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Educative Instincts and Assessment in a Self-Determined Learning Community

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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MA, Western Governors University, 2013

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

For many learners in the United States, the education system has been dominated by compulsory education that largely ignores the learning that can happen when learners are able to follow their curiosity and explore without significant adult intervention. The research problem was that despite a wide body of literature on the benefits of self-determined learning practices, it was unknown how the experiences at the Journey Learning Center (JLC) aligned with self-determined learning practices or how learning was assessed. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how the experiences at JLC aligned with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the learning experiences were measured. Gray's educative instincts served as the framework for the study as it identified seven criteria that were present in a community to maximize self-determined opportunities for learners. The research questions were used to determine if there was evidence of an environment that maximized self-determined learning opportunities at JLC, and how learning was measured. Ten members of JLC volunteered to participate in the study. Data collection included interviews, analysis of internal and public documents, and one observation of the location. Hatch's typological analysis was used to analyze the data which yielded evidence that Gray's seven educative instincts were present at JLC indicating that learners used self-determine practices in their learning. In addition, self-assessment was found to be the main form of assessment within the JLC community. These findings may help communities in the United States provide self-determined learning opportunities and experiences that may lead to developing skills that support alternate paths to problem-solving, collaboration, and critical analysis.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all learners who struggled to fit into an educational mold that was not made for their minds, their bodies, or their curiosity. It is dedicated to all parents who took the bold step, or wish they could, to give their children space to explore, breathe deep, and be bored. It is dedicated to the many educators and stakeholders who see those students and do what they can to support those learners in unique ways despite a system that often tries to standardize them. Thank you for your hours, your creativity, and your heart.

This is also dedicated to people dear to me. I dedicate this to my grandmother who has been a fierce supporter of my unorthodox path through education. Her spirit and curiosity were constant companions on this journey. She passed away within a month of my defense and how I wish she could have seen my commencement. It is dedicated to my mother, whose love of thinking outside the box helped me see the fun of a bit of angst every now and again. To my father, who thought he was getting the American dream, but instead got "Married, with Children" and has helped me laugh and reminisce in ways that keep me grounded to family. To my brother, who reminds me that a little roughhousing and singing holiday tunes in the middle of July is good for the soul at any age. Finally, I dedicate this to Jolene, who has been a partner, a support, an amazing spouse, and most importantly someone who values people for who they are. She has the power to help even the most invisible people feel seen and heard, and it is a special gift that I am privileged to experience and learn from.

Acknowledgments

In the mid-1990s, my family and I went to Disneyland on a family trip. My brother has Down syndrome and has always loved Disney characters. Waiting for the parade I became more frustrated at the looks that people gave my brother as he did his best to contain his body and various noises as he waited in excited anticipation. My frustration evaporated once the parade started as I watched every person in the parade who saw my brother come over to dance, hug, and interact with him. In that moment my brother wasn't just different…he was special… and I knew that I wanted to make people understand the importance of being seen. It took a few years to get there, including working for Disney, but this interaction eventually led to me becoming an educator.

To my chair, Dr. Torres-Lugo, what a ride we have had! Thank you for your time, guidance, and kindness through this amazing (and long) journey. Thank you to Dr. White as well for taking the time to understand and fight for the study. That support showed a faith in the work that kept me going at a time when imposter syndrome had me halfway out the door. Thank you to the participants who were willing to share their valuable experiences and information with me. Finally, thank you to all my friends for their amazing patience and to my family members who have tolerated long sessions of ambient music and me being on a first name basis with various local baristas.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

For many learners in the United States, the educational system has been dominated by geographically based and compulsory education primarily created, taught, and tested by adults (Crosslin, 2018; Fife, 2016; Hase & Kenyon, 2001; Tümen Akyıldız, 2019). However, this pedagogical approach to learning is only part of the educational landscape and largely ignores the innate ability of humans to be self-guided by curiosity and passion (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Boulter, 2016; Gray, 2011; Hase & Kenyon, 2001). Although educational institutions are formal and structured forms of transferring information that is deemed vital, informal learning has also played an important role in human history. One example of informal learning is self-determined learning.

Self-determined learning is a form of informal learning defined as a process of knowledge and skill acquisition in which the learner controls the objectives and the means of learning (Blaschke & Hase, 2019). Previous self-determined learning studies have included a focus on learners exercising autonomy and developing skills through curiosity and investigation, with adults taking a hands-off approach that permits children to resolve interpersonal or complex problems without assistance unless they ask for it (Gray, 2011). Learners who can talk and work on relevant and complex issues with minimal adult intervention naturally form communities of inquiry and cooperation (Kizel, 2016).

Although research has defined self-determined learning in various educational contexts, the gap in the literature at the time of the study was that few studies had addressed how self-determined learning practices are applied or how these practices

produce measurable outcomes. The setting for this descriptive case study was a self-determined learning community located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This learning community was referred to in this study as the Journey Learning Community (JLC), a pseudonym. Information from this study may help leaders of educational settings in the United States identify, learn about, and apply key elements that define self-directed learning opportunities and experiences. Such opportunities and experiences may lead students to develop skills that support alternate paths to problem solving, collaboration, and critical analysis.

In Chapter 1, I describe the research problem that was investigated in this study and provide evidence that the problem was current and relevant. I then present the purpose of the study, research questions (RQs), gap in professional practice, and conceptual framework used to address the gap in the literature. The nature of the study, critical definitions to increase the accessibility of the study to readers, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations follow. A discussion of the study's significance and a summary of the information contained in this chapter conclude Chapter 1.

Background

Forms of informal learning have been the basis of how people have educated themselves since the start of our species (Gray, 2011). As industrialization developed, adults created standardized ways to meet the demands of society in the United States and much of the developed world. This led to the formation of more programmatic forms of learning referred to as *pedagogy*, in the late 1900s that focused on skill and knowledge acquisition, (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Hase, 2017). However, with increasing access to

nearly unlimited learning opportunities and avenues of engagement in learning in the digital age, it is pertinent to explore and conduct additional research into understanding the value and power of more autonomous and self-determined forms of learning.

Several studies have illustrated the benefits of self-determined learning for cultivating interpersonal, critical thinking, problem solving, and other skills. In 2004, Gray and Feldman documented the frequency with which learners of different age groups interacted with each other at a self-determined learning community in New England. Gray and Feldman found 196 organic interaction sequences between adolescents and children at least 4 years younger than the older child. The older children provided opportunities for younger children to grow and learn outside their normal development zone. Meanwhile, the participation of the older children led to opportunities that required the adolescents to make implicit knowledge explicit and practice soft skills such as creativity and leadership.

In 2011, Gray conducted another study of informal practices based on previous research on self-determined learning in cultures worldwide. Gray found that many practices in egalitarian hunter–gatherer tribes were like those in a self-determined learning community in New England. Based on this research, Gray developed a theory grounded in seven practices called *educative instincts*. Within such communities, the seven common practices were that learners (a) had unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore, (b) could mix freely with other children of all ages, (c) had access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults, (d) had access to culturally relevant tools and equipment, (e) were free to play and explore with those items, (f) were

free to express and debate any ideas that they wished to express and debate, and (g) were free from bullying from anyone (Gray, 2011).

Although Gray (2011) created the concept of educative instincts, the application of this theory within other self-determined learning communities has yet to be explored. Additionally, the terms "self-determined" and "self-directed" learning have been used interchangeably in previous studies. Self-directed learning has often been referred to as self-regulated learning. In a self-directed learning environment, the learner controls many aspects of their learning within a confined activity, space, or set of expectations. For example, a teacher may assign a problem-based assignment in which teams work together to find a solution. Alternatively, a learner may complete an independent project in which the learner has freedom to make decisions within the scope of the parameters set by someone, most likely an adult facilitator (Tümen Akyıldız, 2019). Self-determined learning has more often been defined as "a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 120). Although Gray used the term "self-directed" in 2011, the practices Gray was referring to are now referred to as "self-determined."

Although researchers have analyzed assessment methods and practices in various educational contexts, there have been few studies in which researchers have explored how self-determined learning experiences are reflected in measurable learning outcomes. Furthermore, exploring self-determined practices, as defined by Gray's (2011) educative

instincts, may support a deeper understanding of the educational scope of the informal learning process within a self-determined learning community. This may support educational stakeholders to consider how these practices may align with the needs of the students and families that they serve. In addition, the research conducted within this study may lead to further research opportunities regarding understanding various aspects of the informal learning methods of humans through an educational lens and deepening the discussion of the concepts of learning and education and how they align.

Problem Statement

Although there is a considerable body of literature on the benefits of self-determined learning practices, it was unknown how these experiences aligned with self-determined learning tenets and produced measurable learning within the JLC. The setting for this descriptive case study was the JLC located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In this region, various educational options exist, including private, magnet, and public schools, with legislation allowing for additional alternatives such as homeschooling. Among the available educational options, the JLC is a unique space that, according to its public website, is centered around three components: the individual, the community, and democratic justice. In this setting, children aged 4–17 can create and run their learning in what the JLC website calls a supportive and safe environment. This option includes the learner pursuing interests, engaging in social opportunities, and exploring passions. In addition to promoting individual learner freedom, the JLC website indicates that the school values the community.

Policies and practices to support this balance include a weekly school meeting where all learning community members meet and decide on matters related to the day-to-day needs and actions within the learning community. In addition, all community members serve on a rotating basis on a judicial committee in which they hear testimony and decide on appropriate action when someone in the community, regardless of age, is reported to have violated one of the community expectations. The term "community members" refers to all members in the community, regardless of age, and includes the staff and members under 18. There is also a school assembly that consists of the learning community members and parents, at which more significant issues of salary, tuition costs, budgets, and other community matters are discussed. This form of learning community does not have many of the structures in place that more traditional U.S. public schools; however, the practices found at the JLC may be relevant to the world today.

With the emergence of the internet as a means to access large amounts of information as well as the use of digital technology as a resource, exploring self-determined practices and understanding if and how they can align with current understandings of learning may help expand existing definitions of these domains by identifying other forms of learning that may not be widely practiced due to the structured nature of public education (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Aguayo et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018; Tümen Akyıldız, 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic made this even more relevant, with many alternatives to in-person learning being sought due to school closures, online-only learning, and other changes to the traditional in-person nature of the public school system (Kesson, 2020; Zhu et al., 2020).

The gap in practice was that a vast body of literature on self-determined learning exists (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Tümen Akyıldız, 2019), but according to a member of the JLC staff, there has been no formal exploration of whether the practices at the JLC are aligned with the self-determined learning practices identified in the literature, or how the learning is measured in this form of educational experience. The gap in the literature was similar in that few studies had examined learning communities such as the JLC through the lens of self-determined learning practices. Further, the literature contained no identifiable studies that explored what practices exist within unstructured, self-determined learning spaces and how the self-determined learning practices, such as those at the JLC, align with Gray's educative instincts (Gray & Riley, 2013) and produce measurable learning outcomes. Learning communities such as the JLC, which operate outside of the standard U.S. public school system, can explore varied forms of education, including the self-determined way of learning. However, this may lead to a lack of understanding of the educational nature of this learning. To address this gap, I explored the concept of self-determined learning and the measurement of learning outcomes at the JLC in a qualitative descriptive case study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study was to explore how learning experiences at the JLC aligned with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the self-determined learning experiences were measured. The major sections of Chapter 2 address the research design and rationale, my role and potential biases as a researcher, the study's methodology, and issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Research Questions

The current literature on self-determined learning contained little exploration of how self-determined practices are applied in nontraditional educational settings and how learning is measured in these settings. In addition, a framework was required to identify what practices were present within the JLC. The RQs were the following:

RQ1: How do the self-determined learning experiences within the JLC align with Gray's educative instincts?

RQ2: In what ways does the JLC measure or assess learning outcomes produced by the self-determined learning practices?

Conceptual Framework

Gray's (2011) educative instincts were used as the conceptual framework to determine what experiences were considered self-determined at the JLC. With the phenomenon of interest in the study being self-determined learning practices, a way to understand what the practices were and how to identify them was necessary. Gray identified seven criteria found among various settings that led to the best possible environment for learners to maximize their self-determined abilities, which Gray deemed "educative instincts" when taken as a whole. The seven criteria are that learners (a) have unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore, (b) can mix freely with other children of all ages, (c) have access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults, (d) have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment and are free to play and explore with those items, (e) are free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate, (f) are free from bullying from anyone, and (g) have an authentic voice in the

group's decision-making process (Gray, 2011). These criteria are explained in more detail in Chapter 2.

Using the educative instincts framework by Gray (2011) helped me ascertain whether the experiences found at the JLC were self-determined. The concepts in the framework allowed for additional analysis of how self-determined learning concepts were used in the local setting. Assessment was used to determine how outcomes were measured in self-determined settings. Because curriculum, instruction, and assessments are the blueprints used to guide learning in public schools (Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Hatch, 2002), exploring how curricular or instructional goals were assessed in a space such as the JLC was relevant.

The data collected were analyzed using a typological analysis. According to Hatch (2002), typological analyses support the creation of categories or codes before data analysis to organize the data that will be used to answer RQs. In the present study, I used predetermined or a priori categories (i.e., the seven educative instincts and assessment) to understand the nature of both the self-determined practices, as defined by Gray's (2011) educative instincts (RQ1), and how learning was assessed (RQ2) within this community.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative descriptive case study method was used to explore the self-determined experiences within the JLC. A case study was chosen as a research strategy because the phenomenon being studied was contemporary and the study was descriptive, so the variables needed to be defined at the start of the study (see Yin, 2015, 1981). Merriam (2009) and Yazan (2015) stated that a case study is appropriate when the goal is

to study a phenomenon intensely and holistically, such as a program, person, or learning community that has defined membership. In analyzing self-determined learning experiences as a phenomenon at the JLC, I sought to provide additional insight into the nature of self-determined learning in settings other than the JLC. The information gleaned from the study may also support stakeholders in understanding the benefits and considerations of self-determined learning as a choice for themselves as learners, parents, and educational leaders who make decisions about how learning takes place and is assessed.

Different sources and data types were used to develop a detailed, thick description of the application of self-determined learning practices at the JLC. First, semi structured interviews were conducted with the adults designated as staff and facilitators. These participants spoke about the practices they observed and those in which they participated with the learners. Second, document analysis included two types of documents: public and internal. Publicly available information included postings from the JLC's public Facebook page, the JLC webpage, and YouTube videos made and posted by members of the JLC community. Internal documents included the community rulebook and emails between adult participants. Finally, observations of physical space were conducted to explore how the design, layout, and opportunities present within the space supported self-determined learning. All of the data collected were analyzed using a typological analysis that included a priori categories and codes, which are explained in detail in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Educative instincts: Educative instincts are what Gray (2011) defined as the characteristics that allow children in a group to acquire culture. According to Gray, learning norms, expectations, the discovery of interests, and understanding of a group allow the child to develop the means of survival and essential elements of the group.

School choice: School choice is the colloquial term used to describe a movement that has been present in the United States since its founding, whose proponents believe that education funds should be available to all learners to choose a form of education that best suits their needs and desires (Wang et al., 2019). School choice advocates contend that funds should be allocated to families to pursue education of their choosing. Further, School choice advocates support more comprehensive definitions of fundable educational institutions that encompass religious and other alternative educational options (Wang et al., 2019).

Self-determined learning: Self-determined learning is defined as a form of learning and education in which the learner decides the means to learn and what to learn (Hase, 2016; Kapasi & Grekova, 2017; Kizel, 2016). This process can be supported by others who provide suggestions, support, access, and so forth to help the learner; however, the learner controls the process and direction of the learning and education (Carliner, 2013; Gray, 2017).

Self-directed learning: "A process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals,

identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes" (Knowles, 1975, p. 35).

Unschooling: Unschooling is considered a form of homeschooling because it takes place outside a recognized school (Gray & Riley, 2013; G. Riley & Gray, 2015). Also known as *natural learning*, unschooling focuses on learning more than teaching. The learner guides and often dictates what activities they want to engage in and the learning they wish to pursue (Kesson, 2020; Morrison, 2019). Parents support the learner in gaining access to the resources and knowledge they are interested in but generally do not direct the learning choices of the learner (Gray, 2011; Kesson, 2020).

Assumptions

I made several assumptions in the study. The first assumption was that staff and other adults were in some way serving as the primary providers of access to educational needs. Although the learners primarily directed or determined their learning, the adults present ensured the school's continued existence and all members' safety, as detailed on the public website. Additionally, access to the JLC through tuition payment, daily transportation, and purchase of materials learners chose as part of their learning process was assumed to be the responsibility of the adult who enrolled or cared for the learner at JLC. This assumption was necessary to delineate the definition of self-determined learning. This assumption required additional exploration of the concept to determine what data were collected and analyzed in the study.

An additional assumption was that participants would be forthcoming and honest in their responses to the interview questions. Although the content of their responses was

subjective and unverifiable in this study, I took measures to encourage truthfulness. These measures included securing all responses, limiting access to all materials received, using password-protected interview rooms via Zoom to limit outside access, and replacing all identifying information (including names and positions) with randomly generated pseudonyms (colors and numbers) for the data collected.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was one nontraditional learning community that publicly stated the community focused on self-determined learning. The study focused on identifying self-determined learning experiences, aligning with what is known about self-determined learning, and measuring outcomes. How the JLC implements self-determined learning and how they determine learning occurred were the specific foci of the study. A delimitation is a boundary the researcher sets to conduct a study and requires an understanding of the research focus (Simon & Goes, 2013). The present study focused on the experiences seen and reported within the JLC by adults and how they aligned with the self-determined learning practices described in Gray's (2011) educative instincts. The possible disadvantages of self-determined learning were not included in the scope of the present study. This study addressed a unique phenomenon in a given setting, the JLC, which limits transferability. However, the research method and robust descriptions applied in this study may facilitate replication in similar self-determined learning communities.

Finally, I chose not to use observations of the learning community while nonadult learners (learners for the rest of the study) were present. This decision was made for

several reasons. The first reason was that the scope of the study encompassed how the learning community supports self-determined learning. This study focused on the practices, structure, and intent of the learning community rather than the use of these elements by the nonadult (learners) community members. Gray's (2011) educational instincts theory is based not on whether the learners do the things that support self-determined learning but on whether the community is set up to support self-determined learning, including access, practices, and physical space. Frameworks such as Black and Wiliam (1998) were deemed unnecessary because they focused on how students are assessed and did not address how self-determined learning is supported.

Observations of the layout, tours of the location without learners present, and similar data were collected as evidence of this intentional design and use of the space by the learning community facilitators. In addition, the opinions of the adults within the community responsible for supporting self-determined learning and others who designed it were sought to understand those choices. Finally, documents, promotional literature, meeting minutes, and other documents were used to understand the evolution, intent, and focus of the decisions and programs offered within the JLC. These documents provided the basis for understanding how the learning community is structured to support and encourage self-determined learning. I included these documents so that those considering the transferability of these findings would understand the evidence collected if they choose to replicate the study in other self-determined learning communities.

Limitations

I used a descriptive case study design. Case studies have certain limitations (e.g., transferability) resulting from data being collected at a single site and from a unique set of participants. The JLC publicly purports to provide self-determined experiences as the primary form of learning, and challenges existed in establishing transferability due to this being a unique phenomenon. Because of the distinctive nature of a singular community, the findings from this study may not reflect those in other communities (see Simon & Goes, 2013; Yin, 2015). The case study design supported the exploration of the phenomenon of self-determined learning within the context of this learning community and supports the transferability of the methods and steps of the analysis to study other learning communities as well. A second limitation may be the bias of the adult participants. The population from which the sample was drawn included all adult members of the JLC. All were presumed to be biased because they believe the community is self-directed and that learning does occur in the space.

Significance

The findings of this study may provide insights to local stakeholders about self-determined learning experiences at the JLC and any alignment with traditional education structures. This is significant because, with the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and its continued impacts, many educational institutions have been challenged to rethink how to teach the curriculum, provide instruction, and assess the learning for a multitude of situations and environments other than the traditional in-person, teacher-taught model that has been used for many years (Kesson, 2020). Investigating alternative forms of

education grounded in the principles of self-determined learning and how outcomes may be measured may provide insights that stakeholders, learners, and families can use to determine what style of learning institution to attend or what form of learning to focus on. At the very least, findings may inform these groups of the type of learning environment that exists within the JLC, specifically regarding self-determined learning experiences. For the directors and stakeholders of the JLC, the potential benefits include an increased definition of the practices in the community, particularly regarding self-determined practices and assessment, and the ability to promote the learning that occurs due to a more widespread understanding of self-determined learning as an educational option. An adult within JLC shared that studies that examine self-determined forms of learning would be beneficial to inform stakeholders about the type of learning supported at JLC (personal communication, April, 2022).

The findings may also create opportunities for the JLC staff to expand awareness of and participation in their learning community. For families and learners, findings may provide additional information regarding learning alternatives that are available and help them understand how participation may be measured. Knowledge of self-determined learning centers such as JLC may increase access to learning opportunities that are available or were not defined previously as educational. The findings of this study may also contribute to student learning and success by exploring self-determined learning practices, as defined by Gray's (2011) educative instincts. Finally, a deeper awareness of the educational scope of the informal learning found within self-determined learning

practices may lead to expanded opportunities for learners throughout the U.S. education system.

Summary

This qualitative descriptive case study was designed to explore the self-determined learning experiences within the JLC, their alignment with the tenets of self-determined learning, and how learning is measured within the community. In Chapter 1, I explained the foundations of self-determined learning theory and provided background information, as well as the relevance and significance of conducting this study. In addition, the problem statement and RQs were presented. The conceptual framework for this study, definitions of relevant terms, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions were also included.

In Chapter 2, a detailed review of the current literature is presented. This review includes the biological and evolutionary basis of self-determined learning in humans and an exploration of the seven practices within learning communities to maximize this form of learning. In addition, differences in the terms applied to self-determined learning are discussed to clarify the forms and variations of these practices. Chapter 2 also presents the relevance of the skills that employers and stakeholders are seeking to understand the possible relevance of self-determined learning practices as an educational option to meet these desired skill sets and expectations of the world today.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Although there was a considerable body of literature on the benefits of self-determined learning practices, it was unknown how these experiences aligned with self-determined learning tenets and produced measurable learning within the JLC. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how the learning experiences at JLC aligned with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the self-determined learning experiences were measured. The literature on self-determined learning showed that humans have a biological need and desire to learn (Boroomand, 2018; Boulter, 2016; Efford & Becker, 2017; Gray, 2011; Jeong & Frye, 2020). Learning focuses on what society deems important and necessary for learners to know and their respective skill sets, for example, critical thinking and problem solving (Hase, 2017; Kizel, 2016; Snowden & Halsall, 2016). For centuries, adults have determined what access learners have to formal learning through educational options (DeAngelis & Dills, 2019; Efford & Becker, 2017; Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Gray, 2011; Jeong & Frye, 2020; Leidums, 2016; Tanner, 2019). Although this adult-driven education system has been widely prevalent in the United States throughout the 20th century, there are other forms of learning that extend beyond this system.

The literature contained many examples of learning through assessment. Studies focused on methods used to quantify how much a learner has retained or if/how they can apply the learning in situations presented by an adult in a learning or educational environment (Andrade, 2019; Jamrus & Razali, 2019). The existing literature also explored assessment within the context of formal learning communities to measure the

effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction determined and presented by an adult (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Kruger et al., 2019; Tanner, 2019; VanTassel-Baska, 2017). However, the fluid and individual nature of self-determined learning and the lack of literature exploring assessment within self-determined learning communities supported the present investigation into how self-determined learning experiences are defined and measured in a nontraditional learning community.

This chapter includes an explanation of the literature search strategy and a discussion of the conceptual framework. This explanation is followed by an analysis of previous literature on self-determined learning and a discussion of the educative instincts Gray (2011) identified as beneficial to maximize self-determined learning. In addition, the similarities and differences of standard terms in this learning area and the spectrum of self-determined learning options in nontraditional learning communities such as homeschools are addressed.

Literature Search Strategy

I started the review by using keywords in abstracts and titles to collect foundational documents to review. Relevant databases used included ProQuest Central, ERIC via EBSCOhost, PsychINFO, Academic Search Premier, and JSTOR. Search terms that were used included but were not limited to *self-determined learning*, *self-direction*, *autonomous learning*, *autonomy*, *history of education in the United States*, *educational theories*, *school choice*, *educational choice*, *educational options*, *assessment*, *instruction and assessment in the United States*, *John Dewey*, *Milton Freedman education*, and

learning community. In addition, searches of the term *self-directed learning* led to exploring similar terms including *heutagogy* and *self-regulated learning*.

I searched for only English or English-translated studies that were published in the last 5 years. I included both qualitative and quantitative studies with the requirement that they were peer reviewed. I also used reviewed seminal works from Dewey and Rosseau and more modern work in the field of self-driven education, including Gray, Knowles, Hase, and Kenyon, as well as multiple resources for general knowledge and context about the foundations of education in the United States.

Theoretical Foundation

Conceptual Framework

The phenomenon of interest in this qualitative descriptive case study was self-determined learning in alternative learning communities such as JLC. During my review of existing literature, other possible frameworks, including ones by Weimer (2013) and Cullen et al. (2012), were deemed inappropriate because of their strict focus on adult education. However, other researchers, including Gray (2009, 2011) and Gray and Feldman (2004), focused on self-determined learning practices for young learners in various settings. Gray's studies focused on autonomy, the ability to engage with any learning the child chooses, self-direction in complex problem solving and navigating growth (Gray, 2011; also as cited in Hase, 2017; Kapasi & Grekova, 2018).

