The Social Formation of Youth Voice

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Supporters of youth voice in public decision-making have achieved a great deal—a wider acceptance by policy-makers for youth input in decision-making, ratifications by most nations of the Conference on the Rights of the Child, and improvements in the kinds of leadership opportunities available to young people across the country (Forum for Youth Investment; Tolman & Pittman, 2001; Zeldin et al, 2000). Although the effort to foster young people's democratic participation still has a ways to go, it has reached a point where promotional accounts of youth's achievements are not enough, but instead need to be accompanied by more careful analyses of how such initiatives work and conceptual tools that can move the field forward.

This is particularly true for the sub-set of programs that place a strong emphasis on "youth voice." Such groups are made up of youth leaders and adult allies who seek to re-organize hierarchical adult-youth relations and place youth in charge of significant decisions related to program policies and advocacy agendas. Rather than offering limited, circumscribed opportunities for youth input, in which youth serve as "youth representatives" on a decision-making board or learn leadership skills through planning school proms, these groups position young people as capable democratic actors, who have legitimate opinions about social policies and deserve to have these opinions heard in the public square (Camino & Zeldin, 2001). The emphasis that such programs place on youth voice offers an important antidote to countervailing public policies (such as Proposition 21 in California) that treat youth as adults when it comes to criminal infractions but as children when it comes to civic rights and responsibilities (Males, 1996).

Systematic research on outcomes for youth and organizations has begun to document benefits of youth participation. Some promising evidence comes from research on student motivation in classrooms, in which participation in decision-making has been correlated with greater effort, intrinsic interest, and more effective learning strategies (Ames, 1992; Eccles, Wigfield, and Schiefele, 1998). Youth development practitioners, also, have found that participation is an effective strategy for engaging youth, especially older high school students, who typically avoid youth organizations that do not give them a say in decision-making or planning (Ashley, Samaniego, & Chuen, 1997; McLaughlin, 2000). Such engagement has been found to impact the host organizations, which report

that youth participation in decision-making leads to changes in the organizational climate and a deeper commitment by adults to youth development principles (Zeldin, et al., 2000). Finally, meaningful participation is said to foster democratic habits in youth, such as tolerance, healthy disagreement, self-expression, and cooperation (Hart, 1992).

Despite these emerging empirical examples, the field is still developing. Rather than focus in this paper on the merits of greater youth voice and participation (a position few at this conference would disagree with), I would like to focus on one problematic feature of the discourse about youth voice, which is its lack of attention or clarity about the roles of adult educators. The discourse surrounding "youth-led" initiatives often highlights the parts played by youth while omitting much of the behind-the-scenes work done by adults. This may happen for strategic reasons—such initiatives gain their credibility by representing authentic youth perspectives and alternately lose their credibility if they are seen to merely treat youth in a tokenistic manner. Also, adult allies of youth leaders are often wary of talking about adult roles lest the implicit message appear (mistakenly, in my view) that such projects are there by the grace of adults and not because of youth initiative. Except in the rare case of non-adult sanctioned youth programs, adults play multiple roles (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994)—as program directors, advisors, facilitators, coaches, fund-raisers, employers, drivers, and even sometimes meal-providers. In other words, adults do occupy a place in these youth organizations! What is fascinating about these groups, however, is that, unlike most other institutions or social practices that youth and adults take part in, these are organized to arrange adult and youth roles and responsibilities in ways that are democratic and egalitarian (Costello et al., 2000). Youth and adults engage in interaction routines that often depart from normative ones found in schools, families or workplaces as youth and adults together work out more equitable distributions of power and authority in their efforts to make an impact on some sort of problem of public significance.

This task alone is challenging enough, but it becomes even more complicated for adult educators because of the lack of definition about what it means to be an adult supporting these efforts. We need a conceptual lens and vocabulary that enable us to talk about what is going on in youth leadership programs where there is some form of joint work performed by youth and adults. The intended audiences of this paper are

practitioners and scholars who wish to understand what it looks like for adult educators to act as "allies" for youth voice and leadership.

Conceptual framework

This paper starts with the assumption that youth voice, defined operationally here as an organized effort for youth to shape decisions in afterschool programs and classrooms organizations, is a social achievement.[1] That is, youth voice does not signal just an accomplishment of youth themselves, but instead an accomplishment of all the members of a shared social practice. The unit of analysis, therefore, shifts from a narrow focus on youth to a broader attention to youth and adults working together, linked by a shared set of activities, routines, and resources for getting their work done (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Saxe, 1996). In using the term "youth and adults working together," this does not literally mean that youth and adults are working on the same terms or as equals; instead it merely underlines that both youth and adults are working on the same collective task—to re-arrange traditional youth-adult relations so that youth are positioned as leaders and "owners" of the group project. The actual work being done by youth and adults may be quite different, and, in the case of adults, difficult to discern.

