

THE LIFE TRAJECTORY OF ARTISTIC GYMNASTICS COACHES

A TRAJETÓRIA DE VIDA DE TREINADORES DE GINÁSTICA ARTÍSTICA

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RESUMO

Investigou-se a trajetória de vida de treinadores de Ginástica Artística (GA), mediante pesquisa qualitativa, com estudos de caso múltiplos, com oito treinadores na formação de jovens ginastas brasileiros. A coleta foi realizada através do *Rappaport Time Line* (RTL) e de entrevistas semiestruturadas, e a análise dos dados, por meio da técnica de Análise de Conteúdo. Os resultados evidenciaram que os primeiros contatos com a GA ocorreram na infância, estendendo-se ao longo da vida desses sujeitos, impulsionados pelas relações familiares, pela escola e clube esportivo. Conclui-se que tornar-se treinador de GA decorre da participação direta, contínua e, por vezes, induzida, dos sujeitos na GA ao longo de suas trajetórias. Esse processo fundamenta-se nas relações sociais, envolvendo uma inter-relação entre as práticas, os significados e o senso de pertencimento a diferentes comunidades de prática ligadas à GA.

Palavras-chave: Educação Física e Esporte. Treinador. Ginástica Artística.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the life trajectory of Gymnastics coaches (GA). A multiple case study took place with eight coaches with recognized competence in the youth gymnastics coaching in Santa Catarina state. Data were obtained by combining two techniques of data collection: the *Rappaport Time Line* (RTL) and semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using the Content Analysis technique. The first gymnastics practice experiences occurred in childhood extending to the life, and sustained by social relations in the family, school and the sport club. Become a gymnastic coach in this study corresponded to a mutual socialization process across a lifetime through a continuous and compulsive participation these coaches in gymnastics contexts. This process was funded by the social relationships involving an interrelation between practices, meanings and belonging sense, to different communities of practice linked to gymnastics.

Keywords: Physical Education and Sport. Coach. Artistic Gymnastics.

Introduction

The execution of highly technical movements on specific apparatuses and the requirements set forth by the Code of Points are some of the typical aspects of Artistic Gymnastics (AG) that contribute to the complexity of a coach's intervention in this modality^{1,2}. In general, the dynamic and holistic character of a sport coach's intervention^{3,4} has led to the expansion of the concept of learning and professional development in the area. The current literature suggests that becoming a coach corresponds to a process of sporting socialization that occurs throughout life and is founded on social relations in different contexts^{5,6}.

Recent studies, with biographical approach⁷⁻¹¹, show that beliefs, values and behaviors, incorporated through experiences along one's life trajectory, have a strong influence on career entry and coaching practice. Conceptually, this process has been understood as a participation trajectory¹²⁻¹⁴, in which learning is based on social interaction and collaboration in different contexts and situations, throughout the coach's life¹⁵⁻¹⁸.

According to Trudell and Gilbert¹⁹, the notion of participation is a relevant possibility to interpret a coach's learning from the concepts of Situated Learning and Communities of Practice (CoPs)²⁰. From this perspective, learning is an inseparable aspect of social practice, which involves the person as a whole, the world in which he or she lives and the activities in which he or she engages, through a system of interpersonal relationships organized in CoPs^{20,21}. The focus of this perspective is on the types of social engagements of the individual, which provide the proper context for meaningful learning.

In the field of sports training, these concepts have been used to understand the dynamics of learning that occurs in social relations in groups of athletes²²; of coaches, in sports clubs and teams²³, such as baseball²⁴, basketball^{25,26}, surfing^{27,28}, football¹⁷, soccer¹¹, skating²⁹ and skiing³⁰. In general, the results of these studies show that the most significant learnings are those that occur in daily practice, through engagement in different CoPs, participating, interacting and negotiating the meanings of their actions.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the life trajectory of Artistic Gymnastics (AG) coaches. This interest lies in analyzing the engagement of these coaches in AG-related practices, their social interactions within the context of this modality, and the implications of these experiences on their life trajectories. The understanding of these aspects can provide relevant indicators to discuss and operationalize the training of coaches when it comes to federative courses and initial training in Physical Education.

