced parental involvement in their decision to enroll in Agricultural Education at Thomas High. We suspect the absence of parental involvement can be attributed to the infancy of the Thomas High program. Agricultural Education teachers in new urban programs should be mindful of the lack of tradition and familiarity regarding Agricultural Education within the school

district and develop recruitment strategies focusing on first educating school guidance faculty and then targeting the student population.

Regardless of the various avenues in which Thomas High students arrived in their agriculture class, they all shared a similar experience, uncertainty. Tyler explained, “When I got there, I thought like everybody else, you know. This is gonna be boring and it’s gonna be about farming. And you know, I’m not a farmer. This doesn’t really apply to me” [1767:1769]. Natasha confessed, “I actually didn’t know what it was. And my counselor, she just put me in there, and I was like, what is this? I thought it was a veterinarian class” [2944:2945]. According to TLT, students begin their journey toward transformation with a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1990). Thomas High students were faced with their own disorienting dilemma as they were confronted with uncertainty, unfamiliarity, and even fear.



Critical Assessment

The routine *life-world* “is the region of reality in which man can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by means of his animate organism” (Schutz & Luckman, 1973, p. 3). During their first semester of Agricultural Education, Thomas High students engaged in a critical assessment of their new class. The subject matter seemed from the onset to be irrelevant as it was beyond their routine urban life-world. Jamie was not sold; “At first I thought it was like pigs and stuff, me not so much, I grew up with dogs” [81:82]. Brittany explained, “I asked the counselor what it was and she explained it to me, but I hadn’t ever heard about FFA, ag; I hadn’t heard nothing about this class” [3794:3795]. This finding aligns with the work of previous scholars who found that inner-city students were less knowledgeable about current agriculture issues than those students from rural areas and concluded urban students are afforded fewer opportunities to interact with agriculture or agribusinesses (Frick et al., 1995). Although participants did not immediately recognize the value in the agriculture course, their youthful life-world was malleable, and they began to question their initial negative assumptions.

“I hated it the first semester of intro, but then I actually started liking it, like the more we got into it and all” [Addison, 1351:1352]. When asked about her early experiences in agriculture class, Sasha stated, “Once I got in and involved in it, I started liking it like planting, learning about plants, and the names. I know 100 plants now” [4172:4175]. Agriculture students at Thomas High not only expanded their life-world to include an appreciation for agriculture courses, but they also developed an appreciation for Agricultural Education as a new opportunity at school. Most participants in this study were enrolled in Agricultural Education because of their lack of interest in any school opportunity, but were surprised by their experiences. Serenity Lee enjoyed the change of pace; “It’s nice to come in here five days a week and be like, oh, I learned something new...something we are not always aware of” [405:407].

Concurring with TLT (Mezirow, 1990), this important critical assessment of assumptions regarding the relevance of Agricultural Education was pivotal as students determined their intention to persist in Agricultural Education or leave after the first year. Urban Agricultural Education teachers should be aware of the lack of alignment between agriculture subject matter and inner city life-worlds. Furthermore, urban teachers should cultivate and embrace the challenge of establishing relevance and creating a unique program poised to engage students who have previously found school uninspiring.



Shared Experiences

The fourth phase of TLT is achieved when “recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and others have negotiated a similar change (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105). It is clear Thomas High Agricultural Education students quickly realized they shared feelings of frustration, apprehension, and anger

with those around them. Although most of the participants recalled feeling angry, they were forced into their agriculture class and were provided no exit strategy; their apprehensions and frustrations were rooted much deeper than their non-elected new agriculture course at school. Thomas High students were frustrated and saddened by their home life and future prospects. Nearly all of the students who participated in this study lived in broken homes or experienced extreme poverty including homelessness. Our research participants emphasized the importance of friendship and reflected on the family structure that formed after students felt adjusted to the program.