Gray (2011) identified seven criteria among various settings that led to the best possible environment for students to maximize their self-determined abilities, which Gray deemed "educative instincts." These educative instincts have appeared in various

egalitarian communities across the world and over distinct periods in time (Gray, 2011). The seven criteria are that learners (a) have unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore, (b) can mix freely with other children of all ages, (c) have access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults, (d) have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment and are free to play and explore with those items, (e) are free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate, (f) are free from bullying from anyone, and (g) have an authentic voice in the group's decision-making process (Gray, 2011). The use of Gray's educative instincts as a conceptual framework in the present study was appropriate because it provided a means to understand whether the self-determined experiences at JLC were creating conditions that maximize the educative instincts that Gray determined were present in self-determined learning communities.

Educative Instincts

Gray (2011) established that seven practices exist within communities that foster the opportunity for self-determined learning across cultures. The seven optimal conditions are summarized in the following sections and, when combined, form what Gray stated are conditions needed to maximize learners' educative instincts to determine their learning.

Time and Space for Play and Exploration

The first practice that can foster the opportunity for self-determined learning is time and space for play and exploration. This condition represents learners having time during which there is no direction, intrusion, or intervention by an adult. Gray (2011) noted that time and space could lead to many different learner actions, including play,

seeking out others, experiencing boredom, and investigating and playing with objects. The space is also important because it encourages learners to move freely and explore at their own pace, whether in isolation or with others.

Free-Age Mixing Among Children

The second practice that can foster self-determined learning is free-age mixing among children. Age mixing benefits younger children, who may learn skills from older children they see as role models. Older children can also benefit from the opportunity to practice soft skills with younger children, for example, leadership, communication, and creating new games and adventures (Bandura, 1997; Gray, 2011; G. Riley & Gray, 2015; Snowden & Halsall, 2016). Age mixing is also a concept supported by Vygotsky's (1978, as cited in Boroomand, 2018; Gruskin & Geher, 2018) zone of proximal development theory, which explains that learning occurs at the edge of what a person already knows and can do. Learning occurs with the help of support or scaffolds, generally provided by watching or engaging with someone who already has the skill or knowledge to help the other person learn.

Access to Knowledgeable and Caring Adults

The third practice is access to knowledgeable and caring adults. Gray (2011) noted that in hunter and gatherer bands, the adult world is not separate from the world of children. Children often mingle with adults and are privy to their stories, strife, and creation. Although children may often choose to go to other children for answers, they can also access a diverse group of adults to learn from. Adults in a learning community provide knowledge and skills that the younger learners may not have, as well as the

means to access resources and other opportunities that the children may not know exist (Boroomand, 2018; Gray, 2011; Gray & Feldman, 2004).

Access to Equipment and Freedom to Play With That Equipment

The fourth practice that can foster self-determined learning is access to equipment and freedom to play with that equipment. Gray (2011) suggested that young learners must have access to tools. Having both access to the equipment of a culture as well as to the context in which it is used can lead to a sense of belonging and understanding of the culture (Boroomand, 2018; Gray, 2011; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Leidums, 2016; Slaten et al., 2019). In addition, having access and the ability to engage with the material or equipment as it is used in the culture now, combined with the naturally occurring situations of play, boredom, or interest, may lead to creative or inventive opportunities to reimagine, enhance, and evolve to meet emerging needs (Datta, 2016; Gray, 2011; Gruskin & Geher, 2018).

Free Exchange of Ideas

The fifth practice is the free exchange of ideas. Gray (2011) discussed the necessity of divergent views being considered on their own merits compared to ideas and beliefs that may be more widely held in a free exchange of ideas. Eliminating barriers to the free exchange of ideas enhances a learner's sense of agency and value and the ability to communicate, negotiate, and reason through concepts of fairness and problem solving as a community (Boroomand, 2018; Gray, 2011; Williams, 2017).

Freedom From Bullying

The sixth practice is freedom from bullying. According to Gray (2011), anthropologists have noted that in other conditions, such as the free exchange of ideas and close-knit personal relationships, there is reduced bullying because there is less stratification among multiage playgroups. Therefore, a learning community that is free from bullying fosters a sense of belonging and may increase resiliency as learners are more willing to take risks (Gray, 2009, 2011; Slaten et al., 2019).

Immersion in a Democratic Community

The seventh practice that can foster self-determined learning is immersion in a democratic community, which Gray (2011) referred to as the "true voice in the group's decision-making process" (p. 1). Gray stated that when learners feel valued, including youths, they share their perspectives as community members rather than individuals speaking only for themselves. This is supported by existing studies that provided the perspective that immersion in democratic practices such as voting, having equal access to voice, and having choice in decision making encouraged the development of communication and collaboration skills (Boroomand, 2018; Puente-Díaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2017; Song & Bonk, 2016; D. S. Wilson et al., 2014).

Although no studies were found that cited Gray's (2011) educative instincts as a framework, several studies referenced Gray's theory of educative instincts within their work. For instance, Eirdosh and Hanisch (2021) cited Gray when exploring engagement of students through participation in a cooperative learning environment. In this study, older learners presented to younger learners on the concepts of educative instincts and the

research team then interviewed them on their understanding, attitudes, and beliefs about this learning model as part of an interview protocol on self-determined education. Eskelson (2020) also cited Gray's definition of educative instincts in research on the sociobiological origins of formal education in societies. Eskelson referred to the educative instincts as aligned with evolutionary psychology theories for skill and knowledge acquisition through observation, as discussed in Gray's research. In addition, D. S. Wilson et al. (2014) discussed the evolutionary nature of educative instincts to explore what steps may be needed to achieve positive behavioral and cultural change at various scales of size.

Literature Review

The key concepts that arose through the literature review were an understanding of the innate curiosity and foundations of self-determined learning, the various methods and experiences regarding learning and assessment within the learning spectrum, and how self-determined practices may aid in meeting the needs of the digital age.

Evolving Skill Sets and Delivery

In a time of exponential change that rivals the beginning of the industrial revolution, it is appropriate to investigate skills desired and needed by the stakeholders and businesses of today and tomorrow (Glassner, 2021; Ramaila & Molwele, 2022; Singh Dubey et al., 2021). Those entering the workforce today are entering a world in flux where the old systems are being remade or replaced by digital versions. Today's workforce requires agile, adaptable learners prepared to learn continuously (Glassner, 2021; Singh Dubey et al., 2021). This also means that workforce members must learn

domain or subject matter knowledge within the job. However, it is beneficial for them to be innovators, problem solvers, communicators, and solid team members before they enter the workforce (Benek & Akçay, 2022; Hase, 2017; Kizel, 2016; Snowden & Halsall, 2016). Self-determination of learning, which requires the learner to find and investigate their learning, invites curiosity and supports problem solving, critical thinking, and autonomy, may be one form of learning that meets these needs (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Kizel, 2016; Sharma, 2018).

Employer surveys in the United States and Canada are one source that provide insight into highly valuable skills to employers. These skills include interpersonal skills, critical thinking ability, problem-solving skills, and personal motivation (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Fensham-Smith, 2021; Hase, 2017; Kizel, 2016; Richie et al., 2022). This contrasts with a metanalysis of previous responses in the 1980s (Chhinzer & Russo, 2018) that identified critical skills as oral communication, motivation, initiative, and assertiveness (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Chhinzer & Russo, 2018; Fensham-Smith, 2021). Although the reason for this change cannot be assumed, one meaningful difference is the near ubiquitous use of digital technology in business today.

Employers seek employees who are independent and stay abreast of changes and innovations that lead to the informed ability to problem solve and think critically (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Crosslin, 2018; Fensham-Smith, 2021; Kizel, 2016; Richie et al., 2022). Some forms of learning that encourage the development of these skills may include online curriculum, access to formal learning communities, and engagement with

lessons that provide learners with choices to engage in. Although these technology-based alternatives provide self-determined opportunities, they may leave out essential skills that allow learners to cultivate this knowledge in a transferable and synthesizable way to the world around them. At least one study noted a lack of emotional intelligence and self-awareness in self-regulated learners (Rathore, 2018). However, others have noted that combining self-regulated learning with opportunities to build a sense of community and commonality helps to mitigate this deficit (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2015; Carbone & Ware, 2017). Creating environments that require learners to build their affective skills in areas such as emotional and social adaptability, communication styles, interpersonal relationships, and diversity of cultures supports participation in community learning (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2015; Ghavifekr, 2020).

Engaging in self-determined learning at younger ages provides the ability to learn and practice essential skills such as time management, problem-solving, creative chaos, informal research, and sustained inquiry that may support the desired skills of both employers and broader society. (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2015; Damiani & Wieczorek, 2017; Oral & Erkilic, 2022; Snowden & Halsall, 2016). This concept aligns with the belief that learning environments should be places where learners are supported to reach their own decisions and judge the merit of those decisions through both their own lens and that of others to understand the impact of those decisions (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Kirmani, 2016).

By giving learners opportunities to investigate, construct, and ultimately control an idea, they move from passive receivers of knowledge to those who use multiple skills,

awareness, and knowledge to accomplish a goal they create (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Nadelson et al., 2016; Oral & Erkilic, 2022; Sørensen & Davidsen, 2017). This focus on self-determined learning opportunities to work with others may support this cultivation of emotional intelligence and encourage interpersonal relationships. This approach to learning also supports the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, collaborative, and cooperative skills while allowing the learner to decide the value of the information or activity that they are engaging in (Chism & Wilkins, 2018; Hase, 2017; Kirmani, 2016; Nadelson et al., 2016; Rathore, 2018).

Studies also suggest that being presented with projects where learners encounter similar situations as they might in the workspace supports their overall success once they enter the workforce (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Bandaranaike & Willison, 2015; Zhao, 2018). Giving learners opportunities to become entrepreneurs and create solutions to self-identified problems is one specific way to practice these skills (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2015; Radulović & Stančić, 2017). The development and desire for exploration and creation found in self-determined learning may provide the foundation for this process. Additionally, as students grow, participation in research opportunities supports cultivating socio-emotional and collaborative skills (Bandaranaike & Willison, 2015; Burrows et al., 2018). In self-determined learning, this may include similar experiences such as research projects, scientific inquiry, entrepreneurial projects, and other endeavors that focus on evaluating and analyzing information with specific criteria (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Thomas, 2016). The benefits of learners choosing and participating in research studies allow them to generate workable questions, devise strategies, and search

for answers, often as part of a team that requires the cultivation of interpersonal skills (Carbone & Ware, 2017; Sørensen & Davidsen, 2017). For example, if a culminating product of learning is a summary of the findings of the learning via the method chosen, whether they be talks, papers, presentations, or other means, the choice of a culminating product would support the development and confidence in communication with a variety of audiences (Carbone & Ware, 2017; Gomoll et al., 2017; Rathore, 2018). Self-determined learning aligns with the natural curiosity of humans and the skills required to thrive as a species (Coe, 2017; Fensham-Smith, 2021).

Human Learning

Human curiosity and the desire to learn are not just an instinct but a necessity for a young person's survival (Boulter, 2016; Efford & Becker, 2017; Gray, 2011; Jeong & Frye, 2020). In the United States, we often discuss the act of schooling, a concept in which adults deliberately set aside time in unique environments with formal procedures to teach specific domains or content. However, this concept is relatively new to modern humans, and it is not to be confused with the concept of learning, which is as old as humanity (Boulter, 2016; Efford & Becker, 2017; Leidums, 2016).

Learning is broadly defined as how each generation acquires the previous generation's skills, knowledge, rituals, values, and culture (Boulter, 2016; Gray, 2011; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Sim & Xu, 2017). Informal learning, the learning that occurs as part of life, is considered by many to be the most natural form of learning as it is experienced as part of the process of living (Boulter, 2016; Efford & Becker, 2017; Gray, 2017; Jeong & Frye, 2020; Kizel, 2016; Leidums, 2016; Sim & Xu, 2017; Stone, 2016).

Examples of this are seen throughout human histories, such as young people mimicking things that adults do, tribes learning how to protect themselves after a crisis better, and adaptations to changes in climates (Boulter, 2016; Gray, 2017; Jeong & Frye, 2020; Leidums, 2016; Sim & Xu, 2017). In modern times, any adult who has ever found their child binge-watching videos of other children playing a popular game will understand the importance and the prominence of children's observation of other humans (Gray, 2017; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Kizel, 2016; Leidums, 2016; Zhao, 2018;). This self-direction of curiosity, intention, and action is an internal and external process involving the child controlling the how, what, why, and how long to do something. (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991; Gray, 20; Kizel, 2016; Miller et al., 2018; Zhao, 2018).

Humans appear hard-wired to learn and acquire these processes through exploration, curiosity, or self-direction (Boroomand, 2018; Ghavifekr, 2020; Leidums, 2016; Miller et al., 2018). Gray noted that this desire to learn that appears to exist in most humans and allows them to acquire culture, skills, and the ability to adapt to new situations is found in young children at play (Boroomand, 2018; Boulter, 2016; Gray, 2011; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Leidums, 2016). Children are seen even in casual, undirected play to create structure, rules, or expectations for the play that helps them organize the experience (Gray, 2011; Miller et al., 2018; Zhao, 2018). Gray connects this play to learning by noting that it is the process of attaining a goal, such as building an item that is the motivating experience, not the product itself (Gray, 2011). This play concept connects to other research that shows that children who interact with items that they are unfamiliar with without adult interaction or guidance tend to engage with an

object, situation, or material in a way that produces more novel results than if an adult gives them a purpose, a role, or shows learners a way to use the object (Boulter, 2016; Gray & Riley, 2013; Mitra & Dangwal, 2017; Stone, 2016). Natural selection favors the young, who can learn the essential and desired elements of the culture and this desire to self-educate, explore, and interact with objects, as seen within the educative instincts, may show the biological benefits of such curiosity. Those who lacked these skills or could not acquire the essential elements of the culture would be at a severe disadvantage in survival and acceptance (Boulter, 2016; Gray, 2011). It is logical to believe that those with these instincts can be competent in using them to continue learning.

Common but Different Terms

Based on the review of existing literature and the intention of the community, the term self-determined learning was deemed the most appropriate for use within this study. Throughout the literature reviewed, the terms self-directed and self-determined were used interchangeably. However, it is important to note the differences (Blaschke & Hase, 2016; Bartholomew, 2016; Gruskin & Geher, 2018). As noted in Chapter 1, self-determined learning is a form of informal learning where the learner controls both the objectives and how learning is acquired, where skills develop through curiosity and investigation, and in which adults encourage the child to wrestle with complex problems without intervention unless asked (Blaschke & Hase, 2017; Gray, 2011; Kizel, 2016).

However, in self-directed learning within current educational settings, learners guide some aspects of their learning within the specifications of a larger teacher or facilitator-driven situation (Hase & Kenyon, 2001; Miller et al., 2018). Examples used

today where students are allowed to direct their learning within situations include project and problem-based learning methodologies. In this form of pedagogy, students can guide their learning to solve a problem or achieve a goal within a teacher-created construct (Evans, 2017; Kingston, 2018). While this form of student-centered learning is beneficial, the fact that it is limited by the scope and parameters of the class, teacher, expectations, or intent of the creator of the scenario makes it inappropriate for the focus of this study (Craig & Marshall, 2019; Garnjost & Lawter, 2019).

The term heutagogy is a related term that also appears frequently in the literature. This method of learning (coined by Hase & Kenyon in 2001) is referenced in the literature, though it is a form of andragogy. While initially defined by the authors as a study of self-determined learning (Hase & Kenyon, 2001), in subsequent works, they clarify that they do not advocate for curriculum-free environments but define heutagogy as the marriage of knowledge, skills, and autonomous, self-directed learning to reach a level of competency and deep learning (Blaschke & Hase, 2016; Hase & Kenyon, 2001). This lack of definition and continued evolution in andragogy make it inappropriate as a defining term for this study. However, many studies use it synonymously with self-directed and self-determined learning, so these studies were still reviewed within the scope of the literature review in Chapter 2.

Homeschooling Spectrum

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment are the three principal areas of focus considered essential parts of public education today in the United States. These components represent what a learner is taught, how they are taught, and how that learning

is assessed. All three of these educational areas are designed by and consist of the adult stakeholders determining the knowledge and skills in a subject area that learners should learn (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Tanner, 2019; Wall & Leckie, 2017). Instruction is then the act of teaching the content to the students to help them learn and master that content (Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Kidwell & Pentón Herrera, 2019; Seaver, 2019; Shepard et al., 2018; Wall & Leckie, 2017). This mastery is then measured through assessment, which is the means used to measure the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Kruger et al., 2019; Tanner, 2019; VanTassel-Baska, 2017). However, this standardized method of education is only one form of structuring knowledge and skill acquisition.

Schooling at Home

Over two million school-aged learners are currently educated in a homeschool situation. This statistic shows an increase from 850,000 in 1999, or an increase of approximately 10% per year (DeAngelis & Dills, 2019; Efford & Becker, 2017; Gann & Carpenter, 2018). Before the 1800s, learning was done at home, through interactions with the community, and occurred informally. This learning method changed with the industrial revolution in the late 1800s when school attendance became mandatory within the United States (Carlson, 2018; Gray, 2011; Leidums, 2016; Muscatine, 2020; Neuman & Guterman, 2019). Within this period, curriculum, instruction, and assessments were standardized. The current education system was born with a focus on supporting large segments of the population to have basic skills to support the growing industries in America.

In surveys of home-schooling parents, it is common to define homeschooling as a desire to allow the learner to be an active participant in their learning and the adult a partner in helping them achieve their goals (Blaschke & Hase, 2016; Efford & Becker, 2017; Kizel, 2016; Neitzel & Connor, 2018). An advantage that many homeschooling families identify is the ability to tailor the curriculum, instruction, and assessment to the individual child (Boroomand, 2018; Efford & Becker, 2017). Digital technology is increasing the amount, access, and scope of the lessons, with learners able to engage with multiple types of opportunities, including videos, webchats, virtual schools, online universities, and many other methods (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Bartholomew, 2016; Palaigeorgiou & Papadopoulou, 2018; Song & Bonk, 2016). There are many styles and approaches to curriculum-based homeschooling, including the Charlotte Mason Approach, Trivium classical education, religious curriculums, Thomas Jefferson Education, equity-based education curriculums, and other methods (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Fermin et al., 2019; Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Mazama, 2016). In addition to the defined learning curriculum or more structured learning opportunities, home-schooling families often will engage with many resources, including field trips, worksheets, online content, videos, etc., and other dynamic materials to supplement the learning, if applicable, and accessible (Carpenter & Gann, 2018; Kloss, 2018; Mazama, 2016).

Unschooling

Unschooling is a form of learning in which the learning is primarily self-determined by the learner (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Bartholomew, 2016; Boroomand, 2018; Gray, 2011; Kapasi & Grekova, 2018; Kizel, 2016; Miller et al., 2018; Morrison,

2016). Unschooling tends to reject the structure of formalized schooling (Bell et al., 2016; Gann & Carpenter, 2018). This rejection of formalized schooling means that many unschools do not establish a curriculum, require participation assignments, assessments, or measure pre-determined progress. If they do, they do so at the request of the learner. Instead, the learner follows their interests and learns in their time and ways (Alamry & Karaali, 2016; Burke & Cleaver, 2019; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Morrison, 2016; Neuman, 2020; Neuman 2019; Ray, 2013).

The benefits of unschooling include the development of self-regulation and self-directed practices without including structures created by adults. A hallmark of unschooling is a focus on self-determined learning, where the learner retains as much control as possible of all aspects of the learning process. This includes how, when, where, and to what extent they will engage in an activity (Boroomand, 2018; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Pannone, 2017; Riley, 2020; Gray & Riley, 2013; Stone, 2016; Zhao, 2018). This focus on supporting the learner's curiosity to create the environment and allowing them to self-determine their path aids in developing critical thinking and awareness while involving the child in creating their learning and developing valuable skills. (Boroomand, 2018; Efford & Becker, 2017; Riley & Gray, 2015; Stone, 2016). Instead of taking on the role of a teacher or guide, unschooling parents function as support and, in some cases, mutual learners. (Boroomand, 2018; Efford & Becker, 2017; Morrison, 2016; Stone, 2016).

Assessment is an essential aspect of any learning experience. However, with the variety of learning in unschooling, it is hard to clarify what may qualify as an assessment

(Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Hase, 2017; Zhao, 2018). This challenge is also observed in schools that claim they use a self-determined learning approach. In unschooling, informal learning occurs without a specific focus on knowledge acquisition, therefore a formal assessment such as a written test would be inappropriate and impossible. One standard assessment method within informal learning is self-assessment, where the learner uses internal means to decide whether they have achieved the goal they set out to achieve (Hase, 2017; Levin-Gutierrez, 2015; Yates et al., 2022). While an external evaluator may not understand whether a learner has achieved mastery or met the goals they designed for themselves, the learner is in control of assessing their progress. (Burke & Cleaver, 2019; Levin-Gutierrez, 2015). This moves the discussion away from achievement on an assessment to understanding it within the development of the whole person and how that synthesizes to them being able to meet whatever internal goal they have set through self-regulated learning and metacognition (Burke & Cleaver, 2019; Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Hase, 2017).

Cooperative Learning Spaces

Cooperative spaces (often called Co-ops) vary in size, function, and capacity. However, the most basic definition is a group of learners gathering to socialize, share information and resources, and learn (Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Mazama, 2016; Thomas, 2016). Co-ops can vary in design and purpose, but generally, they not only support a wide range of learning styles and methods of homeschooling but also provide valuable opportunities to socialize, engage in activities outside of their family and gain access to resources that they might not usually have access to (Hamlin, 2019; Thomas, 2016).

Access to a cooperative space increases cultural awareness and the ability to interact, which is essential to building up interpersonal skills that may not form because of the limited access to social opportunities often associated with homeschool environments (Hamlin, 2019; Hirsch, 2019; Thomas, 2016).

These cooperative spaces encourage collaboration, cooperation, and knowledge sharing through the opportunity to work on group projects, including community service or team involvement in extracurricular activities, as well (Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Gray, 2011; Hamlin, 2019; Hirsch, 2019; Thomas, 2016). It also provides a support group network for adults who often endure negative stereotypes due to the educational choices made for their children, which many homeschool parents say is the most significant source of frustration (Carpenter & Gann, 2018; Gray, 2011; Mazama, 2016). While there are various cooperative groups, most desire to connect non-traditional learners to form a sense of community, share resources, and engage in formal and informal opportunities (Hamlin, 2019; Thomas, 2016).

Assessment

Curriculum, instruction, and assessment refer to the triad of components that make up the learning progression in public schools today (Achtenhagen, 2012). Throughout the history of the United States, this method has been designed based on what knowledge and information adults deem necessary and vital for students to learn within a particular time (Achtenhagen, 2012; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Hirsch, 2019; Kumar, 2021). The curriculum consists of the adult stakeholders determining the knowledge and skills in a subject area that learners should learn. Instruction is then the

act of teaching the content to the students to help them learn and master that content. This proficiency is then assessed through assessment, which is the means used to measure the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction (Achtenhagen, 2012; Miller et al., 2018; Mohamad Nasri et al., 2021; Raley et al., 2018; Tanner, 2019). This system's primary purpose of assessment is to measure and inform adults on how to improve student learning. It is used to help make instructional decisions, determine student needs, provide stakeholders feedback, and form the benchmark for measuring student progress (Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Rahman et al., 2021). Outside of formal schooling in areas such as apprenticeship and trades, the learner would have been required to prove that they could successfully perform an aspect of the job as they moved towards greater autonomy (Gray, 2011). Throughout history, many forms of assessment have been used, including being able to produce or replicate something, synthesizing, quizzes, tests, and performance-based measurements such as projects and presentations (Rahman et al., 2021).

Assessment is an important aspect of any learning experience; however, within the variety of learning that exists in unschooling, it appears to be hard to clarify what assessment looks like (Carlson, 2020; Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Hase, 2017). A formal assessment would be inappropriate and impossible because much informal learning occurs without a specific focus on knowledge acquisition. One standard assessment method is self-assessment, wherein the learner uses internal means to decide whether they have achieved the goal they set out to achieve (Hase, 2017; Levin-Gutierrez, 2015; Mohamad Nasri et al., 2021; Rahayu et al., 2021). Self-determination and self-directed learning often also lead to self-efficacy. While an external evaluator may not understand

whether a learner has achieved mastery or met the goals learners designed for themselves, learners are in control of assessing their progress. (Burke & Cleaver, 2019; Levin-Gutierrez, 2015). This moves the discussion away from achievement on an assessment to understanding it within the development of the whole person and how that synthesizes to them being able to meet whatever internal goal they have set through self-regulated learning metacognition (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Burke & Cleaver, 2019; Gann & Carpenter, 2018; Hase, 2017).

Summary and Conclusions

This case study explored how the learning experiences at JLC align with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the learning experiences are measured. The significant themes synthesized from the literature within this chapter highlighted humans' natural drive towards self-determined learning, various forms of learning in the homeschooling spectrum, and how self-determined learning may be a way to meet the needs of learners and employers in this digital age, and how learning may be assessed.