Methodological Procedures

Study Participants

A qualitative research, of descriptive type, with interpretive character³¹ was carried out, based on multiple case studies³² of eight AG coaches working in the State of Santa Catarina (Figure 1), who were intentionally selected as per the following criteria: have at least 10 years of experience in AG teaching; contribution to the coaching of young gymnasts, recognized by other coaches and heads; participation in official competitions promoted by the FESPORTE and/or FGSC; being working, at the time of the research, as an AG coach; availability and willingness to participate in the study.

C	Gender	Age	EG	LCA	CE	Undergraduate Course	Other Courses
C1	M	63	12	N	47	Physical Education	PE Spec.
C2	F	31	20	N	13	Physical Education	Children's Education Spec.
C3	M	41	26	N	17	Physical Education	Sport Training and AG Spec.
C4	M	49	25	I	30	Architecture	AG Refereeing Course
C5	M	48	19	E	28	Physical Education	Motor Development Spec.
C6	M	41	5	E	26	PE professional certified based on experience	AG Refereeing Course
C7	M	42	30	I	22	Physical Education	Sport Training and AG Spec.
C8	M	31	18	N	10	PE Student	AG Refereeing Course

Figure 1. AG coaches' profile

Note: C = Coach; M = Male, F = Female; EG = Experience as Gymnast (years), LCA = Level of Competitive Activity, S = State, N = National, I = International; CE = Coaching experience (years); Spec. = Specialization

Source: The authors

Coaches C4 and C6, besides being AG coaches, also performed refereeing activities in the 2013-2016 Olympic cycle, while C2 and C8 were personal trainers, and C7 was a Physical Education professor.

Data Collection

Information was obtained through the Rappaport Time Line (RTL), in accordance with Duarte and Culver⁹, as well as scripted semi-structured interview. The RTL recorded important events in the life of the coaches, organized chronologically from birth until the time of the research. On a sheet (about 1 meter) containing a line with two ends (birth and present), each participant was instructed to record dates, places, situations and important people in their trajectory in the sport. This procedure had an average duration of 1h22 min. (minimum 43 min, maximum 1h56 min). The researcher interacted with the coaches, assisting them in filling the sheet through an informal conversation captured by a digital recorder. The information obtained from the RTL was analyzed and used to guide the interview, contributing to the description and interpretation of the coaches' experiences and trajectories.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings (RTL and interviews) were transcribed literally with the help of Windows Media Player and Word programs and analyzed through Qualitative Solutions Research Nvivo 9.1 (QSR). Multiple case study procedures were adopted³², in which each coach's data were analyzed individually and confronted with each other, allowing the identification of "consensus" as to practices, situations and contexts present in their trajectory. The procedures of the Content Analysis technique, according to Bardin³³, were used to categorize the information given by the coaches. Within each topic indicated *a priori* – that is, the first experiences of AG practice, as an athlete and coaching career entry – specific themes were identified.

The descriptive reliability of the data was obtained by the participants' check, while data interpretation was reviewed by specialists in the area³⁴. Both data collection procedures took place at each coach's workplace, at a time and date they found convenience, allowing the establishment of a trust relationship between investigator and coach, increasing the accuracy of the collected information³⁵.

The research was approved by the ethics committee of a Brazilian public university (Legal Opinion No. 1.122.298/2015). The coaches signed the Free and Informed Consent Form, authorizing the recording and disclosure of results, without profit motives. To preserve anonymity, letters and numbers (C1, for instance) were used to identify each coach in the text.

Results

The contexts and learning situations in different phases of the AG coaches' life trajectory are presented in Figure 2.

Phase	Context	Situations
First contacts with AG	Childhood experiences linked to social relations in the family, school and sports club.	Parents (C7 and C8) Siblings (C3 and C4) Cousins (C1 and C6) PE teacher (C3) Coach (C8)
Engagement in AG systematic practice	Adolescence experiences in family and training environments, and in AG competitions.	Parent encouragement (C6 and C4) Teammates (C1, C3 and C4) Coach (C3) Sport performance (C2, C4, C5 and C7) Taste for practice (C3, C6 and C8) Trips (C2 and C3)
AG coaching career entry	First experiences as a coach (when still athletes).	Coach's influence (C2, C3, C6, C7 and C8) Taste for AG (C8) High performance level (C1, C4 and C7) Financial need (C1, C3, C4 and C6)

Figure 2. Phases, contexts and situations of the AG coaches' trajectory

Source: The authors

First Contacts with AG

In the cases investigated, the first experiences with AG practice occurred in childhood, being linked to social relations in the family, school and sports club. In the family context, they were connected to their relationship with parents, siblings, cousins and aunts and uncles, who have provided opportunities and experiences for this practice and interaction with other practitioners.