Yvette viewed the Agricultural Education building as a safe place and explained, “Some students hang out here instead of you know, being out in the streets and everything. They like to focus their attention on this and it really helps” [2559:2565]. Serenity Lee added, “ I am actually suppose to go home after this interview, but I asked my mom if I could just stay here and hang out. Just because I like being here” [704:705]. Thomas High students cherished the family structure created by their involvement in Agricultural Education and identified their agriculture teacher as a figure of structure and safety. Addison told us, “My ag teacher is my rock I guess. He always lifts me up I guess. If I am having a bad day, he will always come up and ask me how I am doing. I didn’t really care about anything before I got into this class” [693:695]. Sakura told us, “He’s an awesome teacher I can easily follow and learn from” [4113]. This finding confirms the conclusions of Bird et al. (2013) who also linked relationships between urban youth and adult educators to positive student change. While Agricultural Education and FFA membership have been linked to youth development (Newcomb, McCracken, Warmbrod, & Whittington, 2004; Retallick & Martin, 2008), urban agriculture teachers should be aware of the acute need for positive modeling and life coaching.



Thoughtful Planning

Following the first year of Agricultural Education enrollment, Thomas High students began to notice a shift in their cogitative process and urban life-world. Student attitude changes and developing a new thought pattern led to a more positive learning environment. As a result, Thomas High Agricultural Education students began to recognize their feelings of joy regarding their agriculture class and the accompanying FFA activities. Tyler informed us, “Students don’t show up to [agriculture] class because they have to, they show up because they want to” [1747:1749]. Serenity Lee enjoyed the applied teaching components of the program; “It’s hands-on; you don’t get to do anything else like this in school. It’s fun; we are going to have fish and we are going to have CPR dogs and all kinds of stuff” [628:631]. When the thought transitions of the participants are juxtaposed with the major tenants of TLT, it is evident Thomas High students were experiencing the fifth phase of the transformational learning process by investigating their new options and exploring the relationships forged within their new life-world (Mezirow, 1990).

Anderson (2013) concluded students enrolled in school-based Agricultural Education were provided opportunities to advance in their classwork, social environment, and professional preparation. Thomas High agriculture students intended to capitalize on their life-world expansion and break out of the restraints that have restricted older siblings, friends, and parents in the past. “I have seen the way my mom has grown up and my other family members and nobody has actually made it all the way through college, so that is like my number one goal right now” [Jamie, 223:226]. Although all of the study participants indicated they rely on one another for support and encouragement as they plan for post-secondary education, the agriculture teacher and FFA advisor appeared to contribute significantly to the motivation for success. “He is more than just a teacher. We have fathers, but we look up to him. No matter what it is, he helps us. I guess he is like an adult friend you can always count on” [Sasha, 4243:4246]. Participants also

recognized the necessity to acquire new knowledge and develop better life-habits and skills before their plan to break out of their current sociocultural life-situation could be realized.

The perceived requirement for new habits, skills, and knowledge aligns with the seventh phase of TLT (Mezirow, 1990). Tyler shared his desire to become a veterinarian and attributed the small animal care course to his aspirations. “I am taking small animal care this year. So, that will help me even more because I will already have a background with it” [Tyler, 1931:1935]. As an aspiring welder, Manny also found value in his classroom experience; “This class can let you try and see if you really like it or not” [2712:2713].

The findings of this theme led us to conclude that urban Agricultural Education courses are uniquely structured to inspire students to look beyond their current reality and expand their life-world to include post-secondary education and more purposeful career planning. All study participants attributed involvement in Agricultural Education to their surprisingly ambitious new and developing life plans.



Projected Transformation

The urban Agricultural Education students who participated in this study experienced disorientation, critically assessed their new life-world, assembled a support group to share experiences, thoughtfully devised a plan for change, and are on the cusp of initiating the strategy to achieve transformation. Although we are not yet ready to claim that any of our research participants have achieved transformation, we discovered that many are near the end of their transformative journey. According to TLT, students will not achieve transformation until they have provisionally tried new roles and become comfortable in their new life-world.

According to Tyler, “The most important part about high school is making good grades...so you can get good scholarships...and a better career” [1983:1986]. Addison became so fascinated with agriculture she had devised a plan to attend a land-grant university and major in Agricultural Education. Serenity Lee now perceives herself as a role model and claimed, “If I had not walked into this classroom, I would still probably be walking around with nothing” [662:666]. Aaron told us, “Just because you did not grow up on a farm, does not mean you can not have a career in agriculture” [2825:2826]. Thomas High Agricultural Education students have developed a positive self-concept and appear to be prepared to experience transformation. However, it must not be ignored that some level of doubt still lingers. Yvette revealed her fears that her goals are beyond reach; “The only thing keeping me from college is money. Right now there is none” [2522:2524]. While Natasha is confident she can receive state funding for education, she predicted obstacles would arise due to her family’s homelessness. “My mom, she came down here with my brother, and I stayed with my cousin, and then I came with her. I don’t know where we will be next” [3107:3110].