In Gray's original work on educative instincts and unschooling, he noted that research on unschooling communities is lacking (Gray, 2009, 2011). Mitra and Dangwal (2017), famous for studies involving making technology available for informal learning, noted a recommendation to continue learning about children's capacities to educate themselves (Gray, 2011; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Mitra & Dangwal, 2017). Based on this information, it was evident that there was merit in better understanding how a form of learning that focuses on self-determination may benefit this age of exponential change

and learning. Therefore, asking how self-determined learning might be maximized and how self-determined learning practices produce measurable outcomes was warranted. The findings of this study provide information on what self-determined practices look like within a self-determined learning community, thus providing information about how an established learning community within the homeschooling spectrum may support the cultivation of self-determined learning practices. The information produced by this study could benefit stakeholders, including parents, potential educators and facilitators of learning, and the learners themselves by providing insight into these experiences and how learning is measured in these non-traditional learning spaces.

Chapter 3 will describe the methodology and research method proposed to fill this gap in the literature and what evidence will be sought to do so. This includes a detailed description of the practices used, the alignment of the research questions to the data collected, and details and structures used in the data analysis. In addition, consideration of ethical practices, my role as a researcher, and a reflection on the study's limitations are discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how learning experiences at the JLC aligned with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the self-determined learning experiences were measured. This chapter includes the research design and rationale, my role and potential biases as the researcher, the study's methodology, and issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations. A summary concludes the chapter.

Research Design and Rationale

The RQs informed a qualitative approach. The RQs that guided the study were as follows:

RQ1: How do the self-determined learning experiences within the JLC align with Gray's educative instincts?

RQ2: In what ways does the JLC measure or assess learning outcomes produced by the self-determined learning practices?

The phenomenon under study was self-determined learning experiences within a self-determined learning community, JLC. Self-determined learning is characterized by the learner taking the initiative to identify and explore their needs and then formulating how to reach that goal. Identifying and controlling one's learning may be one of the most essential skills to gain as new digital technology and processes emerge within education. The public health threats presented by the COVID-19 pandemic made self-determined learning even more relevant. This complex process often requires synthesizing skills such

as problem solving, time management, and communication (Kizel, 2016; Knowles, 1975; Miller et al., 2018; Tümen Akyıldız, 2019).

The conceptual framework for this study was Gray's (2011) educative instinct theory, which proposes that there are common traits found within egalitarian communities that appear to foster self-determined learning among children. The use of Gray's educative instincts was appropriate because it helped me evaluate whether the self-determined experiences at JLC were creating conditions to maximize the educative instincts Gray determined were present in self-determined learning communities. In addition, the framework allowed for additional analysis of how self-determined learning concepts were used in the local setting. These experiences were also analyzed through the assessment lens to determine learning outcomes in a self-determined learning environment. Because curriculum, instruction, and assessments are the elements used to guide learning in public schools today (Achtenhagen, 2012; Gruskin & Geher, 2018), it was relevant to explore how any curricular or instructional goals were assessed in a space such as the JLC.

The research tradition chosen for this study was a descriptive case study with a qualitative approach, which provided an opportunity to understand a phenomenon through the context of those experiencing it (see Yin, 2015; Zainal, 2007). The case study method was appropriate due to the type of questions, the extent of researcher control, and the contemporary nature of the events (see Yin, 2015). For this qualitative study, I was not required to have control of behavioral events, and the focus of the study was contemporary.

Other research methods were considered. A phenomenological design was considered, but the descriptive purpose of my study rendered the phenomenological design inappropriate (see Baxter & Jack, 2008). Ethnography was also considered but rejected because my aim was to explore the curricular, instructional, and assessment methods that enable learners to be self-directed rather than the learner's self-direction. Due to this, there was no need to be immersed in the community as a participant (see Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was that of an objective interviewer, observer, and data analyst. In addition to collecting data via interviews, I accessed the JLC documents through emails, the JLC school website, and social media platforms. I did not have any prior relationship with JLC before the study and had only a formal relationship with JLC through the study's completion. To mitigate potential bias that might have occurred from my knowledge of the phenomenon, I used multiple data collection strategies and a priori codes to limit my assumptions and preconceptions. I also conducted member checking by allowing participants to review both the transcripts of the interview as well as the initial summary of the analysis data of their interview.

My interest in researching alternative forms of learning led me to engage with other similar self-determined communities before this study. This interest in self-determined learning practices is essential to note when managing confirmation bias in interpreting results. Confirmation bias occurs when a researcher only considers data confirming a predetermined hypothesis or belief (Young et al., 2011). In the present

study, confirmation bias was an important consideration because of my interest in self-determined learning practices and prior work experiences in a similar setting, which may have influenced how I interpreted the results. To mitigate confirmation bias, I used predetermined codes in the analysis process. This allowed me to continually evaluate the data against set criteria to minimize consequences supporting my desires or views.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The setting for this descriptive case study was JLC located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The JLC is a unique space that, according to its public website, is centered around three components: the individual, the community, and democratic justice. In this setting, learners aged 4–17 can create and direct their learning in what JLC calls a supportive and safe environment. Approximately 76 learners and four staff members in this learning community support learning and operations, including maintenance, technology infrastructure support, programming, and secretarial duties.

Selection criteria for this study included up to 15 adults who created, facilitated, or assessed learning. These included staff and parents within the JLC community. Although the community makes little distinction of responsibility or voice based on the age of those in the school, I used certain terms throughout the study. The term *learner* was used to identify a person in the community under 18 enrolled as a JLC student. *Participant* referred to adults meeting the inclusion criteria, and *staff* referred to someone receiving payment as a full-time staff member. When discussing the community as a whole (learners and adult staff), I used the term *community members*.

The sampling strategy for this study was purposeful sampling, which involves participants' selection based on preselected criteria (Yin, 2015). In the present study, the selection of up to 15 participants was based on the uniqueness of the phenomenon, the number of potential participants in the community, and the flexible nature of the learning community. The sample size of 15 was based on recommendations from the literature that indicated that five to 15 participants in qualitative research might help the researcher achieve data saturation (see Creswell & Poth, 2016). Merriam (2009) described saturation as the point at which data obtained becomes redundant. Potential participants were recruited by email, and all communications other than interviews were done through email. The interviews were conducted via the online conference program Zoom.

Instrumentation

I used primary data as the main source of information to answer the RQs. To better understand the self-determined practices within the learning community, I collected data through interviews with those involved with the design and facilitation within the JLC; documents that reflected policies, design elements, and definitions; and a site observation without students present. To collect the data for this case study, I created an interview protocol (see Appendix A), checklists for documents (see Appendix B), and an observation checklist as well (Appendix C). These instruments were aligned with the RQs and the educative instincts outlined in the conceptual framework.

Interviews

The interview protocol was based on the University of Michigan's Center for Socially Engaged Design (2019) semistructured interview recommendations, which do

not require permission to use (see Appendix A). The interview questions were aligned with the RQs and the conceptual framework to encourage the exploration of self-determined experiences and assessments within the JLC (see Appendix D). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using the Otter.ai automated transcription program and checked by me as a second review. The interview protocol was shared with two doctoral-level educators who read the questions and confirmed their clarity and usability to establish content validity. This was done to ensure that the questions in the interview protocol would provide relevant data to answer the RQs.

Observations

I conducted a structured observation at the JLC location with one staff member when no learners were present. The goal was to observe and collect data on the layout and design of the space. I used an observation checklist based on the seven criteria listed in Gray's (2011) educative instincts and the term "assessment." An observation checklist was used to mitigate bias and focus on the data needed to answer the RQs (see Appendix C). Throughout the observation, I recorded notes and observations of what was seen in the learning community and what was explained by the staff member conducting the tour to be analyzed after the observation concluded.

Documents

Two documents were initially sought for review: publicly available and internal information. Publicly available information included postings from the JLC's public Facebook page, the JLC webpage, and YouTube videos made and posted by members of the JLC community. Internal documents included the rulebook and internal emails among

staff. Using the document collection form allowed me to organize the posts and documents. These documents were analyzed by aligning the data content to the seven typographies based on Gray's (2011) educative instincts and the term "assessment." The documents were analyzed using a self-developed checklist aligned with the RQs, the seven educative instincts outlined in the conceptual framework, and the assessment concept.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants for this study included up to 15 adults who created, facilitated, or assessed learning. These could have included teachers, staff, subject matter experts, or parents within the JLC community.

Recruitment

After receiving permission from a staff member at the JLC via the Site Authorization/Letter of Cooperation form (see Appendix E), an email message was disseminated using internal communication (i.e., emails) on my behalf to members of the JLC community. This email included information about the study, my contact information, project title, purpose, eligibility criteria, and an invitation to join a virtual informational session including the date and time (see Appendix F). A total of 21 people were contacted and received an informed consent document, 14 completed the informed consent document, and 10 participated in the study.

Participation

Participants who responded to the invitation email were sent a copy of the consent document, which was drafted using Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB)-template

and included detailed information about the study, risks and benefits, and privacy and confidentiality safeguards. The consent document was signed by participants using Adobe Acrobat with a confidential digital signature. The Adobe program recorded and secured that response and sent me a notification via email. The study was designed so that if more participants were needed to achieve data saturation, the participants would be randomly selected. Participants who did not meet the selection criteria were notified and thanked for their interest. A total of 10 participants agreed to be interviewed.

After obtaining each participant's consent, I notified them via email of possible dates and times for the Zoom interview. Once the interview date and time were arranged, each participant received a unique Zoom link and passcode. The interviewee decided on the location of their participation in the Zoom call. The consent document recommended a quiet and private place that allowed them to feel comfortable answering questions thoroughly and honestly.

Data Collection

The conceptual framework for this study was Gray's (2011) educative instinct theory, which proposes that there are common traits found within egalitarian communities that appear to foster self-determined learning among children. The use of Gray's educative instincts was appropriate because it helped me evaluate whether the self-determined experiences at JLC were creating conditions to maximize the educative instincts Gray determined were present in self-determined learning communities. Using the educative instincts framework helped me determine whether the experiences found at JLC were self-determined. In addition, the seven constructs that define the framework

were used as predetermined codes to help me determine whether self-determined learning was present at the JLC and how these constructs were applied at the JLC. Curriculum, instruction, and assessments are the blueprints used to guide learning in public schools today (Achtenhagen, 2012; Gruskin & Geher, 2018); therefore, it was relevant to explore how any curricular or instructional goals were assessed in a space such as JLC. I used assessment to determine how learning outcomes were measured in this community.

Interviews. The interview questions were aligned with the RQs and the conceptual framework to allow for the exploration of self-determined experiences and assessments within the JLC (see Appendix G). Interview data from 10 participants were collected. In-depth interviews began in November 2022 and were completed in December 2022. Each interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted between 45 and 75 minutes. Each participant completed one interview and received an individual link, except for two who completed the interview together. The interviews were conducted using the interview protocol emailed to the participants before the interview (see Appendix A). Each interview was audio-recorded with permission from the participant and later transcribed using the Otter.ai transcription program with a second review from me as the researcher.

The audio files were downloaded from the Zoom platform and transcribed using the Otter.ai program. The Otter.ai program ensured accuracy and facilitated identifying and correcting transcription errors and gaps. I then reviewed each transcription to ensure accuracy. After transcription, each participant was sent the full conversation transcript and a summary of the initial review of their data as forms of member checking. This

allowed the interviewee to review my interpretation of the data for accuracy and to establish validity. Participants were informed of their ability to exit or refuse to participate at any point before, during, or after the interview. The request to withdraw was outlined in the consent document and could be made by email, mail, or verbal communication. Each transcript was analyzed using the steps of typological analysis outlined by Hatch (2002) and using an inductive model that included emerging coding in addition to a priori coding as the analysis continued.

Document Collection. I reviewed two types of documents for this study: internal and publicly available information. Publicly available information included postings from the JLC's public Facebook page, the JLC webpage, and YouTube videos made and posted by members of the JLC community (See Appendix G). Internal documents included those reviewed while onsite, online via links given to members and staff (such as the rulebook), and content pages of people affiliated with the program. Access to these documents was allowed by a staff member on-site via a site authorization letter granting permission to collect, use, or photocopy documents that are deemed relevant. A total of 206 Facebook posts were downloaded and recorded from the school's public Facebook page. Ten publicly available YouTube videos created by the JLC community were viewed, transcribed, and loaded into the document collection templates—finally, 21 internal documents were also reviewed including internal communications such as email and a rulebook that is used within the JLC community. Each document was copied, or a screenshot was taken and placed into the document collection form (Appendix B).

Documentation was collected over a period of six months. Each document was copied, or a screenshot was taken and placed into the document collection form (Appendix B). The compilation process started in June 2022 and concluded in February 2023. It was anticipated that approximately 30-40 hours would be spent searching, retrieving, and reviewing documents online and via mail to gather data, but the actual time was closer to 60 hours.

Observation. One observation was conducted at the location of the learning community with one staff member when no learners were present in November 2022. An adult staff member with knowledge of the purpose and design of the space was the guide for this tour as they were there to allow access to the space and to give basic information on the design, use, and purpose of the space as it was designed. The observation lasted approximately five hours. The goal was to observe and collect data on the layout and design of the space. Data was collected and later analyzed using an observation checklist incorporating Gray's seven educative instincts (Appendix C). I also recorded notes on the observational checklist. The checklist included an "other" and "assessment" category to record other data relevant to the study that was not part of the observational checklist.

Six pages of field notes were taken at the time of the observation, and the notes were transferred into the observational checklist (Appendix C) immediately after the observation. In total, 346 separate notes were taken, and it took 12 hours to compile and organize the data. The data from the field notes were color coded to facilitate the organization of the information. Upon completion, I created digital scans of the field

notes, and they were kept on a password-protected laptop and organized using Microsoft Excel.

Data Analysis Plan

In this study, data was collected aligned with two specific research questions. This included data related to assessments, i.e., guided, unstructured, formal, formative, and summative assessments, and the seven educative instincts described by Gray (2011). These practices include that learners: (a) have unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore; (b) can mix freely with other children of all ages; (c) have access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults; (d) have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment and are free to play and explore with those items; (e) are free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate; (f) are free from bullying from anyone and; (g) have an authentic voice in the group's decision-making process (Gray, 2011, pp. 34-37).

The type and procedure of coding (a priori, deductive) were connected directly to the two research questions. Categories for analysis were created based on research question 1, which focused on how self-determined learning experiences within the JLC align with Gray's educative instincts, and research question 2, which focused on ways the JLC measures or assesses learning outcomes produced by the self-determined learning practices.

The aggregated data collected from interviews, document reviews, and observation checklists were analyzed using Hatch's typological approach. According to Hatch (2002), typological analyses support the creation of categories or codes before the

data analysis to help organize the data that will be used to answer research questions; in this case, the primary typology was the conceptual framework. Based on the steps of typological analysis as outlined by Hatch (2002, pg. 153), the process followed the following steps:

1. Identify typologies to be analyzed.
2. Read the data, marking entries related to those typologies.
3. Read entries by typology, recording the main ideas in entries on a summary.
4. Look for patterns, relationships, and themes within typologies.
5. Read data, coding entries according to patterns identified and keeping a record of what entries go with which elements of your patterns.
6. Decide if the patterns are supported by the data, and search the data for outliers to the patterns.
7. Look for relationships among the patterns identified.
8. Look for evidence of situations outside these patterns (discrepant cases) and consider if the other evidence is still valid for your questions.
9. Write your patterns as one-sentence generalizations.
10. Select data excerpts that support your generalizations.

The analysis of data was conducted twice using the steps listed above. The first analysis focused on Research Question 1 or how the educative instincts for self-determined learning are present in the JLC. The typologies used in steps 1-3 comprised the seven educative instincts defined by Gray (2011). The second analysis of the same

data focused on Research Question 2, referencing methods and evidence of on-site learning assessment.

Analyzing the collected data from all sources, I marked entries related to one category, i.e., educative instincts or assessment (typologies), one at a time. Once I determined that data fit within a particular category, it was coded, and each category was further organized into sub-categories (Appendix H).

Interviews

Interview data were recorded and transcribed using the Otter.ai transcription tool. The researcher then verified that the information provided by the program was correct by reviewing the initial transcription and analysis. The transcript was analyzed using the steps of typology as outlined by Hatch (2002). The analysis was originally deductive, using specific categories, but moved to an inductive method to further explore emerging themes (Appendix H). Once the data were transcribed and the member-checking process was completed, each interview was read multiple times and entries within the interviews were crosschecked against the pre-defined typologies. A master file was created to organize entries in each typological category (see Appendix H). A similar process was done for each typology before additional analysis occurred. The first typology analysis explored self-determined practices at the JLC based on educative instincts (Research Question #1). The second analysis of the same interview data was analyzed through the lens of assessment (how a learner shows competence) to understand how self-determined learning is assessed within this community (Research Question #2).

After the information was categorized using the a priori coding, analysis was done using a word cloud program that allowed me to put in the data collected from a particular typology category and see which terms, words, and concepts appeared with most frequency (Appendix I). The word cloud identified terminology that was referenced frequently by participants. I further analyzed the context for the words and phrases and, from this analysis, created subcategories in each typology.

Documents

For documents, data analysis was facilitated by cataloging documents into a data repository created by the researcher using Microsoft Office programs (Appendix B). These data were stored in the Microsoft Word program using Excel. The documents' data were analyzed using Hatch's (2002) typology. For research question 1, the number of documents analyzed provided information on what kind of learning opportunities exist in this learning community and how it is communicated to people including stakeholders. Articles, stories, posts, studies, and other published information created by, for, or about the JLC provided details on how the learning community markets itself and is perceived by others were also collected as the documents provided insight as to how they want to be seen and considered by both the public and potential learners.

For research question 2, data were analyzed to get insights into assessment within the JLC learning community using a typological approach described by Hatch (2002). I used codes to identify evidence of self-determined learning as defined by Gray and evidence of learning assessments (Hatch, 2002).

As documents were collected and logged using the Document Collection sheet (Appendix B), information was labeled based on the pre-defined a priori codes, and each typological category was assigned a color. Each transcript, post, and webpage was printed and read, and the information was marked with a color corresponding to each typological category. After the initial process was complete, the data within each typological category or a priori-code was reviewed additional times, with the main ideas appearing in each category later summarized into statements.

This was done using a color-coding system by hand for the observation and document data. Entries were marked with a color corresponding to an a priori code, and then each term was given a tally mark when it appeared again. These marks were then counted to indicate the most frequently occurring terms in the document data.

Observation

For the observation, I used the observation checklist to learn how the physical space at the JLC was used to maximize self-determined learning (Appendix C) based on the eight predetermined typological categories defined by the educative instincts (Gray, 2011) and assessment. Observations of the physical space included a tour of the area with a staff member who explained the intended purpose of the space. The observation was done in person, but a backup plan to conduct a Zoom walkthrough was also in place if needed.

Once the observation was complete, the collected information was sorted based on the categories, with each category assigned a color. A secondary color outline was placed around the original highlighted area if multiple categories were applied, and an

additional color was used to denote something that appeared to be a comment made by me during the observation and not evidence of something seen or experienced while there. Once the subcategories were created, I looked for patterns, relationships, and themes within these sub-categories and typologies and established generalizations that expressed relationships between concepts. I also collected notes and information on any instances in which data needed to be more consistent or concise. This resulted in multiple readings of the notes to get the full range of categories. After this process, the information within each category was read, and the main ideas appearing in each category were summarized into statements.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research involves ethical investigation that promotes the validity of its results. However, unlike quantitative studies, in which ethical and validity issues are resolved before conducting the study, a qualitative approach requires a separate set of criteria (Baškarada, 2014; Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified categories that can be used in qualitative studies to help to cultivate trust within the research community. These categories are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. While the categories do not serve as direct substitutes for internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, as in quantitative research, they are deemed equally necessary to confirm the trustworthiness of a qualitative study (Merriam, 2009).

Credibility

To address credibility and consistency, the study was based on an established qualitative, descriptive case study research design consistent with other case study dissertations (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2015). To establish credibility within this study, I used a reflexive journal to record thoughts is a way that ensures subjectivity does not impact the study.

A reflexive journal allowed me to record my thoughts, perceptions, and progress throughout the research process to keep these personal views from appearing in and influencing the study (Dado et al., 2023). Using a reflexive journal gave me, as the researcher, an outlet to consider what the data might be saying and express my assumptions and thoughts subjectively to keep such thoughts from impacting or being reflected in the study. Making this accessible reflects a conscious acknowledgment of the need to check these potential threats to credibility.

Studies focused on self-determined, self-directed, and unschooling learning communities were explored. Studies with a descriptive case study approach were also reviewed to understand and align the methodology of this study. Examining previous research represented that the study uses credible methodologies. Limitations of these study methods were previously discussed in Chapter 3, confirming that the studies and literature were considered for appropriateness.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the results of a study can be transferred to other contexts or settings (Yin, 2015). Even though this study was of a

unique phenomena and therefore has a low possibility of being able to be generalized, the research method applied within this study can be duplicated to study similar self-determined learning communities. To support the applicability of this study to other groups or settings, I created a detailed description of the data collection process. I kept detailed records of interactions with participants in the study. The conceptual framework or similar research questions can be applied to future research to further the knowledge of this form of learning (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the research finding and the extent to which research procedures are documented (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2015). In this study, dependability was addressed by using triangulation and member checking. An example of conducting member checks to establish credibility involved sharing a summary and full transcript of the initial findings from the interview with the participant. The participant was allowed to clarify, amend, and confirm statements made during the interview, allowing for the most accurate reflection of their responses and may diminish the risk of misinterpretation. Using member checks helped prevent the researcher's biases and misunderstandings of what was observed from impacting the data collected (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). These records will be kept securely and provide evidence of a clear trail of research and information that can be confirmed as part of the triangulation process.

Triangulation is another way to support dependability. Triangulation, or using multiple data sources to help verify the evidence that is analyzed, is used to establish a

comprehensive understanding of practices through interviews and the physical evidence of the practices themselves (Merriam, 2009). This study used multiple sources to explore self-determined practices through the lens of educative instincts and their alignment with curriculum, instruction, and assessment domains. This included collecting interviews, documents relating to the intention of the JLC, and documents relating to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and observations of the physical space. This also provided additional data from which to explore the research questions more thoroughly and without the potential biases that might have arisen using interview-only data.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, it is essential to acknowledge that the researcher is vested in the process and that they may interfere with objectivity. In this study, confirmability was supported by using typology for coding and triangulation. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend identifying limitations and other viewpoints of the topic being researched early in the process. This includes searching for multiple perspectives on topics of interest that may inform this study. This was particularly helpful in addressing bias by gathering information from the literature and identifying potential weaknesses and limitations of the study and its methodology. This also helped to frame that the study was about something other than supporting any theory but discovering and investigating this phenomenon to gather the information that added to the existing data, not to prove or disprove it.

Ethical Procedures

An IRB application was submitted to Walden's Institutional Review Board (09-26-22-0524146). The application summarized the study design and safeguards to protect participants against risks, e.g., privacy, confidentiality, and social or economic harm. The goal was to ensure that each participant and those whom the study may have directly impacted were aware of their rights, the risks and benefits, and the purpose of the study.

Ethical concerns related to data collection included participants refusing to participate or wishing to withdraw early from the study. Participants were notified within the virtual consent document and verbally at the start of any contact that participation was voluntary. They could refuse to participate with no additional communication from me, even if they initially agreed to the study. Ethical treatment of the data was also necessary. This included password-protecting the Zoom room, masking identifying data, storing all information in a password protected computer or locked office, and destroying Zoom recordings once transcribed.

The interview data was assigned a randomly generated color and participants assigned a randomly generated number to replace any identifying information in transcripts. Any identifiers were blacked out using a black highlight function in the Microsoft Word program. This allowed all data collected to remain confidential. This technique was also applied to documents. The documents were redacted to ensure no identifiers were present. Confidential data such as transcripts, physical documents, and recordings of interviews are stored on a laptop computer that requires a password to enter. Files are placed in digital folders and are password protected. Individual interview

transcripts were sent to the participants for member checking, and participants received their transcripts.

I obtained consent from each participant to address ethical concerns within the data collection process (Appendix B). The informed written consent explained the purpose of the study, risks, and benefits and included safeguards to mitigate the harm resulting from the loss of privacy or confidentiality. Additionally, it explained the rights of the participants to stop participating or withdrawing at any time and that their participation was entirely voluntary. Before the interviews, I reminded participants that I would be audio recording the interviews. I also let them know that their transcripts would be available for their review once transcribed, and I emailed each interviewee a copy of their full interview for review. Lastly, participants were informed that they could follow up with me to ask any questions regarding the study or the research. The interview data were stored in a password-protected computer to which I only have access. Per Walden policy, the data will be securely stored for five years. All hard copies of data will be shredded, and electronic files will be deleted and reformatted to ensure deletion.

To reduce invasion of privacy concerns, participant interview responses were kept confidential between only the participant and me. Participants were given individual access links to their Zoom session and asked not to turn on their cameras or record themselves. Transcripts from the interviews were stored on a password-protected computer in my office.

Documents collected or the data obtained from the observation checklist will be kept in a locked office. The documents were scanned using an HP Officejet 3630 printer

and rendered in a pdf document using the Microsoft Word program. Once the items were scanned, all identifying data was removed (blacked out) using the Word program. This strategy was used to ensure the privacy of the document's author and that the site location remains confidential. The data obtained from analyzing documents and entered in an Excel file was protected using a password for this file. The researcher is the only person who had access to this database.

Summary

This chapter outlined the alignment between the research questions, methods, and data collection processes that I used to sort and analyze the data. In addition, using typological and inductive analysis methods allowed for the evolution of understanding the learning community's self-determined practices while viewing them from pre-determined criteria (educative instincts and assessment) to gain further insight.