Coach C8 believes his father's constant encouragement to play various sports (swimming, taekwondo, volleyball), including AG, in addition to his biotype and "hyperactive" behavior, were important to his early experiences in this modality. For C7, the fact that his father was an athlete and works as a coach allowed him to be in contact with the sport from a young age, as he himself states:

[...] My father was a coach... when I was five I would always go to the gym, play, with no commitment, accompany him in training sessions and play on gym equipment. Back then, he had this friend who was also a coach, and he would come to our house, and they would go to work together ... after a while, this friend of my father invited me to start training with him... I was about 7 years old. Then I started training with him every day... and after a while, with my father... after that, I never left the gym again! [...] (C7).

For C3 and C4, daily contact with their artistic gymnast siblings provided their first contacts with the sport, especially through playing at home, as stated, for instance, by C4: "[...] my older brother was already doing gymnastics and I did everything at home, so I got many skills, I was very agile, I climbed up doors, benches [...]". In the perception of C1 and C6, daily contact with their cousins was fundamental for their first contacts with AG. C1 recalls: "... I learned everything he did at the gym and I did everything I could at home [...]", while for C6, although his cousin was not a gymnast, the act of accompanying him in his judo classes may have exposed him to a sport environment that influenced him to start doing AG:

[...] My cousin practiced judo... I watched him and saw all those people in kimonos and that called my attention. Next to where karate classes happened, I would see those guys doing flips, bar spins, on the trampoline, all of them training, and I fell in love with gymnastics. It's when that I began to do some of those things at home [...] (C6).

Still in the family context, coach C5 recalls: “[...] when I was nine, I watched my aunt doing gymnastics and I was impressed by what she did, I found it very cool, extremely different from what I had seen, and was amazed and sometimes I would practice it with her [...]”.

Some coaches (C2, C3, C6 and C8) believe that established relationships and experiences of bodily practices in the school environment and in the club led them to their first experiences with AG. Coach C3 highlights the influence of his Physical Education teacher: “[...] I was 10 years old and my Physical Education teacher brought another teacher to teach Olympic Gymnastics! I tried it and I still do gymnastics to this day! I fell in love and stayed for a long time [...]”. In the case of C8, he recalls the encouragement from his volleyball coach: “[...] she said that I would not do well in volleyball... next to the volleyball class space they were doing gymnastics... she told me to go there, and my dad also supported it... when I started learning the exercises, it became an addiction!”.

It is worth highlighting as well that, in the cases of C3, C5, C6 and C8, the first contacts with AG seem not to be strictly related to the context of this modality, but rather to participation in other practices, such as dance and cycling (C3), table tennis (C5), karate and swimming (C6), taekwondo, swimming and volleyball (C8).

Engagement in AG Systematic Practice

The coaches' engagement and permanence in AG are characterized by experiences in childhood family environments, in training contexts and in AG competitions in adolescence. In the perception of C6 and C4, encouragement to do sports and emotional support from parents were fundamental for them to keep doing AG, as C6 affirms:

[...] For my mom and dad, the first thing was school and studying and then doing sports... I had my homework, I would come home and have everything set on a schedule, it was disciplinary... and, in the end, my dad always asked me what sport I was going to choose... it could be whatever I wanted, but I had to do it... they always told me that in competition I had to know how to lose and win...

For coaches C1, C3 and C4, interaction with teammates was very important so that they remained engaged in the practice of AG. C4 recalls: “[...] We were always discussing about the movements, what we had to train... we were about 12 years old and would go to practice doing handstands and flic flaks as we walked!” For C1, in addition to interaction with his friends, the relationship with his coach and other people linked to AG provided him with the sensation of being recognized and valued, mainly for his performance in training and competitions, as well as his ease in learning the gestures of the modality, as he himself points out:

[...] I lived in a poor house, had nothing. In gymnastics, I had everything! A gym, had a mattress, had friends, a teacher. And most importantly, I was a guy with a tendency to be an athlete, so I was valued. I learned things very fast, so I started to be someone important and respected by everyone in the club, like other athletes who stood out!” (C1)

In the case of C3, the close and familiar relationship with his coach was stressed in his statements: “[...] my relationship with my coach was very good, I lost my father very young, so he took that position of a father... he was very helpful, contentious, hard on me... I think that today I am tough because of him ... he was a model for me.”