This fifth and final theme outlines the need for teacher education strategies specifically designed to prepare pre-service teachers who desire to teach agriculture in inner-city schools. Anderson (2013) also concluded future Agricultural Education teachers should be prepared appropriately to teach “non-traditional students who have different interests and needs than that of the traditional agriculture student” (p. 211). Finally, a follow up study is warranted to explore the post-secondary life-worlds of each participant and determine if student transformation was achieved.

The Essence Revealed

The essence of the shared lived experiences of Thomas High School Agricultural Education students can be described best as a *Journey Toward Transformation*. We exposed the essence by interpreting the data through the theoretical lens of Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000). Figure 1 is a diagrammatic illustration of Thomas High School Agricultural

Education students' Journey Toward Transformation and can serve as a guide for urban program improvement.

As depicted in Figure 1, the Journey Toward Transformation is initiated by a *disorienting experience*. The urban agriculture student is forced to *critically assess* his or her new situation. Next, the student either discovers he or she is engaged in *shared experiences* with others or commences to *thoughtfully plan* for change. Throughout the three non-sequential phases of the journey (critical assessment, shared experiences, and thoughtful planning), students transition from phase to phase as necessary. *Projected transformation* occurs when the student provisionally tries new roles. Student transformation is achieved when all five phases have been accomplished. A student may choose to abort the transformation process during any phase of the journey resulting in a lack of transformation.

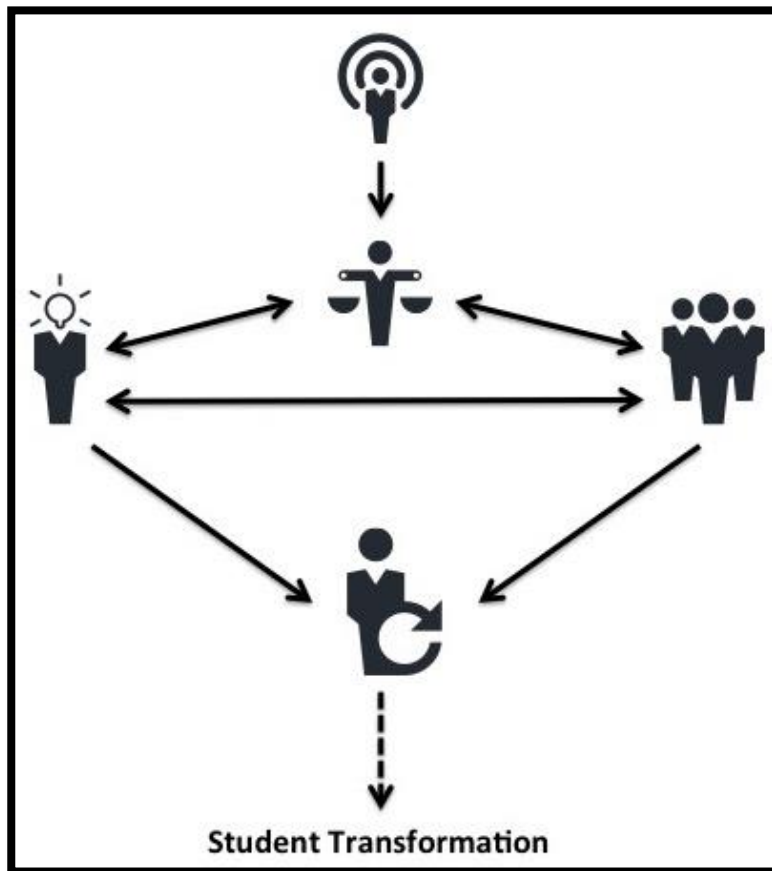


Figure 1. A diagrammatic illustration of Thomas High School Agricultural Education students' Journey Toward Transformation framed by Mezirow's (2000) Transformational Learning Theory.

While TLT emerged as the most appropriate lens in which to interpret and report our data, we do not expect all urban programs would produce duplicate outcomes. Regardless, urban agricultural educators should explore the prospect of structuring their program around the constructs of TLT. Though the journey often begins with a *disorienting dilemma*, urban Agricultural Educators should remain cognizant that this sometimes frustrating stage is the keystone to initiating a powerful student transformation.

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