The researcher secures all data, and the procedures discussed within this chapter should be consistent with the ethical standards of Walden University and the larger research community and adhere to those required of the qualitative case study domain. The researcher has taken steps to mitigate possible ethical concerns by understanding potential biases that may arise. Additionally, the use of triangulation and member checks support that the information gathered accurately reflects the practices and views of the self-determined learning practices within the JLC.

The methods and procedures outlined in this chapter should yield information on the self-determined practices within JLC by analyzing them through the educative instinct's framework (Gray, 2011) and investigate learning outcomes produced by the

self-determined learning practices. This knowledge can lead to consideration and discussion about the role of self-determined practices as a viable learning method. Policymakers, administrators, families, and learners themselves can use this information to determine if this is a form of learning that should be further explored, incorporated, and made available to learners.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how the learning experiences at JLC aligned with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the self-determined learning experiences were measured. The first RQ for this study was developed using Gray's (2011) educative instincts theory, which provided a framework to explore learning experiences at JLC. The second RQ addressed how learning outcomes within this learning community were assessed.

In this chapter, I review the setting for the study and the procedures for data collection and analysis. The results are then presented based on the RQs. I follow the results with evidence of trustworthiness by describing the implementation of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies. A summary concludes the chapter.

Setting

The setting for this qualitative descriptive case study was a learning community (school) located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. According to the school's public website, its structure is centered around three components: the individual, the community, and democratic justice. The school is based on the Sudbury model of learning, which promotes egalitarian relationships between children and adults. Schools in this model include learners between 3 and 18 years old who are fully responsible for their education and how they want to learn, be assessed, and interact with the community. At these schools, decision making is based on participatory democracy among all school community members (M. A. Wilson, 2015). Although many schools and learning

communities around the United States reference and use various structures and tenets of the Sudbury model, each learning community is unique, and there are no defining criteria of governance that determine whether a school is a Sudbury school or not.

For the present study, I sought to recruit up to 15 adults who created, facilitated, or assessed learning, including staff, subject matter experts, and parents of JLC students. Although the initial selection criteria focused on adults currently involved in the community, one staff member of the team of five left in the months preceding the study. This change in personnel was addressed by offering the former staff member the opportunity to participate in the study.

Demographics

For this study, I contacted a total of 21 people, 14 of whom completed an informed consent document, and 10 of whom participated in the study. Demographically, five staff and five parents participated, reflecting a mix of perceived gender identities. Due to the small size of this community, demographic data such as gender, age, and having a dual role in the community (e.g., having the roles of both staff member and parent of a child in the community) are not disclosed to protect the confidentiality of the participants, per ethical research practices. Each participant who provided information signed a consent form before data collection started.

Data Collection

Data were collected from a total of 10 participants. All 10 participants were interviewed, with three of the 10 participants providing documents and one providing

observational data. Some participants had dual roles. One of the participants was a former staff member.

Interview Data

Data from 10 interview participants were collected. In November 2022, I began conducting in-depth interviews, completing each via Zoom in 45–75 minutes. Each interview was audio-recorded with permission from the participant. Participants received individual Zoom links, except for two participants who completed the interview together. The interviews were conducted using an interview protocol emailed to the participants in advance (see Appendix A).

Participants were contacted via email after the interviews were transcribed and given a chance to review their transcript. They were asked to clarify, amend, or confirm statements in the transcript, allowing for the most accurate reflection of their responses. A member-checking process added to the study findings' credibility. In this process, a summary of the preliminary interview data analysis was also sent to the participants for their review, which they could add to, clarify, or amend.

Document Collection

I reviewed two types of documents: publicly available information and internal documents. The publicly available information included postings from the JLC's public Facebook page, the JLC webpage, and YouTube videos made and posted by members of the JLC community.

I began data collection in June 2022 by cataloging the JLC's public Facebook page posts. A screenshot of each post was taken and put into an individual document

collection sheet (see Appendix B). This process was done for every post on the school's public Facebook page with dates ranging from May 2012 through December 2022. In total, 206 posts were recorded from the school's public Facebook page. It took approximately 2 weeks to process the Facebook transcripts. In addition, 10 publicly available YouTube videos created by the JLC community were viewed, transcribed, and loaded into the document collection templates. The process of recording and transcription took 3 weeks.

A total of 21 internal documents, including internal communications and a rulebook, were reviewed. Any identifying information was masked. Each document was copied, or a screenshot was taken and placed into the document collection form (see Appendix B). The compilation process started in June 2022 and concluded in February 2023. The documents were analyzed by aligning the data content to the seven typographies based on Gray's (2011) educative instincts and assessment.

Observational Data

Site observation at the JLC occurred in early November 2022 and lasted approximately 5 hours. The site observation was conducted in person and was led by one participant on a Saturday when no students or other staff were present. The participant provided a tour of the property, offered information about how the site was set up, and answered my questions about the site. While touring, I took six pages of field notes, which I transferred into the observation checklist (see Appendix C) immediately after the observation. In total, 346 separate notes were taken, and it took 12 hours to compile and organize the data by color coding. Upon completion, I created digital scans of the field

notes, stored them on a password-protected laptop, and organized them using Microsoft Excel.

Data Analysis

The aggregated data collected from interviews, document reviews, and observation checklists were analyzed using a typological approach. According to Hatch (2002), typological analyses support the creation of categories or codes prior to data analysis to help organize data that will be used to answer RQs; in this case, the primary typology was the conceptual framework. The typological analysis process had the following steps based on Hatch's typological analysis sequence:

1. Identify typologies to be analyzed and create a priori codes based on research questions.
2. Read the data, marking entries related to those typologies.
3. Read entries by typology, recording the main ideas in entries on a summary.
4. Look for patterns, relationships, and themes within typologies.
5. Read data, coding entries according to patterns identified and keeping a record of what entries go with which elements of the patterns.
6. Decide whether the patterns are supported by the data, and search the data for outliers to the patterns.
7. Look for relationships among the patterns identified.
8. Look for evidence of situations outside these patterns (discrepant cases) and consider whether the other evidence is still valid for the research questions.
9. Write the patterns as one-sentence generalizations.

10. Select data excerpts that support the generalizations.

Interviews

I analyzed 10 interview transcripts using the predefined typologies gleaned from Gray's (2011) seven educative instincts and the concept of assessment. The first step was to transcribe each interview recording. The audio files were downloaded from the Zoom platform and uploaded into Otter.ai, which ensured accuracy by facilitating the identification and correction of transcription errors and gaps. If corrections were needed, the Microsoft Word file was updated, and identifying information, if present, was removed. Each individual transcription was assigned an alphanumeric code, such as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so on.

Each transcript was sent to the participant as an initial form of transcript review, followed by a summary of the initial findings from the analysis as a member-checking strategy commonly used in qualitative research to establish credibility (see Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These processes allowed participants to clarify, amend, and confirm statements made during the interview, facilitating the most accurate reflection of their responses and diminishing the risk of misinterpretation. Using this two-step process of transcript review and member checking helped me ensure that any biases and misunderstandings regarding what I observed would not impact the data collected (see Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

Once I had transcribed the audio recordings and completed the member-checking process, I read each interview multiple times and cross-checked entries within the interviews against the predefined typologies. A master file was created to organize entries

in each typological category (see Appendix H). For example, when interview data about assessment were analyzed, the following subcategories emerged: standardized, formal, informal, self-assessment, competence, capable, members of society, problem solving, ability to conversate, ability to interact, life as assessment, undefined, reading, math, later than others, stigma, deficit, freedom, productive, and happy/fulfilled. Half of the interviewees mentioned that there were no formal assessments that they were aware of, and three interviewees did not mention formal assessments but did state that there were requirements to prove that some of the tools or equipment could be used, giving examples of the power saws and the virtual reality equipment. The same process was done for each of the a priori codes before additional analysis occurred.

Documents

Within the document data, I used a color-coding process. First, the transcripts of the 10 videos, 206 Facebook posts, and 18 pages from the school's website were prepared to be categorized using the eight a priori typological categories as defined by the seven educative instincts (Gray, 2011) and assessment. Each typological category was assigned a color. Each transcript, post, and webpage was printed and read, and the information was marked with a color corresponding to each typological category. An example of information that aligned with the assessment typological category was highlighted in orange. Documents were reviewed more than once to capture relevant information based on the a priori codes and emerging analysis.

After the process was complete, the information within each typological category or a priori code was reviewed, with the main ideas appearing in each category later

summarized into statements. For example, the JLC website stated in several places that although there was no formal testing required at the school, students who wanted to pursue formal testing in areas could do so, including a formal graduation project. These were also added to the subcategory chart, as reflected in Appendix H.

Observations

For data collected during the site observation, a similar color-coding process was used with the eight a priori typological categories defined by educative instincts (Gray, 2011) and assessment. Each category was assigned a color, and the 346 individual notes were read and marked with a color corresponding to each category. A secondary color outline was placed around the original highlighted area if multiple categories were applied. This resulted in multiple readings of the notes to capture the full range of categories.

After this process, the information within each category was read, and the main ideas appearing in each category were summarized into statements. For example, one of the notes categorized under the a priori code regarding "time and space for play and exploration" stated that 27 interior doors were noted within the structure. Of these, only five doors were disclosed as being locked to restrict access, and one was able to be locked as needed because it was a single-stall bathroom. From here, the statements were cross-checked with the initial subcategories that had emerged from the analysis and were deemed either to fit in an existing subcategory or led to the formation of a new subcategory (see Appendix H).

Identifying Patterns and Relationships as Subcategories

Once the general ideas were extracted from the data, each a priori code was analyzed using a word-cloud-generating program to identify patterns within each a priori category. Using this method for analysis helped me identify the frequency of words within each category (see Appendix I). The goal was to identify additional subcategories and to get a visual representation of the prevalence of a term or idea discussed that might not have been evident in the initial analysis. For example, within the assessment category (using a priori code "assessment"), all data coded for this a priori code were loaded into the word cloud program, which sorted the data by frequency of words in a data set. The words "learning," "know," and "problem solving" appear larger in the word cloud because they frequently appeared in the data set for this category. On average, this analysis method was used to identify approximately two to three additional subcategories within each a priori code to further analyze. This word cloud process for the interview data brought the number of codes to 75 (see Appendix H). Each data subcategory was recorded in an Excel master coding document divided by sheets for each a priori code and summarized in Appendix J.

The final step of the analysis process was to generate a general information theme for each original a priori typological category. For each subcategory, one-sentence statements were created that summarized the patterns within that subcategory. These statements were then combined to summarize the data found in each category. For example, the general statement for the typological category "bullying" shared institutional policies and procedures for bullying and was summarized as follows:

> This policy evolves with the community and can be changed by a majority vote. Anyone can challenge the definition of bullying using community meeting procedures. Participants feel that there are few instances of bullying, and there is an accessible process in place to address bullying within the JLC. JLC members have access to these policies via an online rule and procedures book using QR codes around the building, and it is accessible online via the web.

Once these general themes were created, I located excerpts from the data that supported each summary. For the example on bullying, this process included finding a participant discussing how the definition had evolved and explaining how it was defined at the time of the interview, another participant stating that they felt there was little bullying at JLC, and another participant explaining why they thought that there were few instances of bullying at the school. The definition from the rulebook was also included as well as an excerpt from the website that discussed free expression and conflict resolution. These general themes, as well as excerpts, provided a way to communicate the results of the analysis in a way that was accessible and reflective of the evidence found from the analysis.

Using a priori codes based on the educative instincts (Gray, 2011) conceptual framework and the additional code for assessment provided the basis to categorize the information. Hatch's method of analyzing qualitative data as a 10-step process was integral to communicating meaning by requiring analysis of various parts of the data to discover relationships and for further analysis.

Relationships within categories were addressed as the next step in the process. For example, for the typology "Time and Space for Play and Exploration," seven subcategories were created and later bundled into two main categories (freedom and limits) to reflect the main generalizations and relationships found within the analysis of all triangulated data. For example, the subcategories listed as rules, corporations, locked doors, and signing in and out fall under the category of limitations.

A similar method was used for the document and observational data, but it was based on a "key concept" method of brainstorming. In step 4 of Hatch's analysis sequence, each a priori code was placed in the center of a piece of paper, and a keyword from each piece of data collected was placed around it. As more instances of the word occurred, a check mark was placed next to the word. This was followed by a grouping of similar concepts (such as individual, self-determination, and independence) together by color. This resulted in a visual representation of the data and the creation of subcategories to further deepen analysis.

For all data, once the additional subcategories were defined, analysis of the data was performed to deepen the understanding of how the content of each subcategory related to the whole. Interestingly, some categories were found across the seven educative instincts and assessments. For example, "freedom" is mentioned within all of the categories; however, more specific forms of freedom were better elaborated within the sub-categories that were already created (ability to vote, to make proposals, to participate, etc.)

As part of step eight of Hatch's analysis process, discrepant cases were considered and factored into the analysis and are discussed within the trustworthiness section of this chapter.

Results

Self-determined learning is a form of informal learning defined as the process of knowledge and skill acquisition where the learner controls both the objectives and the means of learning (Blaschke & Hase, 2016). Self-determined learning is characterized by the learner taking the initiative to identify and explore what they feel they need to learn and then formulating how to engage in often complex processes and synthesis of skills to achieve that goal. (Kizel, 2016; Knowles, 1975; Miller et al., 2018; Tümen Akyıldız, 2019). The purpose of this case study was to explore how the learning experiences at JLC align with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the self-determined learning experiences were measured.

Merriam (2009) stated that meaning is socially constructed by people interacting with the world. There is no fixed interpretation of the world because our experiences and interactions are experienced individually. Qualitative research gathers in-depth insights into experiences and phenomena (Yin, 2015). The findings of this qualitative case study will be shared in a narrative format, organized by research questions. The data reflect responses from 10 interview participants, documents collected, and site observation.

The first research question was to explore how the self-determined learning experiences within the JLC align with Gray's educative instincts. I found and will present evidence of self-determined learning practices within each of the seven educative

instincts. The second research question asked how the JLC measures or assesses learning outcomes produced by self-determined learning practices. The central theme from the data gathered for this research question was that self-assessment is the primary assessment form within this learning community. The following section will describe evidence of the seven criteria discussed within Gray's educative instinct theory that serves as the conceptual framework for this study.

Research Question 1

Learners' Access to Knowledgeable and Caring Adults

According to Gray (2011), access to knowledgeable and caring adults is a beneficial feature of communities that maximize self-determined learning. Gray (2011) described that "a child who needs a lap to sit on, or a shoulder to cry on, or personal advice, or the answer to some technical question that he has not been able to find on his own, or (occasionally) more prolonged help in the form of a tutorial or course, knows just which adult will best satisfy his or her need (p.36)." Evidence from the interview data indicates that within the JLC, this educative instinct is present.

Participants reported that staff within the JLC were accessible, helpful, and knowledgeable community members. For instance, more than half of the participants responded that the staff was accessible and could assist with requests from community members. It is important to note that in the JLC community, the term community member refers to any person within the community, regardless of age or status. Based on this, adults, who are considered "staff" because of the roles they take on, and learners, who are members of the community under 18, have the same status in most decisions and actions

within the community. Participant Six noted that members of the community can reach the staff via alternate modalities such as "texts, phone calls…" or at different times of the day, as described by Participant Nine "I can always, at the end of the day, or the beginning of the day, walk into the office and say, I need to talk to somebody just for a minute, I have an issue." Many participants had similar comments about the accessibility of the staff, noting that staff were able to be contacted via phone, email, text and in person.

Using Hatch's typological analysis method, six major areas of interest or categories emerged as participants discussed access to caring and knowledgeable adults: freedom, seeking access to resources, trust, learning is natural, adult-led help and accessibility. However, due to the overlapping content that appeared within the patterns of data, two major generalizations emerged (a) natural learning and (b) adults as tools to access resources.

Natural Learning. The role of staff within the JLC community is to support the natural process of learning by being available to learners but only stepping in if asked or if there is a safety issue. This definition of the role of staff aligns with the concept of allowing community members to largely self-determine their path. Within this JLC community, members are expected to be free to interact with the environment and each other without direction from adults. For example, the school's Facebook page and website included quotes, memes, and pictures with captions regarding giving children opportunities to grow through problem-solving, making mistakes, getting dirty, experimenting with materials, and resolving conflicts with others.

When reviewing the additional sources of information, I did not find a formal procedure or direction regarding having staff accessible, or one that requires a staff member to have a specific area of expertise or certification. However, the school's public website supports the view that the role of an adult in the community is not as a teacher but as a community member. The following quote can be found in the "What do the teachers do" section of the question-and-answer page.

> As students and staff have equal standing in an institutional sense, relationships between students and staff tend to be collegial. As in any community, staff and students will develop closer relationships with those they have an affinity for and naturally influence each other's interests and activities. Staff does not artificially seize "teachable moments" as is often discussed in conventional educational models. However, like anyone, they can expound on topics they passionately discuss if a student brings it up.

In a post, from December of 2014, a staff member commented on the benefits of a diverse and knowledgeable staff, stating, "There is generally no teaching per se, but children observe our behavior for possibilities to explore. So, I think that suggests having a diverse staff is crucial. At our school, we have four staff that have very different personalities and interests." However, I found few posts about the staff's roles, responsibilities, or actions within the public Facebook posts for the school that indicate their main role as a tool or means to obtain a resource.

Adults as Tools to Access Resources. Staff members within this learning community are not seen as resources of information but are rather used as tools to gain

access to resources. Within more than half of the interviews, answers provided by the respondents relayed that learners see adults as a resource to learn how to gain access to a specific need or an aid to continuing a path that the learners have chosen. For instance, Participant Six stated, "…if you have a question that they [the staff you are talking to] cannot answer, they will point you in the right direction or take you to somebody that can help you." Additional examples include learning how to use the microwave so members do not need to ask for help in the future or help find a person or resource. Participant Five told a story that reflects this view. "I was trying to get it set up on [one of my child's] tablets, and I was having much trouble. Furthermore, [my child], who was like [under eight] at the time, was like, you know, it is cool. I will text [a staff member]; he will take care of it. Moreover, she just texted him and, like, solved the problem. She has never had a reading lesson, and she has never had a writing lesson. However, she's learned that she is comfortable enough with grownups that she could fix it at the time." Within this community, the staff allow community members to resolve conflicts or use resources without direction or intervention.

While there was no evidence of educational or certification requirements identified for staff, several participants mentioned that three of the four current staff and one former staff member had a solid knowledge base in a particular area of expertise. All participants noted a staff member with extensive math knowledge, one with expertise in stage and film craft, and one with technical expertise. This view of expertise aligns with the below concept that focuses on the opportunities that staff create based on their interests and skill sets.

Immersion in a Democratic Community

In Gray's exploration of hunter-gatherer bands, he found that the main form of decision-making used within these communities was group decision-making which Gray refers to as "true voice in the group's decision-making process" in his work on educative instincts (2011.) He notes the importance of group decision-making as part of the democratic process: "Immersion in the democratic process endows each person with a sense of responsibility that helps motivate education. If my voice counts and I have a real say in what the group does and how it operates, I had better think things through carefully and speak wisely. I am responsible for myself and my community, so that is a good reason to educate myself on what matters to my community (Gray, 2011)." Gray states that the entire community, including children, should participate in those discussions.

Evidence from the interview, documents, and observational data indicates that tenets of democracy were present within the JLC community in several forms. Using the Hatch analysis method, two main areas of focus emerged. The first (a) voice in a democracy includes the subcategories of members having a voice in the decision-making process, the ability for members to vote, and developing the skills to contribute to the democracy. The second generalization, (b) limits to democracy, includes terms found within the analysis, such as limitations within the concept of democracy, judicial committee, and community action.

Voice in a Democracy. As outlined on the school website, their operational model of education "rests on three basic components: the individual, the community, and democratic justice." Community members, which refers to all adult staff and children

enrolled in the school, have a voice to influence the rules and boundaries within the community through weekly school meetings. Data from the interview highlighted the importance of having a voice in the decision-making process and processes to function within a democracy. As stated by Participant Two, "I would say the set curriculum, even though it is kind of not stated, is democracy." Within this community, one of the primary forms of supporting the value of a democratic process is the use of the school meeting. The school meeting is a weekly meeting of interested community members which is used as a forum to raise concerns and questions, make proposals, and discuss items regarding the community as brought up by those in the community. All community members can attend the school meeting and has a rotating and randomized group of community members who run the meetings based on Robert's Rules of Order. Community members can attend and vote on matters brought to the school meeting. The meetings use a majority rules voting system and a formal way to propose agenda items to the community. This can include requests to purchase items, requests for classes, formal complaints or questions about an existing policy or rule, and general topics that community members would like to discuss. A comment expressed by all the participants is similar to the sentiment expressed by Participant Nine, "Within our community, because it is democratic, everything is majority rules vote." Any of the community members can make motions and proposals, and discussions are had about the topic that will be voted on before voting.

The information expressed in the interviews aligns with the information found on the JLC website, which states, "Students and staff run the school together through a

democratic structure in which every staff and student has one vote in every decision made by the School Meeting." According to the rulebook and interview data from over half of the Participants, decisions are made on a majority rules basis, and formal meetings follow the Robert Rules of Order, a manual of parliamentary procedure commonly used for facilitating discussions and group decision-making.

Interestingly, community members can vote regardless of age; no vote counts more than another, irrespective of age or role in the community. The school rulebook clearly confirmed what Participant Five stated, "[a] five-year-old vote counts as much as the staff members vote." For example, the entire school voted on contract renewals of all staff regardless of age or role within the community. Also, the community may give staff members feedback on their performance within the community. At the end of the school year, a community vote is taken on whether to offer each staff member employment the following year.

Limitations in the Democratic Process. Like modern democracies, community members dictate acceptable behaviors within the JLC community, which can limit some freedom. Within the JLC, structures are in place to address conflict that may arise due to this limitation. Participant Six gave an example of someone leaving their trash and walking away. He/she stated that a likely consequence would be that the offender would be requested to clean up a table or do other actions that contribute back to the community in a way deemed "fair" by the Judicial Committee, which is made up of fellow community members. According to Participant Five, the community creates the rules through majority rules voting and every community member has a voice in deciding

those policies. Additionally, these rules are enforced by a Judicial Committee, as mentioned by all interview participants. According to Participant Nine, the Judicial Committee is for "rule-breaking, conflict," and "is strictly for rules being broken." All participants mentioned the Judicial committee, often referred to by the term "JC," as being used as a tool that brings the accused and the accuser in front of a panel of peers to discuss the report made and talk through what happened, how it was perceived and if an action should be taken. Half of the participants shared that the goal is for community members to be reminded that they are in a community of people and that their actions impact that community.

The judicial committee's role as both a protector and limitation to democracy is explained on the website as follows, "while School Meeting creates and amends the rules and policies of the school as needed, Judicial Committee (JC) enforces all the rules in the law book." Participant Five mentioned that using a rotating group of students and staff who serve together on JC for one week at a time was similar to "jury duty, and is a rotating requirement of all students, regardless of age or role". According to most participants, JC meets daily to handle the report. When a community member feels that someone has broken a rule, the witnessing member can write up a report and record details of the incident. The JLC website summarizes in the following way, "Empowerment is at the heart of what students learn at our school. Regardless of how the individual expresses it, all students learn to respect their inner urge for justice, responding to the call of the question, If I am not for myself, then who will be?" The data reflects that the goal is restorative more than punitive.

Additionally, corporations, explained by Participant Two as deriving from the Latin term “corpus,” meaning body, reflect a group of community members coming together and appear to form to allow for action by those interested in a common activity or interest. Participant Nine explained that corporations are voluntary groups that form a small community within the larger community, which provides structure around an interest or goal. Corporations differ from clubs or informal groups because there are formal expectations for corporations as outlined in the rulebook. Participating in a corporation includes holding meetings, requesting money, making and maintaining a budget, and regularly organizing a smaller group without formal requests for funds or actions from the school meeting. This choice to be part of a more formal group of people may limit a person’s autonomy if they hold divergent or alternative views to that of the majority of the group.

The data suggested organizational structures are in place to support the democratic processes, both formally and informally within the JLC learning community. From empowering learners to participate in the creation, modification, and questioning of policies and rules to providing them with recourse if they feel wronged, these tenets are built into the rules and structure of the school, as found in all three data sources. However, this judicial process may also limit the voices or actions of students who make up or take a minority stance at the school. All voting, from school meetings, where rules are created and voted on, to the judicial committee of peers who decide whether someone has broken a rule and the severity of a consequence, is done by a majority rules voting system. While the person found at fault can then make a motion or question the

legitimacy of the policy at a future committee meeting, they are still required to follow the consequence decided on by the Judicial committee. While they have the power and freedom within this system to propose change, it appears that they must convince others and win a majority to do so. The ability to join a corporation of like-minded people who may support this regarding specific interests, proposals, or goals gives community members a chance to have a voice among a group of people with similar interests. Freedom to participate in the democratic process appears to be the foundation of the community, with some of the same limitations regarding minority opinions that exist in many democracies worldwide.

Free-Age Mixing Among Children

According to Gray (2011), "In an age-mixed environment, all children have the opportunity to practice being mature—to practice leading, guiding, and caring for others—through their interactions with younger children (p.35)." Within Gray's framework, children learn from both older and younger people in their environment because younger ones try to emulate older children, and older children must break down things in a way that younger children can understand. Thus, the lack of separation by age is a trait of communities that maximizes self-determined learning practices. At the JLC, the community members can determine with what and with whom they want to interact with no limitations based on their age, knowledge, or skill. This age mixing supports people of all ages to engage in behavior without significant age restrictions. It includes youth

and adults interacting in the same spaces, with the same materials, and based on shared interests or intent.