The desire to achieve higher levels in the practice of AG and good results in competitions was also mentioned by some coaches (C2, C4, C5 and C7) as an important aspect for engagement in training, as mentioned by C7:

“[...] The wish to be a world champion, to reach high levels, to compete in the Olympics, that made me enter the gym and train hard. I got to compete a world championship... so the search for result was something that always motivated me to be practicing in the gym.”

In the particular case of C5, this seemed to be related to a desire to “prove” to himself his ability to enhance his learning of AG technical gestures, as he states: “[...] many people said that gymnastics was not for me... but I wanted to do gymnastics! So, all that gave me more strength so that I could overcome my difficulties and prove to myself that I could surpass myself.”

Taste for AG, and above all for the challenges in learning the stunts, flight elements and other gymnastics movements, as well as the difficulty levels of gymnastics elements, were practice aspects that led coaches C3, C6 and C8 to dedicate themselves to the training routine, intensifying their daily training and seeking to reach higher levels of performance, as C6 states:

“[...] What moved me was the challenges. Each day I would perform a new exercise, that gave me pleasure... a challenge was presented to me and I would fight to overcome it... I was very persistent... so, each apparatus had a different nature of movements, a much wider range of movements, so it really was very attractive [...].

For C2 and C3, trips to participate in AG-related competitions and events, as well as meeting other athletes and knowing other institutions were important experiences so they could set new personal goals of performance and, consequently, engage more deeply in the practice of this modality. This is evidenced in C2’s statement, who says: “[...] some of the best gymnasts in the world came to my city after the Olympics, and I saw some guys doing gymnastics... they did a lot of things I did not know... I was amazed, wanted to do it too, I believed I could do that too.”

AG Coach Career Entry

All individuals mentioned that their first coaching experiences occurred while they were still AG athletes. As C5 narrates:

“[...] I was still an athlete and my job as a coach was starting too. I went to Florianópolis on weekends to train, stayed in a house with these handball players, we would go on Friday, train Friday night, Saturday and Sunday, and return to Inaja on Monday, because I had gymnasts to train [...].”

For C3, in turn, “[...] becoming a coach was handed out on a silver plate to me! My coach invited me to teach at this school on Mondays and Wednesdays, and on the other days I trained [...]”. In C8’s case, this process was driven by the “taste” he had for AG: “[...] I was addicted to gymnastics, I always wanted to work with it, it was to this purpose of working as a coach that I dedicated my life”.

In addition to helping their coaches or acting as head coaches, all of them mentioned that this period was marked by the number of roles taken. Coach C2 recalls: “[...] I was still an athlete, I taught physical education in the morning, coached in the afternoon and went to college at night. It was a crazy routine... so, there is not a specific moment when I became a coach, but I was becoming a coach, until I started helping my own coach”.

Coaches C1, C4 and C7 believe that the high level of performance they have reached, through their experiences as athletes, was a decisive factor for them to take on the role of coaches. Coach C7 recalls: “[...] when I started, I would pick up the boys, choose who I was going to work with and pass on to them my experience as an athlete, from the basics, with the same goal, same technique, to make a high-performance gymnast [...]”. In the case of C1, he recalls: “[...] I felt confident because I knew a lot about AG, so I taught my athletes, they learned and got better than me, even at teaching [...]”

The relationship established with coaches, through daily interaction in training, competitions and other situations provided by the AG context, was recognized by C2, C6, C7 and C8 as an aspect that allowed them to have their first experiences with teaching this modality. Coach C2 mentions “[...] I have trained for about 10 years in the same club and that’s where I started my coaching career, at the age of 18, helping my own coach in classes for kids [...]”. Similarly, C6 recalls: “[...] I handled physical preparation and helped my coach in training sessions, holding some base elements [...]”. As for C8, the experiences with his coach seem to have been so significant that they were still friends until the moment of the interview, as he says:

“[...] I accompanied my coach while he taught, and soon I was coaching at this kid’s school, and only after that I joined the coaching staff. He gave me a lot of tips, showed me the best way... he still instructs me from time to time, we always talk, it’s a very open relationship, of real friends...”