In referring to a practice-based approach, the paper draws on analyses of social practices in the cultural-historical tradition (Engestrom, 1999; Rogoff, 1995; Saxe, 1991). These analyses generally look at three elements of social practices—the division of labor among members; the goals that motivate their activity; and the cultural tools or artifacts that people use as resources to accomplish their work together. While these three elements are all present in this paper, I focus specifically on the third element—"cultural tools." The term cultural tools refers to resources that people use to get work done together, whether material, such as pens, or symbolic, such as language or ideology (Wertsch, 1998). Although often taken for granted, an awareness of the place of cultural tools in human activity reminds us that humans do not act alone but instead with the resources available to us in our social practices. While one can analyze tools at any level of social group (from two friends playing marbles to whole societies using technology),

[1] Youth voice initiatives also typically involve adults who are part of public policy-making groups, such as school boards and city councils. The work performed by these adults is distinct from adult allies inside of youth organizations and is not the subject of this paper.

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this paper examines them in the context of a youth organization. Drawing on two years of ethnographic research in a youth leadership program in Oakland, California, this paper will focus specifically on the features of the shared activity system that enabled youth and adults to move from a primarily adult-led process to one that was more equitably shared among youth and adults. It is organized in terms of two related research questions:

- In what ways did the distribution of responsibility for decision-making and planning in the program change over time?
- What elements of the social practice became resources for youth and adults in their efforts to foster deeper youth leadership?

Methods

Background on the youth program

Youth Engagement in Leadership and Learning (YELL) is a relatively young program, having just started in the summer of 2001. Housed at a public high school in Oakland, YELL was initiated through the efforts of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University, in partnership with school administrators and community leaders in Oakland. The purpose of the program is to create a space where a cohort of young leaders can take action on issues they care about and in the process learn research and advocacy skills. Guided by a constructivist teaching philosophy, program staff view their role as facilitating discussions and group processes that allow young people to come to agreement about a social problem they care about and develop projects that respond to the problem through research and advocacy. There is a mix, therefore, of focused trainings in specific research methods and leadership skills and more open-ended project work, in which youth work together, often with minimal direction from program staff.

Adult facilitators generally articulate a goal for the program to be "youth-driven," meaning that youth are expected to take ownership of the projects and determine their direction, and adults primarily act as resources for youth. Projects are expected to culminate in some form of action or community outreach that involves sharing research findings and offering policy suggestions. In its emphasis on problem-driven research conducted by young people, it bears some similarity to participatory action research

(Park, 1993; Penuel & Freeman, 1997), as well as recent "youth mapping" programs (Center for Youth Development and Policy Research, 2001).

One director and two part-time facilitators lead the project. Participants are selected through an application and interview process. The program meets twice a week after school from October through May, with culminating events in June. Youth receive stipends of $120/month. In their first year the youth participants focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning at their school. In the second year participants selected a new campaign topic that took on the problem of how young residents of West Oakland are portrayed in local media. The participants wished to redress what they considered a predominance of negative and inaccurate portrayals of themselves and their peers by doing their own research and producing news stories that could be distributed to news outlets and other youth. During the current year, which just began, the focus of the campaign is still to be determined.

Background on the neighborhood and school context

YELL is located in West Oakland, an area that has struggled with poverty and unemployment, but which also boasts a rich history of activism. Since World War II, the population of West Oakland has primarily been African-American. Recently, however, increasing numbers of Latinos and Asian-Americans, as well as artists and young professionals, have moved into the area in order to take advantage of the relatively low cost of housing and plentiful warehouse space. It is an area that has a long history of grass-roots political activism, going back to when the Black Panthers began to organize neighborhood residents in 1966 (Locke, 1999). Efforts at community building continue to be necessary because this region has struggled over the last two decades with unemployment and poverty. Literacy and mathematics rates among youth are well below the state averages (Institute for Urban and Regional Development, 2001). The area's only public high school, which is where YELL meets, has traditionally been seen as one of the weakest in Oakland, although it is currently in the middle of extensive reform efforts led by a respected administrator. One indication of recent successes at the school is the number of high school graduating high school seniors, which improved from 42 in 2001 to 108 in 2003.