Evidence from the interview data indicates that within the JLC, this educative instinct is present. The subcategories from the interview analysis yielded information in freedom, natural, building, and community limitations. These subcategories are generalized into two areas of interest (a) support for age mixing and (b) limitations to age mixing.

Support for Age Mixing. At the JLC, age-mixing is an important aspect of the school culture. Ages ranged from age 5-18 years of age among enrolled members, however, all people who are enrolled (children) and those who are staff (adults) are considered community members. According to the JLC website, this conveys that age does not determine a person's value or status within the community. Participants believe community members are not segregated by age or generally restricted to age-based activities. Participant Five stated that "age mixing is one of the system's selling points." Learners are free to move, organize, choose whom and what to engage with, and mix genders and ages. The school is not "a whole monoculture," that is "parents and staff…can associate with whomever they wish, not based on age…" Participant Two explained. Community members are free to choose with whom they want to interact without limitations based on age.

Age mixing was mentioned nine times on the website and in four articles on the school's public Facebook page. Interestingly, two articles are based on Gray's research published in Psychology Today magazine. In addition to the articles, the school's

Facebook page features at least 14 pictures of learners performing various functions and activities around the school. The JLC website summarizes aspects of this educative instinct as follows:

> Younger students engage in, sometimes by simply observing, more complex activities. By being around older students, younger students are motivated to take on big challenges, often with the compassionate help of those older students. The younger students gain exposure to more advanced skills and knowledge while learning from diverse role models. Students only a few years older represent ways of being that the younger students can readily play at being.

The quote goes on to state that older students also benefit from being around younger students by getting opportunities to develop leadership and responsibility for others while still being able to play without fear of judgment.

Forms of age mixing mentioned in the interviews included playing, organizing events, clubs, corporations, communicating, gaming, creating, and other self-organizing activities. When discussing the rationale of age mixing, Participant Four summarized, "the whole kind of age mixing idea is that when they ask people who are slightly older and have recently learned this stuff, and they can, they can see that process themselves". The only exception mentioned within the interviews was that of a sex education class, where three Participants stated that the community members decided to segregate based on age. Eight out of 10 interviewees mentioned age mixing as natural and organic. The virtual tour video on the school's Facebook page states, "Age mixing is the magic

ingredient -also, in what work situation are you only working with people of the same age?" Throughout the website and over half of the interviews, the terms "normal" or "natural" were used when discussing age mixing. From the website, "Age-mixing, in addition to normalizing the real-world fact of age diversity, creates an environment in which younger and older students serve to temper the behavior of the other, thereby providing a complementary means to ease into adulthood."

While not a limit, two community rules were mentioned within the interviews that appeared to be an exception to free age mixing. One was an artificial means of mixing ages mentioned by all interviewees, called chore time. According to the rule book, chore time occurs every day around 2 pm, and the chore assignments are randomized. While this is not segregation by age, the involuntary nature of the assignments was an outlier to the age-mixing freedom discussed by Gray. Participant Nine mentioned one reason for this randomization without regard for the choice to age mix, "it kind of, like, gives them a chance to work with somebody for five minutes that they might not have spoken to. And I've seen that things like that have led to people hanging out." In addition, including the entire community at school announcements, which occur at the start of every week, and the requirement that all community members serve on a random, rotating judicial and school meeting committee removes the choice to age mix. Instead, it requires it as part of the community model. These committees include random judicial committees and school meeting assignments that do not consider age.

Limitations to Age Mixing. There are two clear limitations to age mixing within the community. The first is the use of voluntary Corporations. Corporations are formal

groups formed through similar interests or to accomplish a task or meet a desired outcome, such as fundraising, trip planning, or engaging in specific activities like cooking, or music. Members self-organize organically, and sibling interaction is seen to influence this when siblings are present in the community. Members connect based on interest rather than age, and many learners have a core group of friends to whom they gravitate. However, limitations may exist based on the skills or maturity necessary to meaningfully engage.

It was mentioned in four of the interviews that natural grouping does occur in a general, informal way based on age. Participant Three mentioned, "Younger members tend to stay near adults but move further away as they age." The building is three stories inside, and evidence found during the onsite observation substantiates this view. On the first floor, there is evidence of a variety of multipurpose spaces, children's books, and some younger children's toys in a sunroom area just outside the library. The second floor has a wider variety of rooms, including a gym, multiple art spaces, and the judicial committee room, but no evidence of age-specific space. On the third floor, there was a space labeled the "infotarium," described in an interview and during the observational walkthrough as generally considered a teen space. The art on the walls and various art pieces reflects older, angsty cartoons, sculptures, drawings, and conversation styles. The space has a variety of places to sit, and there were several computers of various types within the space as well.

One limit to the natural curiosity and freedom discovered in the analysis of the rulebook was based on age safety requirements on some tools or equipment where a

learner must prove competency to use the item. Seven of the interviewees stated that there were restrictions on some activities due to safety concerns. While nothing specific was found on the website or the school's Facebook page about age restrictions, safety was mentioned as critical several times on the website. The rulebook contained evidence about learners showing competence or receiving training through YouTube videos, a demonstration, or some other form of validation before using various power tools in the workshop, the VR headset equipment, and some kitchen appliances or resources. While this is not age-based, it may appear that way based on general adeptness, with use of things like power tools being generally skill-based.

The freedom from forced age segregation is clearly defined within this community. The naming of it as a foundational belief on the website and discussions held within the community whenever age segregation is considered are two examples of its importance to the community. The interviewees describe the ability of members of this learning community to connect with others on the basis of interest or chosen projects regardless of age as beneficial to older and younger children alike and seen as a significant asset to the school.

Freedom From Bullying

Gray stated that another integral piece to a community that supports self-determined learning is feeling safe to explore and play because the community members feel free from harassment or bullying. Gray stated that "according to anthropologists, the close-knit personal relationships, the age mixing, and the non-competitive, egalitarian ethos of hunter-gatherer cultures worked effectively to prevent serious bullying (Gray,

2009). In addition, "if an older or bigger child seemed to pick on a younger or smaller one, others would quickly stop it." (Gray, 2011). Based on the research, data indicates this educative instinct is present and can be generalized into two main areas. These discussion areas are (a) a shared community definition of bullying (b) how bullying is addressed.

Definition. At the JLC, bullying has been defined in the rulebook as "unwanted, aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance and repeated over time. Examples of power used to bully include but are not limited to physical strength, access to sensitive information, and popularity. Bullying includes but is not limited to making threats, spreading rumors, attacking someone physically or verbally, and excluding someone from a group." According to Participant Nine, the school community has revised this definition several times, and it has evolved as situations have arisen through a process called the school meeting. From the website, "The entire community accepts and cares for its members. They may not all be friends, but a common bond makes each community member feel welcomed and cared about." Based on the interviews and the rulebook, bullying is considered a mistreatment of the community and requires action, and the rule against bullying applies to all community members, including adults. Half of the interviewees mentioned that the freedom of learners to express themselves limits bullying because students feel that they can express themselves without fear. Three of the parents interviewed stated that their children have said they do not need protection because they are empowered and are told that the community accepts their identities. When Participant

Eight asked their child if they were experiencing bullying or teasing, the child responded that they did not experience it and "felt comfortable" at the school.

The freedom within the self-determined model allows members to escape or avoid uncomfortable interactions. The site observation revealed that over 17 different rooms or spaces are freely accessible to community members throughout the school. This allows many options to move to locations to engage, avoid, or explore with other members. One interviewee stated that their child has reported being comfortable, able to express themselves, and open about exploring their identities. Participant Seven explained, "I think the community does a very good job giving the kids the empowerment to say if they're having a problem with somebody." As described by three interviewees, teens can "be teens" and tease each other. However, they can also express themselves when uncomfortable by informal means (stop rule) and formal action, such as writing someone up to the judicial committee. Specifically, the stop rule was mentioned by over half of the interviewees and listed in the rulebook as stating that when someone feels a troubling action is being directed towards them, they may say "stop" and the action must stop.

While no direct posts about bullying were found on the community's Facebook page, anti-bullying messages were observed in other online media. Found within the initial pages of the JLC website are messages such as, "A key component of this model is the acceptance of the individual" and, "We use life itself as our curriculum, and we neither praise nor criticize students' personal choices. We embrace authentic emotions—joy at something delightful, frustration at annoyances—but notions of what is worthy of a student's time come from students themselves, both as individuals and as reflexive

members of a community and the world of resources around them." These statements from the website support the idea that students can explore their identities without fear of bullying.

How Bullying Is Addressed. According to the interviews, most participants stated that if bullying occurs, it is referred to the judicial committee once a report has been made. If bullying is considered egregious or a continuous offense, then the matter is referred to the school meeting, at which time anyone interested can attend and hear about the concerns. School assembly, which includes the school community and interested parents, can recommend more severe consequences of bullying, such as suspension or expulsion, and may require a more than majority vote.

Outside of the formal process of the Judicial Committee referral and community action being taken, over half of the participants stated that conflict resolution is often dealt with informally within the community. The website addresses this as well. "If students' interests clash, adults are not expected to establish a " fair regime." They must work out a solution for themselves (either on their own or through the school's systems for conflict resolution) or face the consequences of inaction." Combined with the formal ways of addressing bullying, the use of peer mediation mentioned on the website and mentioned by all interviewees as a possible way of addressing bullying supports Gray's discussion of forming close-knit personal relationships which appears to prevent severe bullying.

All interviewees indicated that they were not aware of many instances of bullying. There are two other rules found in the rulebook that may align with the no-bullying

policy. They are, “no one may knowingly or negligently infringe on anyone’s right to exist peaceably. This includes loud, profane, irritating, or annoying behavior,” and “Disrupting someone’s activity is prohibited.” These two additional rules in the rulebook support a student’s ability to feel safe to explore without the fear of bullying. Using the Judicial Committee to address what bullying is and how to define and resolve issues supports the “free from bullying” educative instinct.

Free Exchange of Ideas

According to Gray, the free exchange of ideas is the sharing of ideas and views without censorship or fear of being ostracized. He explains, “All ideas are on the table. In this environment, an idea is something to think about and debate, not something to memorize and give feedback on a test (Gray, 2011; p.36).”

Interview participants used common terminology to refer to student freedom at the JLC. Participants used the word “free” to refer to actions which are able to be taken within the school community. Examples included being free to vote, make decisions, choose, argue, ask, be involved, create, leave, exchange ideas, escape, fundraise, voice their opinions, propose, and interact. The website states, “It starts with the individual. This is both the input and output, ultimately, of all schools. Our model starts with a fundamental respect and acceptance for the individual as they are.”

Parents and staff equally discussed the freedom for students to express themselves within the school. Participant Six stated that one thing they liked about the school “is the openness to, and the freedom to follow their passions and explore the things they are interested in.” Similarly, Participant One shared, “The sky’s the limit there” regarding the

focus on self-determination that exists at the school. The website states, “When kids are given the time and space without judgment to pursue their passions, one sees a child fully alive. It is thrilling to witness.” This aligns with the interview statements. Evidence from the interviews indicate this educative instinct is present in two generalizations. The first generalization includes common phrases within the interview analysis of collaboration, freedom, discussion and expression (informal and formal) discussed under the term (a) expression. The second generalization is based on the common phrases of conflict, divergent thinking and majority rules that emerged that are summarized as (b) handling of conflict.

Expression. Freedom to exchange and express ideas requires learners to express themselves to others because of the community structure. This expression includes engaging in conversation, making proposals, advocating for an interest or activity if needed, and participating in the democratic process. Over half of the interviewees mentioned that learners were empowered to act on anything they felt was necessary. Examples include, “If a student has an idea or wants to change something about the school, they come to school meeting…” from Participant 1, “Anyone can propose, they just need to present…”from Participant Five and, “If you have a will, then you will figure out a way,” from Participant nine.

The use of Corporations, voluntary groups that form a small community within the larger community, provide support for various forms of expression. Community members who may feel uncomfortable with outward formal expression, such as putting forth a proposal at school meeting, can connect on a smaller scale with others with

similar ideas who may be willing and interested in doing so. Corporations also provide commonality around a topic, interest, or participation in planning an event, such as a sleepover or trip. As Participant Nine explained, Corporations differ from clubs or informal groups because there are formal expectations for corporations as outlined in the rulebook while also being voluntary.

The rulebook supports the idea of freedom of expression with many rules that seem to protect the individual from harassment or restriction. Two such rules found were, "No one may knowingly or negligently infringe on anyone's right to exist peaceably" and "disrupting someone's activity is prohibited." This belief in expression and autonomy is summarized on the website as well in this explanation when discussing the naming of the school, "Ideas…Everyone has them; Everyone should feel ownership of their own; Everyone can fight for their concept; Everyone should let go of an idea when a better one comes along; And because the world always needs good ones." The website mentions over ten times that students at JLC are given time and space to cultivate ideas and express themselves. "With no curriculum, required academics, no testing, and a daily schedule left up to each student to decide for themselves, students...are free to learn, explore, and reflect at their own pace in a way that works best for them." There appears to be much overlap within the Facebook posts that focus on democracy, freedom to play, and freedom to express. There are approximately 70 posts about the importance and value of freedom of expression found on the public Facebook page of the school. These range from 15 photos of the learners doing something mentioned as play, self-directed, or expressing an idea and nine posts about respecting autonomy in children. Three concepts

in the analysis were the need for students to embrace their agency to act, the importance of collaboration and discussion, and the limits to personal freedom within the community.

Based on the evidence reviewed, enacting change in the community requires effectively expressing ideas to the community via a formal process. However, the five parents interviewed all stated that staff and other students are available to support learners who want to present ideas or understand how to engage in the process. In addition, during the observation, additional forms of expression other than the processes noted above included seven free-write spaces (whiteboard, areas to hang work and write messages) that were spaced out on each floor, giving room for members to express ideas. In addition, open spaces such as driveways and various items found outside, including rocks, pieces of wood, and fences, showed signs of expression. Informal forms of collaboration include play, clubs, gathering in spaces, and other activities throughout the day. Informal can consist of any self-directed peer discussion involving expressing an idea. Formal forms of collaboration include corporations, clubs, and working with others to form proposals or take actions such as fundraising or events. Participant Six states, "If a student has an idea…there is a discussion at a school meeting, school meeting hashes out all the pros and cons and the costs, and it's open to everybody in the school." Similarly, reasons for collaboration that were mentioned were for research, creating a project, making reports to JC, influencing others, sharing a concern, and enriching a learning experience. Formal collaboration also takes the form of group decision-making used to create rules and proposals made at school meetings and on committees that form to accomplish a task. Additional formal expression in the form of discussion comes in

proposing ideas for items to the school meeting, including proposals, motions, committees, offering pro/con reasoning, and other discussions to express an idea to the school meeting or school assembly.

While little evidence was found within the school's public Facebook group that directly mentioned collaboration and discussion, community posts alluded to the value of supporting learners with their ideas, projects, and activities. The website states students will learn skills that "will serve them for the rest of their lives, such as self-guidance, self-motivation, expressing themselves to others, social skills of negotiating and problem-solving with other people within a community." The website states, "In minutes, [community members] can go from rule breakers to rule enforcers to rule makers. They learn to look out for one another and our system as a whole." The website also states that the school design empowers members to find their voice both as individuals and as community members.

Handling Conflict. While all the interviews mentioned "freedom of expression" as a part of the school, it is notable that evidence of limits to expression is found within the interviews, website, and the school's Facebook page. These limits include consequences if boundaries or rules are broken. According to the staff members interviewed, this community considers idea expression natural. Conflict can be assumed with a focus on supporting freedom of expression, and supports are in place for learners to work through this. Participant Two explains, "Mostly the experience of the school is more finding the truth in things than dealing with conflicts. It's rarely someone just coming out with this idea that people are opposed to; usually, someone is like, well, I

don't quite support that idea because of this reason." Members are encouraged to explain, voice ideas, advocate, and respect each other's ideas and viewpoints while discussion and disagreement are accepted. Participant Two mentioned, "So, we provide the structure of the community, and community provides the boundaries that you bump up against when you make decisions and make choices that are not popular or antagonistic." Most conflict appears to be resolved through discussion and support. All interviewed participants mentioned a mediation process for conflict resolution and using a formal judicial committee. One example of a rule in the school rulebook states, "When a School Meeting Member says "stop," it is indicating that the [member] feels harassed or threatened, is not playing a game, and does not wish a troubling action being directed at them to continue. Not stopping after being told to stop is prohibited." Members can have formal conflict resolution through the judicial committee. This process starts with writing a person up, and all parties are invited to explain the conflict to a pre-selected and rotating community group. The committee's decisions are rendered as part of a majority rules process.

Gray (2011) posited that intellectual development occurs best in a setting where ideas are freely shared. Evidence supports that the free expression of ideas is encouraged here through both structural and informal means. A structure of procedures to influence the community allows for expression, debate, and action, as well as the space and freedom to exchange ideas with others freely. Evidence from the observation showed myriad forms of expression and the space to do so while also seeing evidence of the formal procedures (forms, the meeting room, and procedures in the rulebook) that support

that this is a school that puts freedom of expression as a foundational principle within the community.

Access to Equipment and Freedom to Play With That Equipment

Gray (2011) identified that learners could access various tools and equipment to explore and use to maximize self-determined learning opportunities. He stated, "To learn to use the tools of culture, people need access to those tools. Hunter-gatherer children played with knives, digging sticks, bows and arrows, snares, musical instruments, dugout canoes, and other equipment items crucial to their culture" (Gray, 2011). Evidence from the interviews indicates this educative instinct is present. Data were summarized under two major generalizations. The first generalization includes the common phrases found in the interview analysis of free access, people, and internet and general under the term (a) access. The second is based on the common phrases of safety and the shared concepts of natural and free access that emerged through the use of the Hatch method of typological analysis. These will be discussed in the section titled (b) limitation to access.

Access. There needed to be more evidence of limits on access to materials within the grounds of the learning community. A comment made by Participant Nine explained the reason for access in the following way, "That is part of what their education is, is figuring out the resources and the ways because like life is like a Google search." The website supports this belief. "By choosing each step, students own what they know." The site explains that learners explore the world around them in a way that suits them to make

sense of and engage with things they are interested in to both get what they need and learn how to learn.

Several participants mentioned the philosophy of the process to bring in resources that did not already exist in the community. Participant Seven stated, "If a kid, you know, instead of someone running around going like, Hey, isn't everyone interested in chemistry, it's sort of the reverse where a kid says I'd like to learn something about chemistry, or I'm interested in space… what can you tell me and they'll kind of point or suggest or find other kids, or it might come up in school meeting, where a kid would say something like, it would be cool if we had a spacious room or a science room or something like that." Learners can request access to or acquire new materials by proposing a motion using the school meeting forum. Students are also free to fundraise for, purchase, or donate resources to the community. All interviewees mentioned using the school meeting to make requests, submit proposals, or advocate for specific resources. In addition, another resource and tool for problem-solving is the judicial committee which provides access to conflict resolution in a formal means within this learning community.

Resources include people, the internet, and physical materials that are fluid. In addition, students and families can donate resources and ask for additional resources. "Anybody can bring in resource books they want to have available there and submit it through the Library Clerk to be put on a shelf" (Participant Six). While few Facebook posts on the community page that directly discuss using tools or access to them were

found, several pictures were posted over the years of students playing with wood and sticks, in puddles, and using art supplies or instruments.

There was a wide range of accessible materials seen during the site observation. These materials include technology such as desktop computers, iPads, and laptops. However, laptop and iPad access may be limited by the number available. If needed, there is a sign-out system to provide more comprehensive access but with time limits. Creative art supplies are available and were found within a dedicated art room, primarily. However, there were also separate woodworking and music spaces in the carriage house (just to the side of the main building), and chalk, paint, crayons, and other art materials found in other building areas. In addition to the gym and some open space in the basement, there are multiple spaces outside that a member has access to as well. This outside access includes grass yards on all four sides of the building, a parking lot that is closed to cars during the day so that the space can be used, and a large multipurpose yard. Several smaller sets of materials are present, including several piles of wood of various sizes, types, and states of rot, a rope swing, bikes, and a large tent with chairs that are accessible as well.

Resource use is interest-driven within the JLC community. The freedom of access in this self-determined community provides the resources for use if the student chooses. This choice of what resources members will use is summarized in the statement from the website, "students have the freedom and the responsibility to pursue their learning. As they follow their curiosity and interests, they learn related facts and practice useful skills." The reason for accessing resources is to meet a need or attain a goal, such as

using the internet to find an answer. Corporations are used to specialize and increase access to specific equipment, such as in the kitchen, woodshop, and music corporations.

Limitations. During the observation, there were 27 doors within the facility's interior. Only five of these doors were locked (storage in the basement, boiler room, elevator machine room, one art supply closet, and one storage closet door that housed the audio and visual equipment). In addition, the other door that is expected to be locked during use is the single-stall bathroom located on the first floor.

The primary justifications for limiting access to resources were cost, safety, and as deemed necessary by the judicial committee. Restrictions on resource access are placed with the community's permission through the School Meeting process and majority rules voting. Items deemed hard to replace may require proof of the ability to use them, including the Virtual Reality equipment and sound/video equipment.

The JLC rulebook and data obtained from the interviews noted that safety is essential. The website states, "A fundamental attribute for any school is to be safe. Our school provides a safe environment in multiple ways." The community votes using the school meeting forum on all limitations or requirements for use. Based on the interview data, the learners have more access to some resources by becoming part of a particular group that uses them (a corporation: kitchen, music, VR corporation).

Over half of the interviewees made a statement like Participant Two, "There are some areas where we do restrict the use of resources because those resources are dangerous or very expensive or require some knowledge." The items are restricted due to safety, and the community requires that learners take some safety-related measures before

use. This process includes a certification procedure for access to the tool in the workshop. QR codes provided access to YouTube videos and instructions on how to use materials and safety considerations. At the same time, additional sheets listed what a student must demonstrate to gain "certification" to use a tool in the workshop. Examples are hand tool certification, which states that the student must demonstrate proficiency in using screwdrivers, clamps, a handsaw, and bench vice to receive "certification" to use these items independently. Additional limits to access were found during the observation. These limits on freedom of access included the mechanical room and boiler rooms being locked in the basement. The person conducting the walk-through observation explained that access would be provided to view the room's contents, but access is restricted to viewing only with an adult. A student may also have restricted access to an item if they are found to be treating it destructively, according to a ruling from a judicial committee complaint. The rulebook for the school states that the destruction of property is defined as behaving in a manner that is "destructive or excessively rough with the items." This definition limits the freedom to assess the boundaries and abilities of tools; however, the community decided on these limits and is limited in time and scope based on the committee's ruling. For example, the judicial committee limits access to the laptops for one week based on a finding of abusing the laptops by throwing them.

Results from the interviews with the participants demonstrated that there are many avenues for students to access and request resources through informal and formal means. Informal means include asking, seeking help from a friend, or using the internet. Formal means include making proposals, filing a judicial review form, and having a say

in the employment of people that will serve as community members and resources for them. The community decides on what items are restricted, and this designation is subject to review and modification by the community as desired.

Time and Space for Play and Exploration

Gray (2011) states that "time is needed to make friends, play with ideas and materials, experience and overcome boredom, and develop passions." (p. 36). According to Gray, self-education occurs during play, and exploration requires most of a child's time to be unscheduled and unscripted, meaning that they are free and have time to do whatever they choose without much interference from authority figures. Evidence from the interview data indicates that within the JLC, this educative instinct is present. The subcategories from the interview analysis yielded information in freedom, natural, corporations, limitations and rules. These subcategories are generalized into two areas of interest (a) freedom and (b) limitations.

Freedom. Time and space for exploration within the community is considered essential. All the interviewees indicated that they found the freedom provided by the self-determination model a significant component of the school. All parent participants cited the freedom of children to determine the course of their day and activities as a reason they chose this form of schooling. Participant Four explained their view: "You know, I just kind of believe that humans are designed to really kind of explore and learn from that exploration much more than listening to stuff coming in at them." In addition, the two current staff and two adults who were both a parent and staff cited the idea that they believed that the freedom to play and explore are natural forms of learning. Participant

Three states, “I think that kids, and people in general, are learning machines; there’s a natural inclination and tendency to try and understand your environment.” The JLC website clarifies this for potential families and those interested, that “autonomy” is a foundation of the school. The school’s website focuses on freedom for the learner to determine their “path.” “We recognize learning pursued in this manner may not always appear linear, sequential, or useful. By design, the methodology will be unique to the learner. We are convinced this is the hallmark of a deep, personalized, authentic education and the gold standard for our culture.” The site also mentions that self-discipline, respect for self and community, and commitment are a “natural; outcome” of self-determination.