In this phase of the coaches’ trajectory, it is believed that the choice of the Physical Education university course by almost all of them (C1, C2, C3, C5, C6, C7 and C8) was mainly driven by their vast experience as athletes, as they aspired to be professionally recognized as AG coaches and were already performing coaching activities. For instance, coach C4 recalls: “[...] at that time I was already attending the Physical Education course, so those who are or used to be gymnasts tend to work with it, become a coach, and of course, study Physical Education [...]”.

The financial aspect also seems to have been a circumstance that influenced some choices in the trajectory of coaches C1, C3, C4 and C6, allowing them to maintain their training routines as athletes. This is evidenced in C6’s and C4’s reports, respectively, “[...] since I was still training, working as an assistant to my coach in the club, I could make some money, which helped me stay in AG [...]”, and “[...] I started working in the club where I trained more because I needed, but then I had a chance to work, that’s when I became a gym instructor [...]”.

Discussion

The results showed that, in the case of the investigated individuals, becoming a coach corresponded to the participation, throughout life, in different social contexts (family, school, club and university) where AG was present. For Cushion, Armor, and Jones¹⁴, this involves a sporting socialization process that results in the collective understanding and sharing of meanings, symbols and values about a particular sports culture. This process involves moving in the sense of full participation in a particular practice and group, which, in turn, means an

increase in responsibilities taken, amount of practices, expansion of skills for practice, and number of roles played within the group²⁰.

The coaches' first experiences with AG practice happened via social relations, especially with family and friends. Daily games and other situations experienced at home, on the street, at school or in the club expressed a playful character with the meaning of fun and challenge. Most of the times, these situations were mediated by more experienced individuals – cousin, friend or parent –, who provided a mode of instruction that emerged from the very interactions in practice. Therefore, while the coaches played spontaneously, they also appropriated skills and perceptions about their own body in the execution of acrobatics and body movements that are typical of AG³⁶.

Results of studies with coaches in soccer¹¹, surfing²⁸, basketball²⁶, Paralympic sports¹² and canoeing/climbing¹⁰ show that these individuals' first experiences with sports were marked by a playful and spontaneous character, defined by the combination of a sense of belonging to the family with a favorable environment for sports. According to Wenger²¹, family represents the first community of practice, although it may present itself from several configurations, as it brings a common capacity to create, reproduce, transmit and disseminate routines, beliefs, values, interests, symbols and stories. Generally, it is within the family group that the child perceives that a certain activity is performed by some members of his or her surroundings, when he or she begins to feel a desire to belong to that group, seeking to engage in this activity to feel part of it and have the group's recognition²⁰.

The coaches' engagement in AG routine practice, still in childhood, was driven mainly by close people (parents, cousins, friends, and teachers) who already had some connection with this modality. From that moment, they began to participate in a group of people whose main interest (domain) was the practice of AG and that, consequently, involved a social life in the contexts where this practice developed, especially in the club and school. As they broadened their skills and knowledge about this sport, they moved toward full participation in that community.

According to Wenger²¹, it is the individual's engagement in a CoP and his or her dedication to specific community activities that significantly contribute to the self-evaluation of his or her skills/abilities and their refinement, as well as to him or her deriving pleasure in doing it. For Galipeau and Trudel²², this movement towards the center of the CoP, of a certain sport modality, occurs not only through engagement in physical practice, but also through social interactions and a sense of belonging to the club, the group of athletes or the team. At the same time that this participation has contributed to the development of personal identity as an athlete, it enabled identification with the club and with the other practice mates.

Sense of belonging brings effective gains of legitimacy in participation, implying a deep engagement in the practice of interest²⁰. From this perspective, therefore, becoming a gymnast has meant learnings in the dimensions of acting (practicing), thinking and feeling, supported by a social and cultural context linked to AG, attributing a meaning to the process (cognitive and social) and to the content of learning (specific knowledge, skills, competencies and values). This participation allows the incorporation of sociocultural values typical of a particular sports culture, integrating the trajectory of athletes or practitioners and creating beliefs that may reflect on their choices and attitudes in adult life³⁷.