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Participants

As is common in voluntary youth programs, there is often quite a bit of change in the youth who originally begin the program and those who are involved at its completion (Cole, 2001). This pattern held true in YELL, although retention was greater in its second year. In year one the YELL project began with eighteen youth; nine months later eight youth were still involved. In year two the group began with nineteen youth and concluded with twelve. A core group of seven students remained in the program from year one to year two. During both years there were three adults in charge of organizing and overseeing the program—one program director and two AmeriCorps members. See Table 1 for the ethnic backgrounds and gender of youth and adults who were directly involved with the program for 3 months or more. (Because researchers were primarily observers, we are not included in the table listing youth participants and adult staff members).

Table 1: Participants' ethnicity and gender

Race/ethnicity	Youth	Adults	Total
African-American	11 (5 F, 6 M)	2 (1 F, 1 M)	13
Latino	3 (2 F, 1 M)	0	3
Asian-American	6 (4 F, 2 M)	1 (F)	7
Middle-eastern	0	1 (F)	1
European-American	0	1 (F)	1
Bi-racial	1 (M)	2 (2 F)	3
Total	21 (11 F, 10 M)	7 (6 F, 1 M)	28

Data sources

This study relies on field notes and interviews from two years of ethnographic research by the author, from fall 2001 through summer 2003. Field notes were taken by hand and then typed after weekly visits to the program over the course of two years. Four rounds of interviews were conducted throughout the two years. In interviews youth were asked to share their views of the program, what they valued in it, and to compare their experience there to school. Interview transcripts and typed field note entries were

compiled and entered in qualitative data analysis software. These documents were coded and analyzed based on low-inference categories relevant to the research questions.

Results

Question #1: In what ways did the distribution of responsibility for decision-making and planning change over time?

One way of answering this question is to examine who was involved with tasks related to program planning and decision-making at different time points. These tasks ranged from long-term planning, such as curriculum development and program structure, to short-term responsibilities, such as designing the agenda for group meetings or facilitating small group projects. As Table 2 indicates, from October 2001 to October 2003 the distribution of responsibility for decision-making and planning changed in recognizable ways. Whereas at the program's inception adult staff members took responsibility for most planning and decision-making, over the course of two years these responsibilities became more shared among youth and adult members of the group. It is noteworthy that by the third year youth members were not only taking part in day to day leadership tasks, but also long-term decisions about program structure.

Table 2: Youth and adult involvement in YELL leadership tasks

YELL Tasks	2001-2		2002-3		2003-4	
Writing program curriculum		A		A		A
Designing program structure (delineating youth and adult roles, decision-making procedures, expectations of youth, etc.)		A		A	**Y**	
Recruiting, interviewing, and hiring youth participants		A	**Y**	A	**Y**	A
Planning agenda for group meetings		A	**Y**	A	**Y**	A
Facilitating and debriefing meetings		A	**Y**	A	**Y**	A
Deciding groundrules for the group	**Y**		**Y**		**Y**	
Deciding on campaign topic and research methods to be used	**Y**	A	**Y**		**Y**	?
Facilitating small group projects		A	**Y**	A	**Y**	?
Presenting ideas to the public	**Y**		**Y**		**Y**	?

*Y = youth; A = adults; ? = will happen in coming year

Another way of documenting some of these changes is to look at the organizational structure of the program, which started with a fairly simple division between adult staff and youth participants and became increasingly differentiated (see

Table 3). Whereas in year 1 there was only one role available to youth—participants—new roles were added each coming year. In year 3 there were four different positions available to youth, which were earned depending on different levels of experience in the program and the level of commitment one wished to make. The youth staff coordinator position is interesting because it emerged in response to the interests of a veteran young person who had graduated from high school and wanted to continue to be part of the program, but was not interested in a full-time "adult staff" position. The youth Board of Directors, which discusses problems that arise in the group, engages in long-term thinking about where they program should be going, and makes decisions about disciplinary issues, emerged after a summer planning process where veteran youth looked for ways to create a structure for youth governance of the program.