Within the JLC’s public Facebook page, 76 of the posts mentioned the benefits of play and freedom in some way. This was the highest number of posts for any of the identified a priori codes. These posts included pictures of students engaged in activities they decided to participate in, quotes from outside sources about the benefits of freedom or play, and references articles about play or freedom of choice and autonomy for children. This quote comes from a virtual walkthrough video of the school posted to the school’s Facebook page: “Another word for the structure that kids create to learn important things would be...Play…, Or if you saw adults do it, it would be called brainstorming, analyzing, inventing, experimenting, drilling down, or problem-solving. We define play as any activity with no known outcome.” From interview responses there is a foundational belief in giving students the ability to determine what to do with their time at school. Interviewees mentioned that the students had opportunities to develop

friendships, play with ideas and materials, and determine what and how to explore. From a virtual tour of the school, "This video would go on for the next three hours if we tried to describe all the benefits of play: for emotional intelligence; health; creativity, their ability to handle adrenaline and social conflicts; focus and mastery. Children need to play." However, there were two limitations to the freedom to explore found, which the community acknowledges as limitations through the data collected.

Limitations. The interview responses describe several ways students can group up with other community members for various reasons. This includes informal groups such as finding a group of people to play tag or a video game with and forming a club that has no formal authority but is a group of people who may have more expectations based on what they want to accomplish. The third form of group is a corporation. According to the website, "Corporations are groups of [school community members] that are given authority over a specific non-essential sphere of activity (e.g., cooking, electronics, gymnastics, etc.)." The interviews expanded on this definition by explaining that corporations are set up by community members so that they can connect with others with similar interests or goals. However, unlike a club or other group, corporations have requirements and expectations of participation, though a student can leave whenever they choose. The learners within the corporation can vote on what they want to do, how to do it, and how to fund it if needed. Based on the collaborative and group nature of participating in a corporation and the majority rules decision-making process built into the JLC, the students accept a possible limit to their freedom to participate in a collective group.

The community has a digital rulebook that acts as a repository of the over 300 rules that exist within the community. These rules are proposed, created, and voted on by community members, and every community member, regardless of age, has an equal vote. The general process is that a rule proposal or issue is brought before the school community at a weekly community meeting, a discussion occurs, and then a formal vote is taken. That vote is a majority rules vote as determined by the democratic nature of the community and using Roberts Rules of Order as the system of decorum. Because this process of creating and questioning rules that exist within the community, there is an opportunity for community members to create rules that restrict freedom within the community. The community rulebook, which anyone within the community can access via QR codes posted around the community, has several rules that appear to restrict freedom that should have been discussed during the interviews. Some rules in the rulebook include not playing in the bathrooms, not approaching wild animals, not climbing bookshelves, not shining laser pointers in eyes, no bumper chairs, and wearing shoes on the lumber pile.

The three main categories of rules that appear to limit freedom in the rule book are:

- Damaging community property or impacting the community (such as not throwing things out the window, no feet on the windowsill, no using body sprays inside.
- Personal safety (such as wearing shoes when using skateboards, no cars driving into the parking lot during the day, no climbing bookshelves), and;

- Annoyance (using nail polish inside, shining flashlights in people's eyes, or playing ball indoors).

Additionally, there are two times when freedom is limited in a formal capacity. The first is a required chore time which occurs every day at 2.05, and the required attendance at the school meetings for morning announcements on Mondays. In addition, all community members must sign in at a computer on campus as a form of attendance gathering. Since this attendance taking is a requirement, it may also be a minor limiting of choice to play and explore as one wishes, regardless of engaging in a different activity.

Considering that the average school day often occurs from 8 am to 4 pm, Monday through Friday, the limitations on free play in the form of daily chore time, Monday morning announcements, and possible rotations on committees do seem to only minimally impact the amount of time learners spend engaged in free play. The ability to join groups that may grant more significant opportunities to explore, even if it may impact freedom, is also an option for learners. However, several rules in the rulebook restrict the freedom to explore and play based on how the community views your actions. These restrictions could be enforced if the behavior prevents others from freely engaging in their preferred activity or is deemed destructive or unsafe. These would be determined through the school meeting proposal process and be decided on by a majority rule vote. With this in mind, there is a focus on allowing as much freedom as possible while setting boundaries to establish community norms that may restrict some freedoms.

Research Question 2

Assessment is essential to most learning experiences (Black & Wiliam, 1998). However, with the variety of learning that occurs in self-determined learning communities, it is hard to clarify what may qualify as an assessment at the JLC. As Participant Two stated, "Learning, it's invisible." Additionally, since informal learning often occurs without a specific focus on knowledge acquisition, a formal assessment such as a written test would be inappropriate.

Two interview questions focused on understanding the nature of assessment within the learning community. I asked participants to explain what learning looks like at JLC, and I asked how participants knew students were learning. The most common response was that they did not know how the students were learning but knew they were learning because the skills they saw grew over time. The question "How do you know that learners are learning" elicited varying responses from the interviewees. Over half of the interviewees responded, "You don't," or as stated by Participant Two, "What is learning? It's mysterious." Based on the interview responses and additional data, this section will focus on (a) assessments in disciplines such as math, science, and reading and (b) self-assessment.

Assessments in Math/Science/Reading

Within the JLC learning community, math was mentioned as a gateway skill to access things that community members desired more than as a discipline to master or be assessed on. Examples appear in multiple areas within the data. Half of the participants mentioned that community members were learning or using basic math regarding

financial transactions, such as counting money, understanding a budget, or shopping. Two additional participants mentioned basic math skills being used in cooking/baking.

Two participants mentioned math specifically. Participant Two mentioned that despite no formal math class or overt interest in math during their time at the JLC community, they knew of a child that did well once they left the community to attend public schools. “We’ve had math teachers say, Wait, you’ve never taken a math class? How are you able to be in eighth-grade math right now and doing fine, making A’s and B’s and doing well (Participant Two)?” Another participant mentioned that they had a learner who identified one of their “regrets is that [they] didn’t learn math like [they were] never interested in it. But now that [they are] getting ready to take SATs…. I kind of wish I already knew how to do math. I don’t want to have to learn it. But I wish I already knew it (Participant 6).” The website does make it clear that if community members wish to pursue math or other disciplinary education, they are welcome to. The website states the community view that “Children also study advanced mathematics as needed to achieve specific goals. To prepare for college entrance exams, they seek resources for self-study and often find that they can grasp all the material relatively quickly in a few months. They learn to view math as a tool that they can master rather than as a subject to be feared or dreaded for years.” Additionally, five posts reference a “math class” led by a staff member that students requested that showed short videos and lessons on mathematical concepts.

On the JLC website, there is a specific question-and-answer section regarding reading. “We live in a literate society in which reading and writing are necessary skills.

Demanding that these skills are attained on "schedule" creates unnecessary pressure. Allowing children to acquire these skills at their own pace fosters positive attitudes about learning." Over half of the participants stated their children learned to read later than many of their non-JLC peers, but once the child started, learning to read progressed quickly. Two participants mentioned that they were unsure what their child's proficiency was. Another mentioned that their community member had joined a reading group while unable to read, but that they attended the group to hear the book read out loud and eventually had dictated their story ideas to their mother before eventually learning to read and write their ideas on their own at 13 years old. This concept of the evolution of learning being self-determined is also reflected on the JLC website: "Children learn to read on their own. As with any new skill, learning happens when children are interested and motivated, and that journey will be unique for each child. Some children learn to read early, and others learn much later. Once reading starts, it may progress slowly or surprisingly quickly."

Among the resources seen during the observation were books of a wide variety; within the area described as the library were approximately 150 books that ranged from children's books to young adult titles, fiction, and educational and non-fiction books. There appeared to be various children's books in the sunroom off the library and a multipurpose room between the office and kitchen space. In almost every room that was entered, including the kitchen area, there was at least one book seen within the space.

The JLC website states, "Those who pursue a formal academic education do not find their lack of traditional academic preparations a problem. Rather, they find that the

life and general learning skills that they have acquired allow them to master the missing academic pieces quickly, easily, and readily." The website and several posts on the school's Facebook site support the idea that regardless of not having formal assessments, students "have found fulfilling pursuits, from apprenticing and becoming a professional in a trade of choice to attending college on a scholarship." It was also noted on the site and by two staff members that if students want to engage in formal assessments, such as preparing for college entrance exams, taking the SATs, or other tests, they can choose to do so.

Over half of the interviewees mentioned that there were no formal assessments that they were aware of. Three interviewees did not mention formal assessments but stated that there were requirements to prove that some of the tools or equipment could be used, with examples given of the power saws and the virtual reality equipment. These statements were affirmed by the website, which states in several places that while no formal testing is required at the school, students that want to pursue formal testing in areas can do so, including a formal graduation project. Overall, it appears that math and reading opportunities are available to the learners, but not in a formal or measured capacity. As seen in previous areas of the analysis, the opportunity to access a subject like math and reading is available. However, it is reliant on the community member to decide if, how ,and to what extent they wish to pursue it.

Self-Assessment

Informal learning is the process of learning that occurs from daily activities. Informal learning can be unintentional, incidental, or random, with no prescribed intent to

learn (Souto-Otero M., 2021). Based on the data collected, self-assessment is the primary form of assessment within this community. Though no evidence was found of a definition of self-assessment within the community, self-assessment comes in many forms and can include creating a project, improving a project, or simply no longer pursuing a project. The amount of freedom that members have allows for a wide range of self-assessments. There are many opportunities for learners to define their assessments within this community. "[my other child] taught himself everything he knows about computers, through YouTube videos, and friends and connections and tutorials," is how Participant 1 views self-assessment in the digital age. They can choose to engage in something such as a financial literacy class, choose not to interact with people, choose to be bored, choose to take on roles within the community, choose to walk away from something, choose to engage and use tools that may require some safety assessments, and choose to engage in something that may require formal assessment such as the SATs. As explained by Participant Six, "[one child] concluded that he wants to go to college. He wants to learn more about the mechanics of things and how the English language works; I want to take a class and learn from experts in it." Within this system, self-assessment dictates choices about many aspects of how a community member will engage in something. This freedom may look different for every person within the community. Participant Six relays this comment from their child, "I did it right. I don't need anybody to tell me I got an A, B, or C or whatever." This self-assessment aligns with the concept that students can express themselves and pursue interest-driven and self-determined paths at school.

However, community members can give up some freedom to join groups such as clubs, committees, and corporations which may require them to perform tasks up to a confident expectation that allows or is defined by a group of people. However, the member can leave these committees or groups and walk away. As mentioned in the rulebook and by almost all interviewees, the requirement for community members to do chores could also be a form of assessment. Members can be written up if their chores are not done to the community's satisfaction, which becomes a measurement of task completion.

Assessment in most schools could be considered an essential aspect of most learning experiences, and based on the evidence found, this is the case at JLC as well. However, with the freedom and fluid nature of the learning that this community encourages, informal and self-assessments are the most appropriate forms of assessing learning. Because there are few formal tests to pass and few benchmarks, the structures support allowing the learners to determine when they have learned enough to satisfy their needs, desires, or interests. The assessment then is subject to the view of the learners or learning community.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

An essential process within the qualitative analysis is the establishment of trustworthiness to support confidence in the data and process. This study used credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to support the data quality and analysis.

Credibility

To establish credibility within this study, I used a reflexive journal to record my thoughts, reactions, and questions about the data and the process to prevent subjectivity from impacting the study. A reflexive journal allowed me to express potentially biased views throughout the research process to keep these personal views from appearing in and influencing the study. This journal includes my reflections and views on the process and my questions as I continued. Using this throughout the process reflects a conscious acknowledgment of the need to check these potential threats to credibility.

Transferability

Through the study, I explored self-determined practices and assessments only at the JLC. While qualitative studies generally have low transferability (cite someone), I created a detailed description of the data collection process to support the applicability of this study to other groups or settings. I kept detailed records of interactions with participants in the study within an email system. In addition, I created data collection strategies, copious notes, and documents that could be used for replication studies.

Dependability

In this study, dependability was addressed by using triangulation and member checking. Triangulation of data involved using multiple data sources to test the validity of the analyzed interview evidence (Merriam, 2009). This process involved using the themes established from the interview analysis and other data sources, including the school's public Facebook page, website, and site observation data, to comprehensively understand the collected data.

Additionally, member checks were conducted on the interview data. A transcribed copy of the interview as well as an initial summary of the interview analysis was sent to each participant after the interview to establish credibility. The participant was allowed to clarify, amend, and confirm statements made during the interview, allowing for the most accurate reflection of their responses. This process gave me additional validity within the study regarding the interview data.

Confirmability

Considering discrepant statements or outliers to the data and recording them with the rest of the data provided objectivity. Appendix I shows that the data found was included in the collection even if it appeared to be an outlier. The consideration and inclusion of discrepant cases demonstrate the process of considering all data to get the most complete exploration of the learning community. For example, the interview data showed that participants believed there needed to be more formal assessments within the school. However, the rulebook provided several instances where a community member would need to complete a certain task or demonstrate competency to access a space where potentially dangerous items are used. This led to reanalyzing the "formal assessment" subcategory because the researcher realized that they may have applied a biased view of the term "formal assessment" based on their level of expertise.

This consideration was particularly helpful in addressing bias by identifying potential weaknesses and limitations of the study and its methodology. This also helped to frame that the study was about something other than supporting a particular theory, but

instead, discovering and investigating this phenomenon to gather information that added to the existing data, not to prove or disprove it.

Summary

Ten people were interviewed to explore how the learning experiences at the JLC aligned with self-determined learning practices and how the outcomes of the self-determined learning experiences were measured. Parents, staff members, and those who held both roles made up the participant pool. The participants provided valuable information for the study by answering interview questions that pertained to their experience within the JLC. In addition, a site observation was conducted, and documents were collected from online resources, including the school's website, public Facebook page, and YouTube account. Hatch's typological analysis method was used to analyze the data following a 10-step process of analysis.

From the interviews, themes emerged that aligned with the two research questions for this study, and these themes were triangulated with the document and site observation data. Results from the document, observation, and interview data provided insight into the seven areas Gray's educative instincts theory felt were necessary to maximize self-determined learning and better understand the nature of assessment within this learning community. Data from the first research question explored the alignment of the school's policies, procedures, and structure to the seven areas of the educative instincts theory. Generally, it was found that the school policies, procedures, and structures aligned with each of the educative Instincts defined by Gray. The second research question was

focused on understanding the nature of assessment within the JLC. This portion of the study showed that the main form of assessment within this school was self-assessment.

Chapter 4 provided insight into the data collection process, the procedure for data analysis, and evidence of trustworthiness. Chapter 5 will build on this by interpreting the findings, explaining limitations within the study, recommendations for future research, implications of the results, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The extensive use of online and asynchronous learning during the COVID-19 pandemic provided timely justification to explore the value and power of autonomous and self-determined forms of learning. With the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and its continued impacts, many educational institutions have been challenged to rethink how to design the curriculum, provide instruction, and assess the learning in a multitude of situations and environments other than the traditional in-person, teacher-taught model that has been used for many years (Kesson, 2020).

Self-determined learning is defined as the process of knowledge and skill acquisition in which the learner controls the objectives and the means of learning. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to explore how the learning experiences at JLC aligned with self-determined learning practices as defined by Gray (2011) and how the outcomes were measured. The findings from this study could provide insights regarding self-determined learning experiences at the JLC for stakeholders to consider how this type of learning may support learners in their communities.

The first RQ addressed whether critical elements of self-determined learning were present at the JLC using Gray's (2011) educative instincts framework. Gray's seven educative instincts include the following: (a) having unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore, (b) mixing freely with other children of all ages, (c) having access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults, (d) access to culturally relevant tools and equipment, (e) being free to play and explore with those items, (f) being free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate, and (g) being free

from bullying by anyone. Data obtained from parents and staff indicated that the seven educative instincts were present within this community.

The second RQ addressed how learning outcomes within this learning community were measured. Data from participants indicated that learners continually self-assessed their ability to use math and reading. Examples included using math to interact with money as a consumer and in small business-like ventures within the community, as well as pursuing reading to interact online with friends or books/media they are interested in. At the JLC, there was no set curriculum, instruction, or learning outcomes that were designed to be measured; therefore, the data showed that self-assessment drives personal actions and choices about when, how, for how long, and at what level a community member is going to engage in something. The use of the proposal and judicial systems within the community allow the community member to assess actions and practices within the community through a democratic, discussion-based method. The democratic process allows all community members to submit proposals of things they wish to see created, to bring up concerns, and to question existing practices in the member-led school meetings. Actions that community members deem inappropriate can be discussed and addressed with a member-led judicial committee. This committee reviews, assesses, and facilitates corrective actions of the behavior.

Interpretation of the Findings

Learners' Access to Knowledgeable and Caring Adults

Participants reported that the role of staff within the JLC community was to support the natural process of letting curiosity and choice guide the learner's choices.

Adults being accessible aligns with one of the seven educative instincts that Gray (2011) stated maximize self-determined learning. In studies of egalitarian hunter–gatherer tribes, Gray found that children within these communities were free to mingle and interact with adults as children and fellow community members. In short, children had access to a diverse group of adults to learn. The freedom that the adults gave the learners to guide and experience their learning within the JLC, only stepping in when requested, confirms the previous literature on the importance of informal learning (Jeong & Frye, 2020; King & Casimere, 2021; Sim & Xu, 2017; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020). Informal learning is considered by many to be the most natural form of learning because it is experienced as part of an individual's evolution (Boulter, 2016; Efford & Becker, 2017; Jeong & Frye, 2020).

Immersion in a Democratic Community

Data analyzed in this study indicated that tenets of democracy were present within the JLC community in several forms, including the maintenance of a community-authored rulebook, the use of a disciplinary committee of community members to discuss possible violations of the rules, and the practice of giving all members an equal vote in community matters regardless of age or role in the community. These results align with Gray's (2011) research that immersing learners in a democratic community maximizes self-determined learning because learners feel valued. Additionally, previous research showed that when youths are active participants and feel valued in their community, they are more likely to speak from a community perspective (Boroomand, 2018; Golovchin, 2019; Muscatine, 2020; Puente-Díaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2017; B. Riley, 2020). The

participants also noted that at JLC, all community members, including children, are seen as equal members, which benefits the whole community. This confirms findings in the literature that highlighted the benefit of open access between adults and children. As the adults' knowledge and skills are passed down and learned by the younger generation, the younger members reinterpret and modify these skills to adapt to emerging situations and the evolution of the community and culture, thereby preserving and evolving it (Boroomand, 2018; Eskelson, 2020; Gray, 2011; Mpungose, 2020; Nasir et al., 2021; Woodford, 2020).

However, a democratic community also has expectations and rules that limit personal expression. Within the JLC, this includes having community members adhere to a rulebook written and controlled by a democratic process within the community. In community members are viewed to have gone outside of these expectations or rules, they must explain their actions and accept the consequences decided on by a jury of peers at a judicial committee meeting. Although this was not directly discussed in previous literature, the natural boundaries that communities impose upon themselves for protection or to encourage transmission of values and beliefs were discussed in several studies (Eskelson, 2020; Puente-Díaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2017; Woodford, 2020)

Access to Equipment and Freedom to Play With That Equipment

Participant reports and observational data indicated that learners had access to various resources and were given the freedom to play with these resources; however, there were limitations on access, primarily in the interest of safety and determined by the community. These results confirm other studies' findings that learners' curiosity, space,

and interest may lead to children interacting with items without being taught their intended purpose. This allows children to self-determinedly test and interact with the object or situation (Keung & Fung, 2019; Mitra & Dangwal, 2017; Sanchez Tyson, 2019; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020). This access to resources and the freedom to play with equipment in ways that the learner desires was seen by Gray (2011) to maximize self-determined learning. Additionally, research into unschooling methods found that learners in unregulated environments developed self-regulation and self-directed practices in the absence of an assigned structure that allowed the learner to experiment and decide their level of engagement in an activity or with a resource (Boroomand, 2018; Coe, 2017; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Pannone, 2017; Sanchez Tyson, 2019; Yacoubian, 2020; Zhao, 2018).

Within the JLC, however, there were limits on some items or locations observed in the walkthrough of the facility and mentioned by over half of the participants. For example, at the JLC, members should be trained before using equipment that may cause physical harm to users like a bandsaw or miter saw. Expensive equipment such as virtual reality goggles and audio/visual equipment also required training to use safely and responsibly. Although existing literature appeared to support self-determined learning, even when considered potentially risky, community members creating and maintaining these limits by majority vote of the community was equally supported in the existing literature (Coe, 2017; Sanchez Tyson, 2019; Yacoubian, 2020). The existing literature, including Gray's (2011) work, indicated the benefits of democratic environments and ones where the community naturally sets boundaries to support and protect itself. Self-

determined learning allows learners to decide on acceptable situations, adapt to emerging ones, and create a structure that they feel is necessary, as seen in children with time and space to play (Boroomand, 2018; Eskelson, 2020; Fensham-Smith, 2021; Sanchez Tyson, 2019; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020). The community creates rules that create structure and expectations as a system of organization that aligns with children at play (Miller et al., 2018; Nasir et al., 2021; Neuman & Guterman, 2019; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020; Zhao, 2018).

Free-Age Mixing Among Children

Regarding the free mixing of community members, regardless of age, the findings from this study are aligned with previous studies. Based on the evidence found in this study, the free-age mixing of learners is a foundational part of the structure and community at JLC. Previous studies reported on the perceived benefits of the freedom for learners to mix, regardless of age, including that it presents a dual learning opportunity for younger children to learn skills from older children, and for older children to benefit from the opportunity to practice soft skills such as leadership and communication (Bandura, 1997; Mitchell, 2020; B. Riley, 2020; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020). Previous literature also indicated that this process of learning is based on Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory, which states that learning occurs at the edge of what a person already knows and that learning more readily occurs among those within a close age range of the learner (Murphy, 2022).

Through this study, I found some limitations to age mixing occurring naturally within the community, but they appeared to be more about maturity or skill development

than age. This included freedom for community members to form groups to engage in an activity or interest, but not all community members may be able to meaningfully engage based on their level of maturity (which may be age related) or ability to learn a skill, such as how to use a particular kitchen appliance. Vygotsky's theory and recent studies examining the benefits of age mixing indicated that the desire to be part of something a learner cannot access because of limitations is a natural part of development (Gray & Feldman, 2004; Murphy, 2022). Studies of mixed-age groups confirmed that learners will decide to either attain the skill or be part of a group that they are not yet able to access or find an alternative that is more accessible to them, such as finding a different group or asking for help (Gray & Feldman, 2004; Parrott & Cohen, 2021).

Free Exchange of Ideas

Evidence from the collected data indicated multiple ways for community members to express their ideas within the community. These included having a voice in the decisions made within the community through a voting system, the ability to advocate for and propose ideas to the community through a proposal process, and the ability to challenge behavior that a community member feels damages the community. Previous research confirmed that eliminating barriers to the free exchange of ideas enhances a learner's sense of agency and the ability to communicate, negotiate, and reason through concepts of fairness and problem solving (Boroomand, 2018; Fensham-Smith, 2021; Keung & Fung, 2019; King & Casimere, 2021; Williams, 2017).

However, a perceived conflict arises when the desire to support the free exchange of ideas conflicts with the majority rules process and policies inherent in the democratic

structure of the JLC. The JLC uses a majority rules decision-making process regarding all significant decisions that impact the community, including creating, modifying, and eliminating rules. Community members who hold divergent opinions from those of the majority may be subject to rules or expectations that limit the free expression of these opinions or practices because of the nature of this majority rules decision-making process. Although immersion in a democratic community and the free exchange of ideas are considered essential to maximizing the self-determination of learners according to Gray's (2011) educative instinct theory, they are in conflict. Gray discussed the necessity of allowing divergent views to be considered on their own merits as ideas and beliefs that may be more widely held in a free exchange of ideas. However, Gray also confirmed the value of democratic communities by stating that when learners feel valued, they view their perspective from the position of a member of the community as opposed to just an individual speaking for themselves (Boroomand, 2018; Fensham-Smith, 2021; Gaudreau & Brabant, 2021; Puente-Díaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2017; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020).

Freedom From Bullying

Using the evidence obtained, I found that there are clear practices within the community to limit bullying. Such instances include a definition of bullying within the community rulebook and the ability to address instances of bullying via a judicial committee of community members. Additionally, the definition of bullying from the rulebook is in alignment with known definitions of bullying. Research about bullying included identifying what constitutes bullying within the community, and examples of behavior that could be considered bullying. However, the unique situation that was not

found in the literature regarding bullying was that JLC strives to prevent bullying through structures that supports an evolution of evaluation and modification of the definition of bullying and how it is addressed in the community as desired.

This flexibility in the community to question, consider, and modify the definition or the response to bullying aligns with the previous research on the benefits of feeling like a valued member of the community through the ability to express ideas and participate meaningfully in the community (Boroomand, 2018; English et al., 2023; Mitchell, 2020; Plexousakis et al., 2019; Williams, 2017). Previous studies noted that bullying is reduced in mixed-age communities and supported the free exchange of ideas because the community fosters a sense of belonging and the freedom to avoid or address negative situations (Peters, 2021; Slaten et al., 2019).

Time and Space for Play and Exploration

Results from this study indicated that within JLC, the majority of community members' time is unscheduled and unscripted and that there is a variety of settings and an abundance of space for learners to explore with little interference from authority figures. In previous research, Gray (2011) noted that the freedom to play and explore supports a variety of soft skill development through play, seeking out others, experiencing boredom, investigating and playing with objects, and many other experiences. Additional previous research showed that learners given time and space for exploration are driven by curiosity and interest, which leads to discovery and is inherent in self-determined learning (Keung & Fung, 2019; Mitra & Dangwal, 2017; Mpungose, 2020; B. Riley, 2020; Stone, 2016). Further research on unregulated environments showed that the freedom of time and space

encourages learners to experiment and determine the level of engagement in an activity or with a resource (Boroomand, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; B. Riley, 2020; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020; Zhao, 2018).