The transition from athlete to the first coaching actions was marked by the intensification of these individuals' participation in AG practice and, consequently, by the acceptance of new responsibilities, such as reaching higher levels of practice (learning of new and diversified gymnastics elements), achieving good results in competitions, representing the club and/or city, assisting club mates in the learning process, and coaches in training tasks, and making a living with AG. However, still in the role of athlete, when they took on the role

of coaches, the shared practice also included the teaching of AG, indicating an initial phase of these individuals' engagement in a CoP of coaches^{22,30}.

The trust relationship established with coaches, through daily interaction for years, was an important aspect in determining the first AG teaching experiences. By observing, talking and assisting their coaches in the development of training activities, they could construct the first representations about teaching. In the roles of assistant or coach, they became "newcomers" in the activity of teaching this modality, engaging in a more peripheral participation in this group, learning about the principles, values and norms established, as well as work conduct, communication of ideas, and the engagement of the most experienced coaches²².

Considering the time that the investigated coaches were exposed to AG, it is clear that their entry in this career was a "natural" process^{19,38}. Several studies focusing on the career and development of sports coaches^{8,12,38} show a strong relationship between positive experiences in sports and the choice of the coaching career. According to Côté *et al.*³⁹ and Jones, Armour and Potrac³⁷, coaches interpret situations and idealize future pedagogical actions based on their previous experiences. In addition, the possibility and/or desire to intervene as AG coach possibly led them to seek a professional certification that would legitimize them as sports coaches – habilitation in Physical Education specifically. This could be verified in studies with other Brazilian coaches^{4,11,26}, in which the main reason for choosing the course in this area was meeting the legal requirements for intervention as a sports coach.

Indeed, the involvement of these coaches in the roles of sportspeople/athletes and coaches was a defining factor of their interests and professional choices. In particular, the sense of belonging – to the family, to the team, to the club and to the coaching profession – was not restricted to the spaces of sharing of knowledge and skills, but rather to the way they were seen by the members of their own communities. The gains of legitimacy and belonging through participation in the practices were fundamental in the process of becoming a coach.

Verifying the importance of personal engagement and authentic participation in AG-related practices for the investigated coaches' learning, it is believed that the results of this study can contribute to the discussion and development of strategies for the updating and formation of coaches. Social interactions, observations and professional practice itself, in authentic contexts of practice, are fundamental aspects to be considered for qualification and updating opportunities of coaches, promoted by clubs and entities representing AG (clinics, workshops, short courses, meetings, etc.) For disciplines related to teaching and sports training in AG, in particular, offered in Physical Education undergraduate courses, the results of this study can contribute to the implementation of strategies that prioritize the participation of undergraduates in authentic activities, social interaction with professionals who already work, and the daily routine of a club where activities related to this modality are developed.

Conclusions

Becoming an AG coach resulted from these individuals' direct, continuous and sometimes compulsive participation in practices linked to this modality along their trajectories. This process was marked by sociocultural aspects in different phases of their lives and by social relations established in immediate contexts (family) and with other specific groups (school and club).

Throughout the life of these coaches, the practices in which they engaged corresponded to the actions of doing gymnastics for fun, training and competing as an AG athlete, as well as teaching this modality as coaches. As they mentioned, the meanings of

these practices are about the playful and spontaneous nature of childhood games, the challenging aspect of the movements, the pursuit of success as an athlete, and the pleasure and personal satisfaction of being an AG coach. Their experiences were founded on social relations they established by participating in different CoPs, which were organized according to practices, the family, the club, the group of athletes or coaches, and a broader group linked to AG.

Possible limitations of the study may be related to the inefficiency of the methodological procedures adopted to access all of the coaches' forms of participation in a wide sporting system referring to AG. The fact that the coaches investigated come from the same Brazilian state prevents the generalization of their trajectories as being typical of coaches in this modality. In addition, the number of coaches investigated led to the decision to discuss the similarities of the episodes that characterized the learning process of these individuals.

Future studies should investigate the learning of experienced AG coaches in different regions of Brazil, based on a combination of procedures for interview, observation and systematic recording, in order to analyze the social interactions established in the daily work of these professionals, obtaining detailed information on: "what do they seek to learn?", "how and with whom do they learn?" and "what do they learn?"

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