During the research, some limitations were found regarding both time to explore and the exploration itself. While most of the time within the community is self-determined, there are some instances, such as chore time and weekly meetings, where participation is mandatory. Similarly, while most resources and areas of the JLC are open to all members, there were some areas where either exploration was not allowed due to safety (such as the boiler room) or resources to which community members must be given access to through proving competency of use (VR equipment, power tools). Self-determined learning allows learners to decide on acceptable situations, adapt to emerging ones, and create a structure that they feel is necessary. If a material or item is determined to need access restricted, a proposal, discussion, and vote must occur in which all interested members of the community may participate (Eskelson, 2020; Gruskin & Geher, 2018; Lee et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2018; Zhao, 2018).

Assessment

Evidence from this study reveals that individual community members learn, assess, and refine skills by using them on a functional basis. Examples given by participants included using math to interact with money to purchase or budget and reading to engage in popular discussions about the content of a book or reading text messages from friends. Additionally, the learner determined whether they are satisfied with their ability to use a skill, making the main form of assessment within the JLC self-

assessment. This self-assessment and use of skills are aligned with the existing literature. Previous studies showed that within self-assessment, the learner uses internal means to decide whether they have achieved the goal they set out to achieve, and this can lead to increasing self-efficacy (Hase, 2017; Mohamad Nasri et al., 2021; Rahayu et al., 2021; Riley, 2023; Rudge, 2021). Previous studies also confirm that other individuals may not understand the assessment method because only the individual learner can decide whether they have achieved the goal or assessed their progress. (Burke & Cleaver, 2019; Levin-Gutierrez, 2015). This form of assessment is holistic but largely cannot be standardized because the goals, intentions, and level of engagement are individualized. However, the community members can work together to achieve goals and measure success (Agonács & Matos, 2019; Burke & Cleaver, 2019; Gann & Carpenter, 2018; King & Casimere, 2021; Peters, 2021; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2020). While this may move the assessment from internal to a shared determination of success, the group still self-determines their satisfaction with the progress or results in a way that benefits or meets a goal of the group (Boroomand, 2018; Gray & Feldman, 2004; Puente-Diaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2017).

Findings Related to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is Gray's educative instinct theory (Gray, 2011). In a study by Gray, he identified that some communities have certain practices that he felt maximized the ability for learners to self-determine their own learning. The educative instincts, as he named them, were found in communities that maximized self-determined learning among egalitarian hunter-gatherer bands and at a

democratic, self-directed school named the Sudbury school, in the United States. While Gray used the term self-directed practices in his 2011 research study where he discusses educative instincts, a greater understanding of the concepts he discussed would lead them to be called self-determined practices today. This clarification is important as self-directed learning is a term used within current educational domains to denote learners guiding *some* aspect of their learning within the specifications of a teacher or facilitator driven situation (Hase & Kenyon, 2001; Miller et al., 2018). Therefore, self-determined is the more appropriate name for the type of learning that Gray describes based on previous research into the definition of self-determined learning. According to one definition, self-determined learning occurs when the desire and actions of the learner determine what is investigated, regardless of whether the learning is informal or structured (Kapasi & Grekova, 2017; Kizel, 2016; Mpungose, 2020; Nasir et al., 2021; Souto-Otero, 2021). The main requirement for learning to be self-determined is that the learner controls the learning aspects, including how they learn, what they learn when they learn it, how long they learn it for, and to some extent, what they intend to do with what they have learned (Aguayo et al., 2020; Agonács & Matos, 2019; Fensham-Smith, 2021).

The importance of Gray's work in previous studies (2009, 2011) on a democratic, self-determined learning community and its similarities to egalitarian hunter-gatherer tribes provides the foundation to use the same criteria to explore the JLC democratic learning community. Based on Gray's research, an environment that is maximized for self-determined learning, which was found in hunter-gatherer bands and at the previous school studied—is that young people (a) have unlimited free time and a large amount of

space to play and explore; (b) have an environment where people can mix freely with people of all ages; (c) can interact with people of all ages and have access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults; (d) have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment and can use those items to play and explore; (e) have a community where all people are free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate; (f) a community where all people are free from bullying; and (g) have a community where all people have an authentic voice in the group's decision-making process (Gray, 2011). Data collected from this study indicated that all participants felt these seven criteria were present within the community and supported self-determined learning in most forms.

Limitations of the Study

Four limitations to the findings of this study were noted in the interest of trustworthiness. The first two were previously discussed in early chapters, and the final two emerged as the study was being conducted. The first limitation to trustworthiness within this study was that of transferability. The JLC is a unique phenomenon. Therefore, the results and findings from this study are unique to this community and the degree to which the research results can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings may be limited (Simon & Goes, 2013; Yin, 2015). Using a case study supported the intense exploration of the phenomena of self-determined learning within this context; however, it limits the transferability of the method and steps taken during the study, not the results. While this study focuses on exploring a specific location and therefore has a low possibility of being able to be generalized, the research method applied within this study can be duplicated to study similar self-determined learning communities. To

support the applicability of this study to other groups or settings, I created a detailed description of the data collection process. I kept detailed records of interactions with participants in the study within an email system. In addition, I created collection strategies and documents that could be used for future studies to replicate the types of data collected.

A second limitation addressed in Chapter 1 is the bias of the participants. Participants are vested in the mission and structure of the JLC. Their involvement in the JLC leads to a presumption of bias because they believe the community is self-directed and that learning does occur in the space. This belief that specific actions are occurring can lead to positivity bias among participants (Merriam, 2009). The researcher addressed this by asking follow-up questions and asking the participants to explain their answers further. In addition, while the JLC community is a non-traditional community, a certain amount of social desirability bias may be present from the participants because they were told that the researcher's motivations were to understand this community better. This may lead to a desire to "paint a rosy picture" of the community to support their chosen community. To address this, research questions were phrased to validate participant responses (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

The third limitation to trustworthiness is the small sample size. Due to the small and singular nature of the community studied, there was a small sample population size for the study. A pool of approximately 60 participants was possible among the parents and staff. Of those 60, approximately 21 showed interest in participation, 14 provided consent documents, and 10 participated in the study. This small sample size means that a

wider variety of responses that may have allowed further exploration were unavailable; therefore, the breadth of the study is a limitation because less than 20% of the population participated. Similar answers were seen throughout the interviews, and by interview eight of ten, I believed they had reached saturation due to the sameness of the responses.

The final limitation not previously addressed or anticipated was the decision to focus on something other than the (JLC) model. While the school's mission is grounded in the Sudbury model, community members also state on the school's website that reference to this model is a self-declaration, and no accreditation is needed. In reading about the Sudbury model on the website and watching the informational videos about the model on the school's YouTube channel, I decided not to include this information as a focus. These factors limit the study because I am choosing to leave out a piece of data that has supported and guided the creation of the community, which could give insight into the decisions made at the start of the learning community. While the Sudbury model provides a framework for many JLC systems, the school community oversees the decision-making process. The school community was founded on the Sudbury model principles, now operates as a democratic learning community that does not require members to adhere to any particular ideology.

Recommendations

The results of this study represent the perception of adults within the community concerning the self-determined learning environment at the JLC. Interestingly, participants named age mixing, participation in a democratic community, and the ability of community members to determine their daily paths as reasons why they find the

community beneficial. The findings indicated that of the seven educative instincts that maximize self-determined learning communities as defined by Gray (2011), all were present within the community. The findings support the declaration on the website, which states that school structure is "centered around three components: the individual, the community, and democratic justice."

Within the investigation, a participant noted that approximately 200 families had been part of this school community but had left for other learning opportunities. Information provided from interviews indicated that possible reasons why some learners do not stay within the community include boredom, the small size of the school, lack of friends, or desire for more concrete academic success. Based on the findings of this current study, one recommendation for future research would be to investigate what about the community did not work for those community members that left after participating in it. Reviewing this information and understanding why some learners and their families choose to leave a self-determined learning community may help understand the benefits and drawbacks of the community from the viewpoint of someone not in the community.

Additionally, exploring other non-traditional learning communities or environments may be prudent to increase what is known about other models or approaches to learning. By investigating marginalized or lesser-known ways of learning, stakeholders can increase the amount of information known and better understand possible applications within educational settings such as formal learning models like modern public schools and less formal settings such as home or unschooling

environments. In addition, aspects of self-determined learning may already exist in more formal educational settings such as traditional public schools. Using Gray's educative instincts model to assess if practices that maximize self-determined learning are already present within schools may provide stakeholders with information to make this form of learning accessible to students who desire to learn this way.

Another recommendation for future research is to investigate the perceptions of students who attend the JLC. While all members of the JLC have equitable status, for this study, only adults over 18 years of age were asked to participate. Since this study reviewed the perceptions of parents and staff, it is naturally biased by the perception of adults who experience the community as either adult staff or parents with limited involvement because they are not daily community members. Understanding the perceptions of the learning community itself could be beneficial to understand how the youth of the community experience, use, and interact with the educative instinct criteria that maximize self-determined learning.

There were specific criteria within the educative instincts theory that could also be further explored in this community, or ones similar. Gray (2011) stated that to maximize self-determined learning, learners should "have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment" and can use those items to play and explore. An area for further exploration would be to understand what method or criteria is used to determine whether a tool is culturally relevant. Within this study, the cultural make up the learners is not known or defined so it was not studied. Further research could include exploring what defines a

tool as culturally relevant, how and if a tools relevancy is assessed, who is making this determination and the impact on the community.

There was also a conflict within the educative instinct model itself that can be further explored. Gray identifies, "immersion in a democratic community," and "freedom to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate," as practices that maximize self-determined learning. While the actual educative instinct Gray refers to in his 2011 study on educative instincts is a "true voice in the group's decision-making process," he posited that this could best be accomplished in a democratic environment. Evidence of both being present at the JLC were found, however, the freedom to express and debate appears to be restricted within this community because of the majority rules nature of democratic practice. It would be assumed that a common consideration for stakeholders in most schools of youth would be determining how to balance the support of growth of identity with adherence to boundaries and expectations. Therefore, further exploring this issue in a self-determined learning community may identify similarities and differences that add to the understanding of how to both support expression of divergent or unpopular opinions and thoughts while also supporting the tenets of democratic policies which often limit the expression of minority opinions because of its focus on majority rules voting. Further research to examine how the tension between immersion in a democratic community and expression of ideas in a self-determined learning community resolve may yield information on how boundaries are created and enforced and the logic for doing so.

Implications

One potential for social change concerns the definition of learning as applied to the education systems in the United States. Within this study, participants indicated that self-assessment is a valuable measure of learning within their school, and this could be valuable insight for learning institutions and models that use primarily formal testing or assessments. In addition, the primary learning mode within this self-determined learning community is informal and self-determined. In the modern education system in the United States, benchmarks, standardized measures, and scaffolded learning plans, along with formative and summative assessments, are widely used as part of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment triad which is used within many public schools in the country. The opportunities seen within this community for learners to determine when they are satisfied with their knowledge on a topic is worth considering because it aligns with the freedom of adults in our society to do the same. Within this community, there is a focus on "life as curriculum," and in so doing, students can stop and start projects, start and leave groups, and determine when they are ready to move on from a topic, similar to the freedom that adults experience. This could mean that as a society we start seeing the value of multiple options to support learners. Many districts within the United States already provide "alternative models" such as technical high schools and magnet schools that support learning opportunities outside of "traditional public school" models. A model of self-determined learning would be another option where learners could use their natural curiosity to explore, create, and innovate.

Another potential for social change comes from the data regarding the democratic environment within this learning community. The modern education system in the United States has focused on individual merits and performance through individual grades, standardized test scores, and ranking systems. Within JLC, the community members decide on the community's standards. While individuality is supported, there is a focus on the concept that individual actions impact the community, which supports social solidarity and responsibility. The concept that learning communities themselves can determine their standards could change the adult-led structures of many schools where decisions regarding what to learn, how to teach the information, and how to assess the information are decided outside of the community experiencing the product of this. Aligning with Freire's critical pedagogy theory, the skills embedded within self-determining learning practices support the natural examining of the power structures and equity of decisions made within the JLC and prepare learners to participate in American democracy.

Using Gray's educative instinct theory as a conceptual framework provided a way of exploring self-determined learning without defining it. Gray's seminal work that presented this theory referenced that these seven practices maximized the development of self-determined learning, not that they all had to be present for self-determined learning to occur. The educative instincts provide a foundation to look at various environments through a lens of self-determined learning. This sharing of information and space as a community is appropriate to note when considering recommendations for future practice based on the findings of this study.

Conclusion

Learning is part of being human, or as the Latin phrase goes, vivere est discere "to live is to learn." The introduction of digital technology has made learning more accessible than ever before. No longer are people reliant on the knowledge of their elders, their library, or other historical sources of learning; instead, they have nearly instant access to information. This makes focusing on democracy and communities important as places where that knowledge can be given context, tested, applied, and shared. The research by Peter Gray reflects that egalitarian and self-determined learning is not new but can be applied to the new means of learning provided by the digital age.

Learning communities like the JLC reflect that groups can come together from diverse backgrounds to form working communities based on mutual interests and operate in common space. This leads me to wonder what learning communities and "schools" of the future could look like if they operated on principles similar to those found in self-determined learning communities. Imagine a once-defunct mall that is now a learning hub where people of all ages can go and learn from each other. Empty spaces are now full of machines and new technology to be shared and used by community members. On the second floor, the former storefronts are full of people sharing space, working on ideas, playing games, or joining a formal class to attain a certificate or credit. This could be the future of education that is not based on "school" but on the learning that can come from the community and from our own innate curiosity.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Hello!

Hi, my name is Kelly Woodard, and I am a doctoral candidate with the Walden University School of Education. The purpose of the study is to learn about the self-determined practices (learning on our own) within this learning community and to better understand how learning is assessed within this community (how we know that learners are learning). I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel so please know that there are no right or wrong or desirable and undesirable answers.

If you consent to be interviewed, everything you say will remain confidential, meaning that only I will be aware of your answers. I will be audio recording our conversation since it is hard for me to write down everything while simultaneously carrying on and engaging in our conversation with you.

Below is a list of the questions that I will be asking. Please know that these serve as places to start to learn more about this learning community and its practices and that in many cases, there may be follow up questions based on your responses. At any point in time, you may stop the interview or choose to withdraw from the interview. Please feel free to ask any clarifying questions and stop me at any time.

Questions that you will be asked:

1. Please explain how learners and their families choose what learning to engage in here.
2. Please explain what learning looks like here.
3. How do you know they are learning?
4. Please tell me about how students are grouped, or how they find themselves to be in certain groups, classes, or experiences. What guides

this?

5. If learners need assistance with something, to whom do they go? How do they know who to go to? Is there a set procedure to do this?

6. Please explain to me some of the resources available to people here. How do families choose what resources to use? How do they access them?

7. Please explain to me how decisions are made within this learning community? Consider first regarding the families as a group, then in terms of procedures and curriculum choices.

8. Please explain to me how families express their ideas to the community. How do families express and or discuss or debate ideas?

9. Please explain to me what happens if conflicts arise within the community specifically, regarding bullying.

10. What are some essential practices you feel are necessary for success within this learning community?

11. Please describe some of the activities that you have been involved with here.

Appendix B: Document Collection

Date	
Short title for document	
Type of document	
Location of document	
Summary of document	
Notes pertaining to Research Question #1 How do the self-determined learning practices within the Journey Learning Community align with Gray's Educative Instincts?	
Notes pertaining to Research Question #2 In what ways does the Journey Learning Community measure or assess learning	

outcomes produced by the self-determined learning practices?	
Additional Notes: Possible follow up, next steps, other avenues from this evidence	

Appendix C: Observation Checklist

Question	Answer	Evidence
Is there evidence in the space that learners have unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore (a)		
Is there evidence in the space that learners can mix freely with other children of all ages (b)		
Is there evidence in the space that learners have access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults (c)		
Is there evidence in the space that learners have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment and are free to play and explore with those items (d)		
Is there evidence in the space that learners are free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate (e)		

Is there evidence in the space that learners are free from bullying (which includes freedom from being ordered around arbitrarily by adults) (f)		
Is there evidence in the space that learners are given a voice in the group's decision-making process (g).		
Other observations:		

Appendix D: Research Question Alignment

	Research Question #1: How do the self-determined learning practices within the Journey Learning Community align with Gray's Educative Instincts?	Research Question #2: In what ways does the Journey Learning Community measure or assess learning outcomes produced by the self-determined learning practices?
Document Based Evidence	Documents collected: • Documents pertaining to the design of the building including documents that may explain the reasoning, rational and voiced intent of the design of the physical space. • Documents that outline the goals of the community including meeting minutes, plans, schematics, narratives of the purpose and design of the learning community. • Literature and documentation regarding the practices of curriculum design to analyze for evidence of self-determined practices • Documents pertaining to the choice of the curriculum and syllabi including created or pre-designed curriculum, outlines, pacing guides and other related materials to analyze	Documents collected: • Literature and documentation regarding the practices of curriculum design including outlines, strategy memos, design outlines, pacing and sequence guides and similar items that show a progression of design to a set of information to be taught or made access to learners. • Documents pertaining to the origins of the curriculum (created or used from an outside source) such program sites, textbooks, syllabi, curriculum guides, outlines, and similar items. • Documents pertaining to and including syllabi to explore the design of curriculum, instruction and assessment

	for evidence of self-determined practices • Documents that demonstrate the instructional strategies of the instructors such as lists of policies, rules, expectations to analyze for evidence of the incorporation or design to support self-determined practices • Any documents related to created syllabi to analyze for evidence of self-determined practices • Any documents related to assessments such as outlines, study guides, project outlines or formative/summative assessment criteria to explore how they align to self-determined practices	• Documents pertaining to and including assessments to understand how they are assessing progress or other benchmarks regarding learning.
Source	Multiple sources include online databases, notes and meeting minutes sent, advertising, documents posted in online classrooms, posted within the physical space and observations of the facility itself.	Multiple sources include online databases, notes and meeting minutes sent, advertising, documents posted in online classrooms, posted within the physical space and observations of the facility itself.
Frequency	Multiple online searches and review of documents	Multiple online searches and review of documents
Duration	10-20 hours	10-20 hours

Method of recording	Checklist database aligned to the research question	Checklist database aligned to the research question
Follow up protocol if needed	Re-access of the data collection site and access to materials.	Re-access of the data collection site and access to materials.
Related Interview Questions	Related Interview Questions • Please explain how learners and their families choose what learning to engage in here. • Please explain what learning looks like here. • How do you know they are learning? • Please tell me about how students are grouped, or how they find themselves to be in certain groups, classes, or experiences. What guides this? • If learners need assistance with something, who do they go to? How do they know who to go to? Is there a set procedure to do this? • Please explain to me some of the resources available to people here. How do families choose what resources to use? How do they access them?	Related Interview Questions • Please explain how learners and their families choose what learning to engage in here. • Please explain what learning looks like here. • How do you know they are learning? • What are some essential practices you feel are necessary for success within this learning community? • Please describe some of the activities that you have been involved with here. • Please tell me about how students are grouped, or how they find themselves to be in certain groups, classes or experiences. What guides this? • If learners need assistance with something, to whom do they go? How

	• Please explain to me how decisions are made within this learning community? Consider first regarding the families as a group, then in terms of procedures and curriculum choices. • Please explain to me how families express their ideas to the community. How do families express and or discuss or debate ideas? • What are some essential practices you feel are necessary for success within this learning community? Please describe some of the activities that you have been involved with here. • Please explain to me what happens if conflicts arise within the community specifically regarding bullying.	do they know who to go to? Is there a set procedure to do this? • Please explain to me some of the resources available to people here. How do families choose what resources to use? How do they access them? • Please explain to me how decisions are made within this learning community? Consider first regarding the families as a group, then in terms of procedures and curriculum choices.
Source	University of Michigan's Center for Socially Engaged Design (2019) semi-structured interview protocol	University of Michigan's Center for Socially Engaged Design (2019) semi-structured interview protocol
Frequency	1 time per participant	1 time per participant
Duration	1.5 hours	1.5 hours
Method of recording	Zoom recording of audio only and transcription of audio	Zoom recording of audio only and transcription of audio

Follow up protocol if needed	Interviews will be transcribed and provided to each participant. The participant is informed that they may be asked clarifying questions and be able to identify additional information and corrections as part of the member checking process.	Interviews will be transcribed and provided to each participant. The participant is informed that they may be asked clarifying questions and be able to identify additional information and corrections as part of the member checking process.

Appendix E: Letter of Cooperation

To: Walden University IRB Office
100 S Washington Ave #900
Minneapolis, MN 55401

Hello,

The purpose of this memorandum is to confirm that *:name redacted:* has spoken with the Journey Learning Community, and they have given Kelly Woodard, doctoral candidate at Walden University, permission to recruit study participants for the study, "Investigating educative instincts in a self-determined learning community." We understand that this exploratory case study's purpose is to explore the learning community's self-determined practices.

Kelly Woodard will recruit adult subjects to be interviewed, observe the physical space, and collect copies of documents within and about the learning community. Those participants who agree to join the study will be provided a consent via email or physical copy. Kelly Woodard has permission to do the following to obtain data:

Interviews- Conduct 1:1, private interviews using online software such as ZOOM with up to fifteen adults who influence or are involved with learning within the learning community. The Interviews will take no more than 1 hour and the data will be anonymous within the study.

Documents-Collect documents pertaining to the practices, intent, design and curriculum, instructional methods, and assessments within the learning community. You have agreed to grant me access to the programs and access points that learners and designers within the community use to convey, access, and use learning tools as well.

Observations- Walk through the grounds, buildings of the learning community to better understand how the space is set up and designed. This will be done with 1 to 2 staff members at a time when learners are not present.

Should the Walden Institutional Review Board have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Regards,

Information redacted in compliance with the Consent Document

Appendix F: Initial Message

Hello!

My name is Kelly Woodard, and I am a doctoral candidate within the school of Education at Walden University. I am conducting a study within your learning community titled: Investigating Gray's Educative Instincts within a Self-determined Learning Community. The aim is to explore self-determined practices (self-determined means learning on your own) within this community so that we can better understand how these are used in the community and the methods used to measure learning.

To participate, you need to be an adult who is involved with facilitating learning, supporting learning or who has a learner within this community. This may include the founder, members of the board of directors, parents of learners, staff and adults who have or currently come in to facilitate learning as part of the community or who have been involved with any aspect of developing, leading, supporting, organizing, hiring, or facilitating an aspect of learning.

If you meet these criteria and would like to participate in the study, please click the link below to be taken to the informed consent document and learn more about the study. When you sign and include your contact information, then I will reach out within 5 days and provide next steps. If more participants than are needed meet the qualifications, then participants will be randomly selected by me.

Please note that there is no compensation for participating in this study. However, your participation will be valuable to increase our understanding of self-determined practices within a self-determined learning community such as this one.

Thank you!

Kelly Woodard
Walden University Doctoral Candidate
Kelly.Woodard@waldenu.edu

Appendix G: Interview Protocol Alignment

Research question	Interview question
Research Question #1: In what ways does the Journey Learning Community measure or assess learning outcomes produced by the self-determined learning practices?	• Please explain how learners and their families choose what learning to engage in here. • Please explain what learning looks like here. • How do you know they are learning?
Research Question #2: How do the self-determined learning practices within the Journey Learning Community align with Gray's Educative Instincts?	• Please explain what learning looks like at the JLC *E.I (1)- children have unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore;* • Please tell me about how students are grouped, or how they are assigned to be in certain groups, classes or experiences. What guides this? *E.I. (2) can mix freely with other children of all ages;* • If learners need assistance with something, to whom do they go? How do they know who to go to? Is there a set procedure to do this? *E.I -(3) have access to a variety of knowledgeable and caring adults;* • Please explain to me some of the resources available to people here. How do families choose what resources to use?

	How do they access them? *E.I -(4) have access to culturally relevant tools and equipment and are free to play and explore with those items;* • Please explain to me how decisions are made within this learning community? Consider first regarding the families as a group, then in terms of procedures and curriculum choices. *E.I - (5) have a true voice in the group's decision-making process.* • Please explain to me how families express their ideas to the community. How do families express and or discuss or debate ideas? *E.I - (6) are free to express and debate any ideas that they wish to express and debate;* • Please explain to me what happens if conflicts arise within the community specifically regarding bullying. *E.I - (7) are free from bullying from anyone*
Pertaining directly to both research questions:	• What are some essential practices you feel are necessary for success within this learning community? • Please describe some of the activities that you have been involved with here.

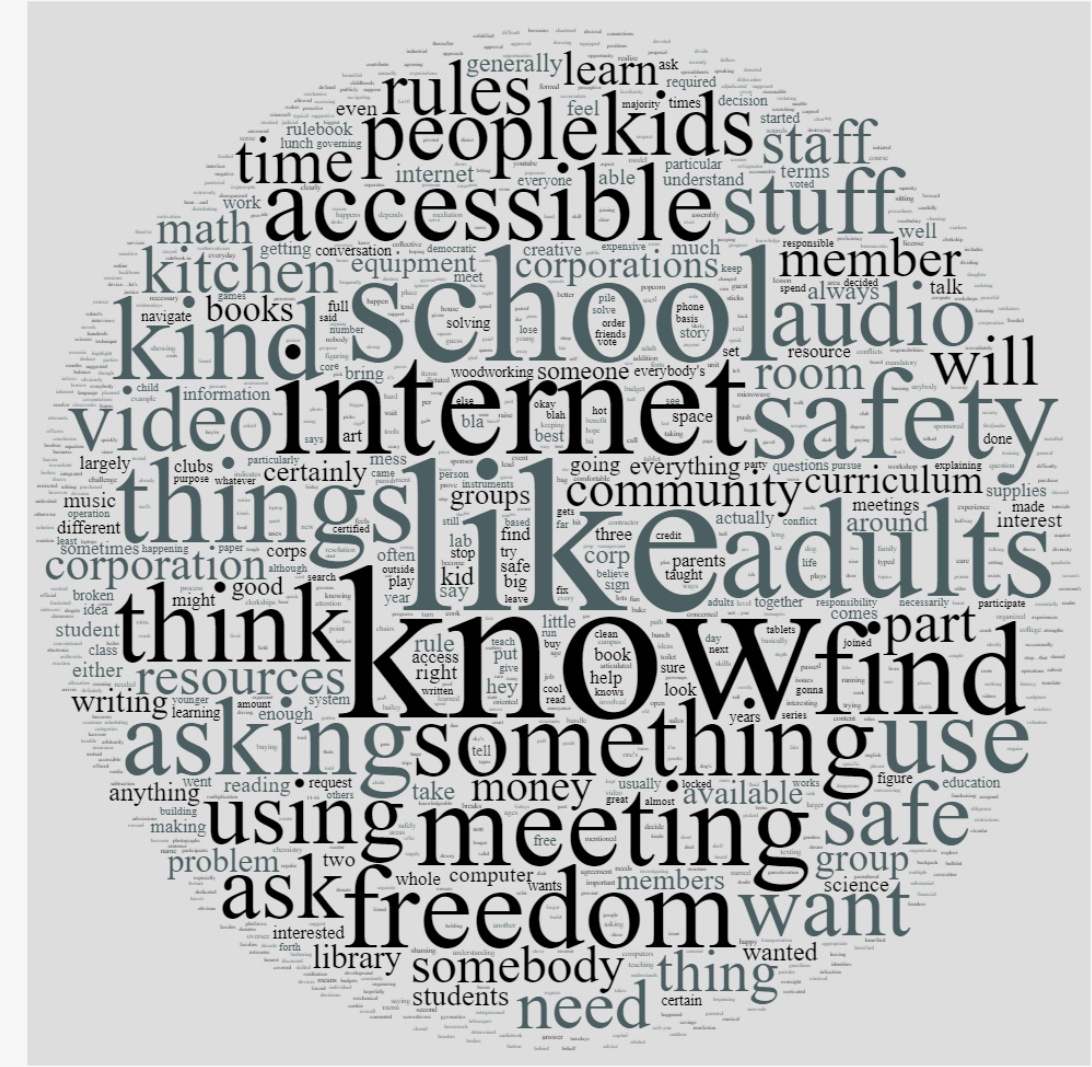
Appendix H: A Priori Codes and Subcategories From Interview Data

Categories of a priori codes	Subcategory codes based on interview data
Time and Space for Play and Exploration	rules, corporations, freedom, natural, locked doors, rules, signing in/out, limitations
Free Age Mixing Among Children	helping, freedom, adults, natural, building community limitations, skill development
Access to Knowledgeable and Caring Adults	whoever is closest, seeking a specific adult, seeking access to a resource, adult-led help, trust, freedom, natural accessibility
Free Exchange of Ideas	discussion, creativity, collaboration, conflict, divergent thinking, majority rules, judicial committee, freedom, trust, value, formal expression, informal expression, fluid, skill development
Freedom from Bullying	addressed by an adult, learner addressed, mutual respect, freedom to express self, community defined, evolving definition, not aware of instances of bullying, protection of the community, levels of resolution
Access to Equipment and Freedom to Play with that equipment	access, equipment, materials, play, freedom of access, limits of access
Immersion in a Democratic Community	voice valued, communicate action, an equal voice in decision making, skills to participate in democracy, voting, democracy, judicial committee, limits on voice
Assessment	standardized, formal, informal, self-assessment, competence, capable, members of society, problem-solving, ability to conversate, ability to interact, life as assessment, undefined, reading, math, later than others, stigma, deficit, freedom, productive, happy/fulfilled

Appendix I: Word Clouds

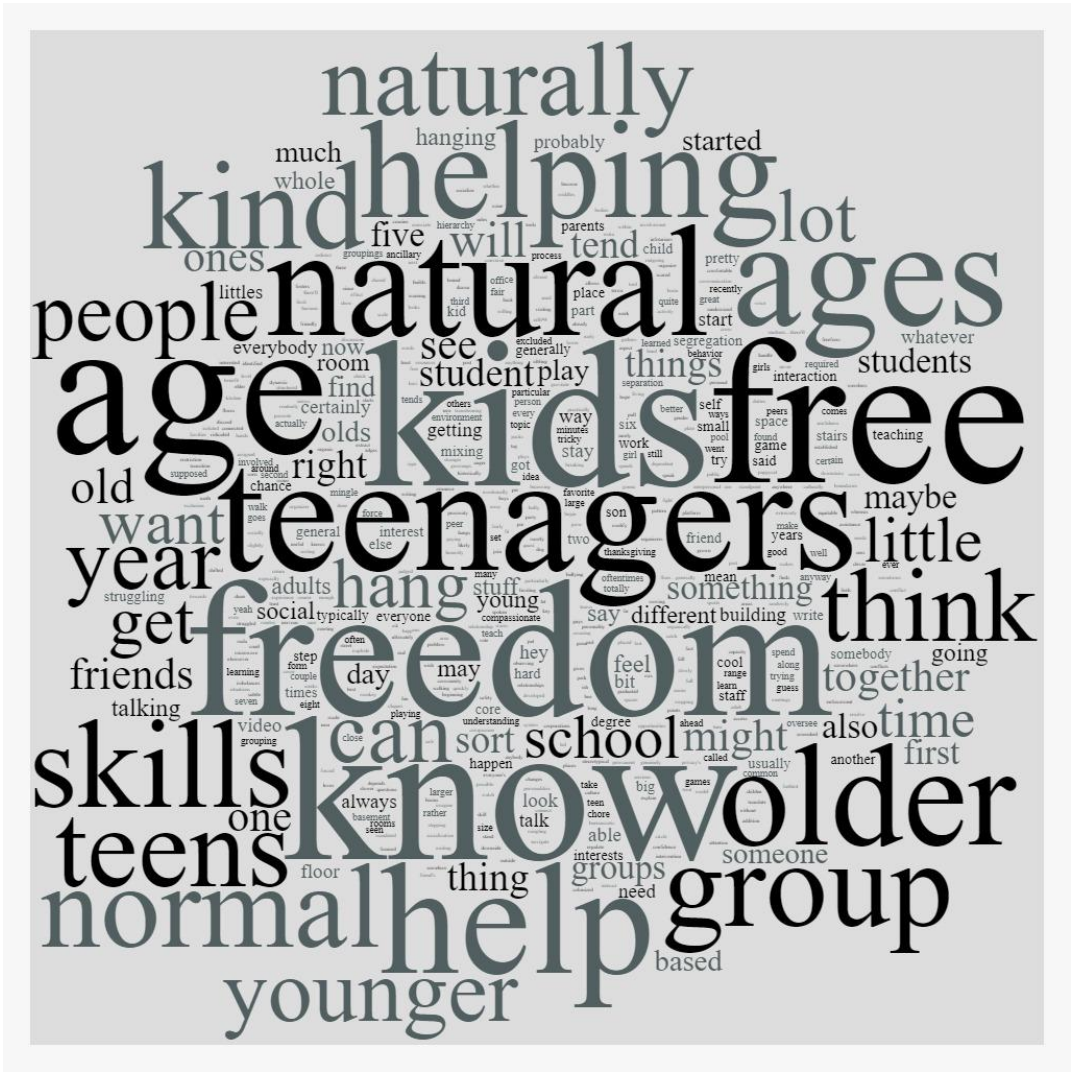
Word cloud for the “have unlimited free time and much space in which to play and explore” educative instinct a priori code (research question #1)

Word cloud for the “Access to Equipment and Freedom to Play with that Equipment” Educative Instinct a priori code (research question #1)

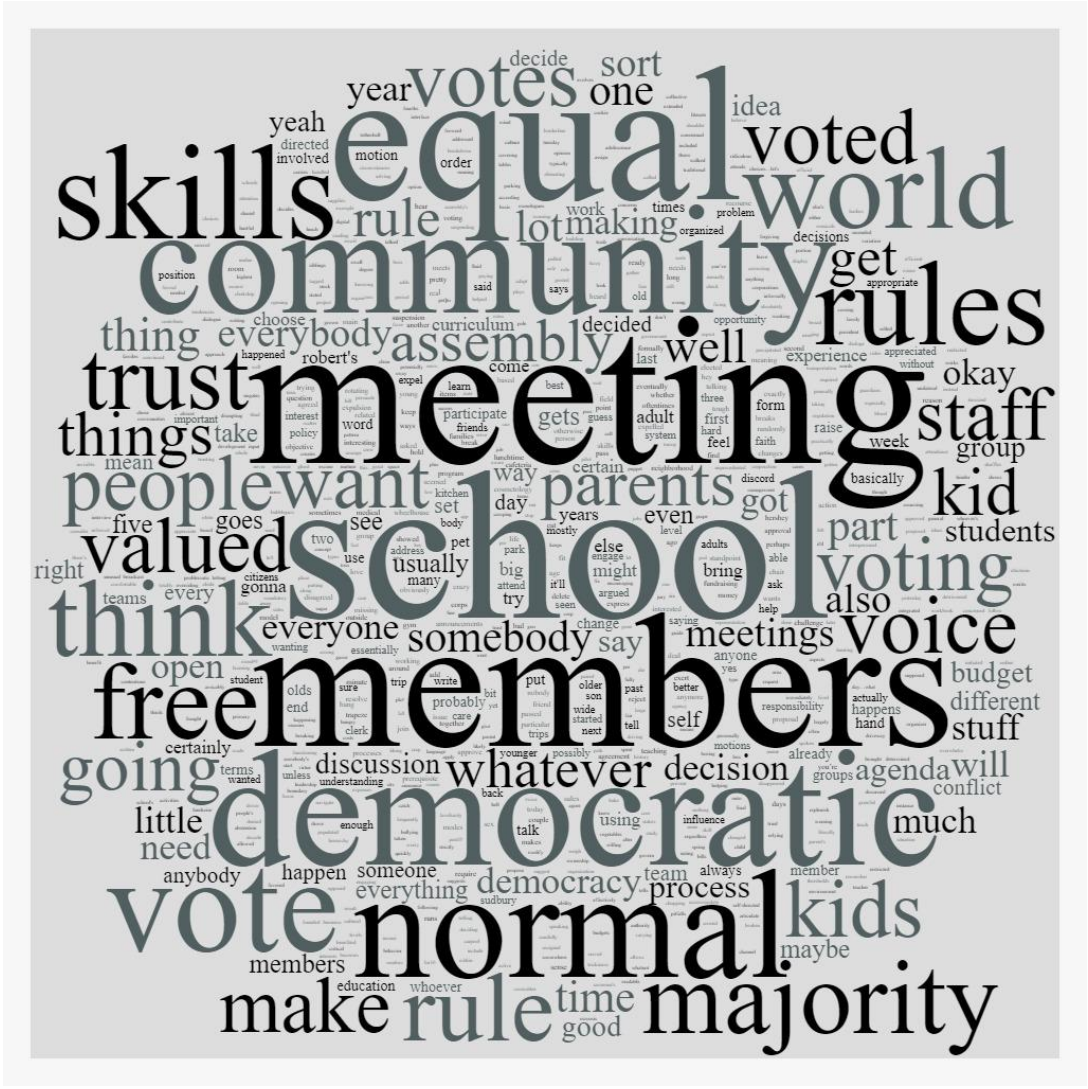


Word cloud for the “Freedom from Bullying” Educative Instinct a priori code (research question #1)

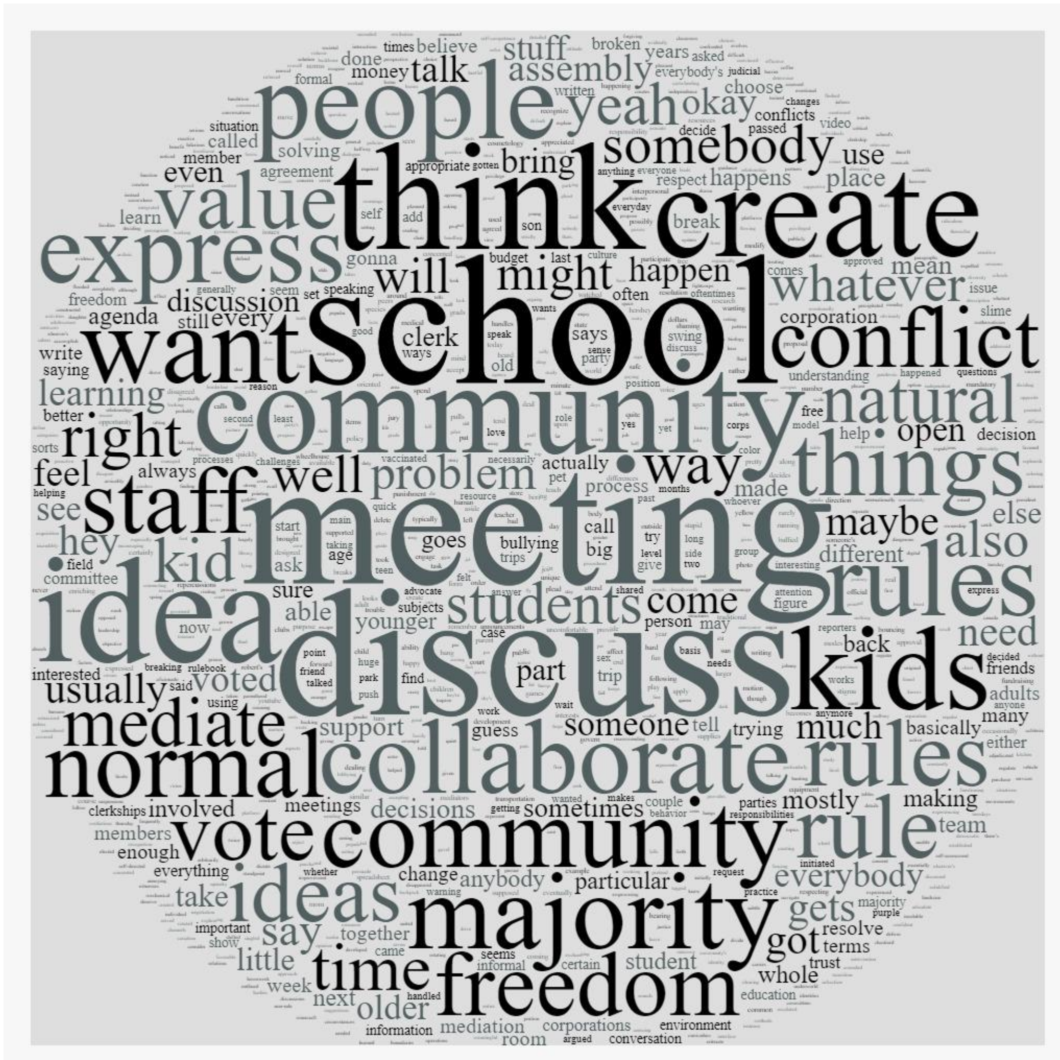
Word cloud for the “Free Age Mixing Among Children” Educative Instinct a priori code (research question #1)



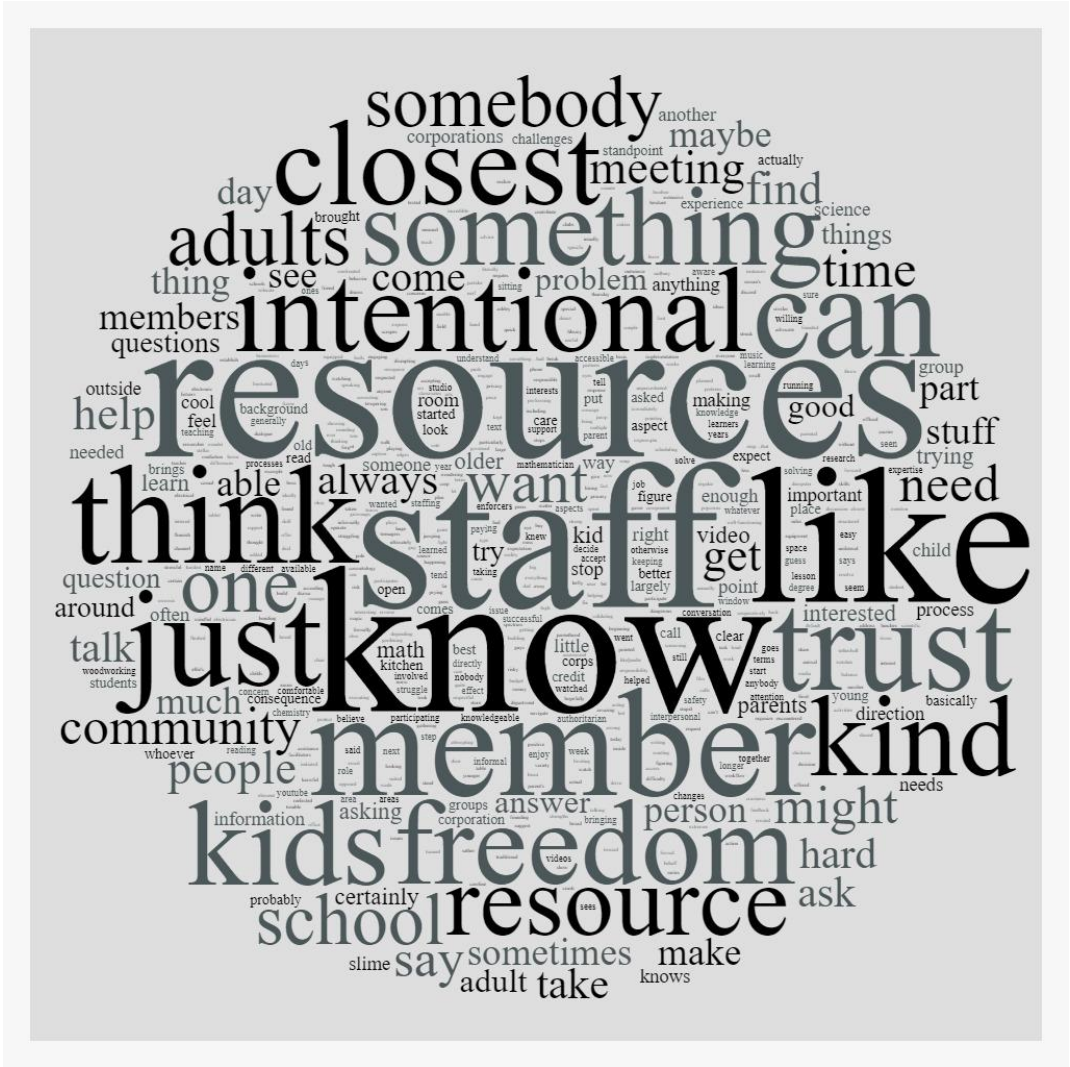
Word cloud for the “Immersion in a Democratic Community” Educative Instinct a priori code (research question #1)



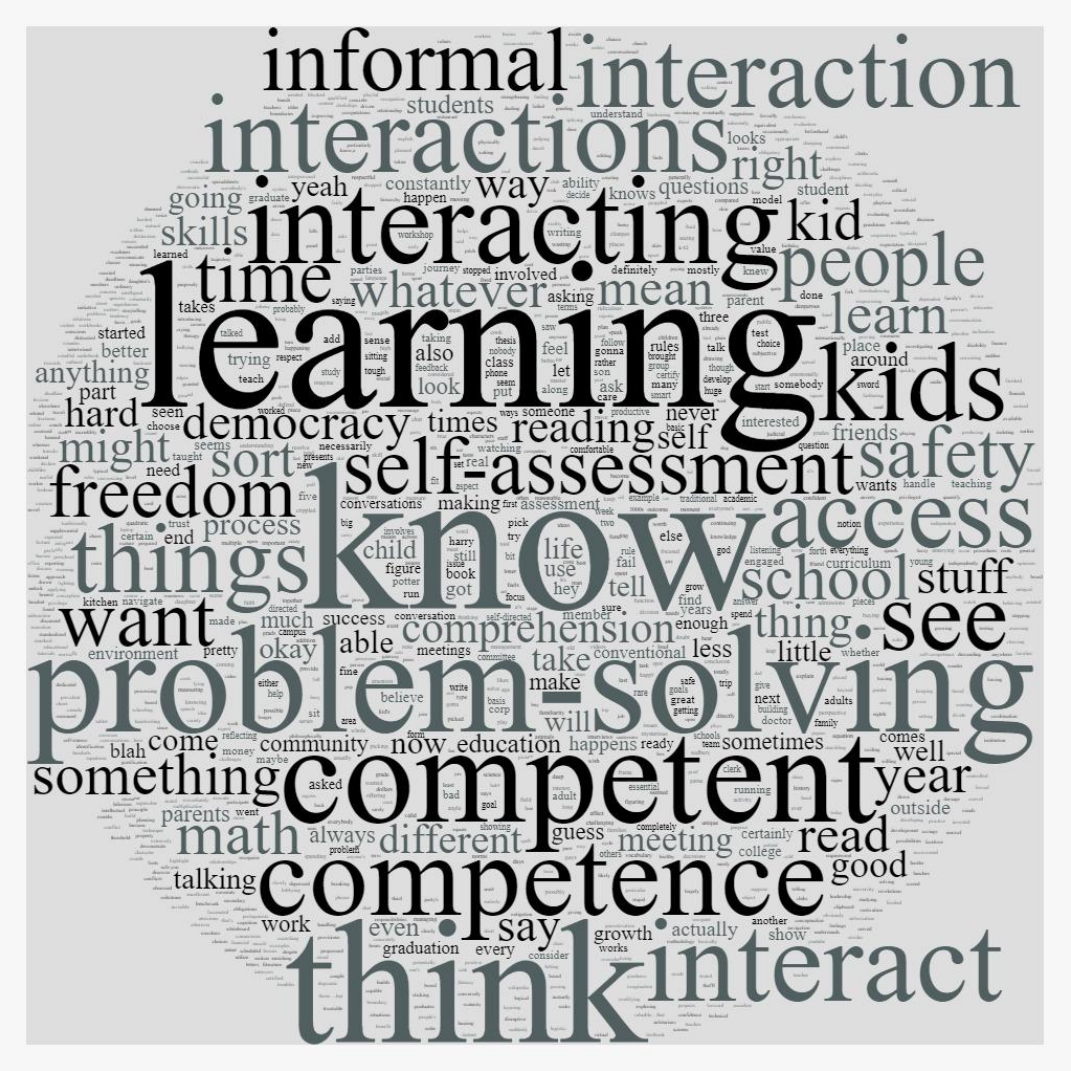
Word cloud for the "Free Exchange of Ideas" Educative Instinct a priori code (research question #1)



Word cloud for the “Access to Knowledgeable and Caring Adults” Educative Instinct a priori code (research question #1)



Word cloud for the assessment a priori code (research question #2)



Appendix J: Codes by Frequency

Codes from interview data	Original A priori code	Frequency from all interviews
	Time and Space for Play and Exploration	
Freedom		86
Natural		65
Corporations		55
Rules		45
Limitations		29
Locked Doors		15
Signing in/out		9
	Access to Equipment and Freedom to Play with that Equipment	
Free Access		79
People		72
Internet		66
Natural		49
Safety		45
Seeking a specific adult		36
Collaborative		32
Classes		14
Whoever is closest		6
	Access to Knowledgeable and Caring Adults	

Codes from interview data	Original A priori code	Frequency from all interviews
Freedom		32
Seeking access to a Resource		29
Adult-led Help		25
Trust		25
Natural		16
Accessibility		6
	Immersion in a Democratic Community	
Voice in decision making		62
Voting		58
Voice valued		54
Skills to participate in democracy		31
Democracy		29
Judicial committee		22
Community action		19
Limits on voice		15
	Freedom from Bullying	
Community defined		32
Freedom to express self		19
Mutual respect		12
Evolving definition bullying		9

Codes from interview data	Original A priori code	Frequency from all interviews
Learner addressed		9
Levels of resolution		7
Addressed by an adult		6
Not aware of instances		5
Protection of community		2
	Free Age Mixing Among Children	
Freedom		50
Natural		36
Community limitations		22
Building limitations		18
Older helping younger		16
Skill development		12
	Free Exchange of Ideas	
Collaboration		75
Freedom		63
Discussion		43
Formal expression		40
Informal expression		31
Conflict		21
Divergent thinking		19
Trust		19

Codes from interview data	Original A priori code	Frequency from all interviews
Majority Rules		18
Judicial committee		15
Creative		11
Value		9
Skill development		6
Fluid		5
	Assessment	
Competence		41
Ability to conversate		40
Problem solving		39
Capable		38
Self-assess		37
Ability to interact		32
Life assessment		26
Undefined		25
Reading		24
Standardized		23
Member of society		21
Math		16
Stigma		10
Deficit		8

Codes from interview data	Original A priori code	Frequency from all interviews
Productive		7
Later than others		6
Happy/fulfilled		3
Freedom		2