Table 3: Changes over time in roles

2001-2	2002-3	2003-4
Adult staff members Adult researcher Youth participants	Adult staff members Adult researchers Youth staff Youth participants	Adult staff members Adult researchers Youth Staff Coordinator Youth Staff/Board of Directors Youth Leaders Youth Allies

The "objective" changes in the program structure documented above offer useful indications of the division of labor between youth and adults. It is important to point out that such an analysis leaves out a consideration of how youth made meaning of these changes, which were quite varied and are still under analysis. Generally speaking, two points can be made about how youth interpreted the division of labor between youth and adults at the end of 2002-3. First, there was general consensus that YELL was a program where youth had meaningful input into decision-making and program leadership (Time 4 interviews, summer 2003). Some veterans talked about ways in which the program had become less adult-directed over the course of their time in the program. For example:

> *Interviewer:* Now that the year is over how do you feel about how it went?
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> *Youth:* This year I think it was harder because last year the adults were more involved with the groups. And they helped pull us through and they kinda had an agenda and what they wanted us to get done during that day and, they planned. It seemed like they helped plan more stuff…And this year it was more like, "We're gonna let them do everything and we're just gonna sit back and watch and if they need help we'll be there but we're not really gonna take charge of the situation…" And I think that's good though, 'cause that's what YELL's about: you making your own choices, you getting your things done.

At the same time, some veteran youth expressed frustration with what they perceived as too much assertion of authority by adult allies, especially when it came to completing the small group projects. One veteran described it this way:

> *Interviewer:* Well for people who are trying to do a project like this in other cities or other schools…what do you think would be the best role for an adult to play, or for the director to play?
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> *Youth:* Best role….? I mean it's alright to give your suggestions, strong suggestions, but it should be left up to the youth participant to finalize the product—unless you know it's really going to have a negative impact on the program if they do it. If you give your suggestions all the time and, like, enforcing your own implementation on a certain project, the youth is not going to feel that their own personal part, their contribution to the product is in there—because it's like so much suggestions. And it's like after so many suggestions it's basically like the director, or whoever is over the participant, is actually telling him what *they* want to see the (product) look like...

This statement was part of a larger set of comments that were critical of the level of input exercised by adults in the program. It is included here to show that, despite concrete shifts in the kinds of responsibilities available to youth leaders in the program, tensions persisted in the way certain projects were carried out. The tensions raised above reflected not just this person's candid assessment of social relations but also his development of more sophisticated and discerning judgments about what it means to have a "youth-led" project. In other words, "youth voice" was an elusive target—as young people gained a stronger sense of their own power their analyses of youth-adult relations in the group changed as well.

Question #2: What elements of the social practice were resources for youth and adult's efforts to foster deeper youth leadership?

On one hand explaining the shifts discussed above is fairly straightforward. Adults made room for youth input and ownership by getting out of the way and allowing youth to make key decisions or have a say in program planning. By modifying the program structure (e.g., pulling back, introducing new leadership roles for youth, ceding more decisions to youth members) adults made it more possible for youth to step up and assume responsibilities. One major point, therefore, would be to emphasize that a key way of supporting youth leadership is to organize the program structure in such a way that youth are expected to be involved in a full range of leadership tasks, including not

just discretion over the campaign topic but also the group's division of labor and long-term direction.

But merely describing these objective changes in leadership roles for youth only goes so far, because even in cases where adults "pulled back" from decision-making, they contribute to helping the group function together. Furthermore, one can point to changes in program structure as an element of this effort to distribute responsibility, but what are the features of the activity system that helped people make these changes meaningful and successful? One way to answer to this question is to look at the resources or cultural tools that youth and adults made use of in order to distribute authority across the group. Here I focus on three such elements of the YELL activity system: *group agreements*; *scaffolding of complex tasks*; and *program ideology*.

Group agreements

Forming groundrules is a common strategy used by educators who wish to encourage democratic values in their classrooms. Typically members discuss what kinds of rules they want to follow as a group, such as "no interrupting," "respect others," etc. This strategy is justified as a way of soliciting everyone's input into the rules that members will live by. Such agreements can also become a useful means for shifting authority out of the hands of a group leader or teacher and towards a more impartial constitution.

In YELL several meetings were devoted to establishing the details of the group agreements, which included expectations for people's behavior and also consequences for violating these expectations. This was often a slow process, as youth participants had different ideas about what these rules and consequences should be. Some found the whole exercise foreign; others thought it was a poor use of time, preferring instead a more traditional scenario. During a conversation at the beginning of year one, a student said, "I think ya'll *(the adults)* should make the rules".

Nevertheless, the set of agreements became an important resource for dealing with problems that came up in the group, ranging from interpersonal conflicts to absenteeism. One example of this can be seen in the detailed attendance policy that youth and adults created in the second year, which defined excused vs. unexcused

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absences, specified consequences for each infraction, and specified the number of warnings one could accrue before being asked to leave the program. In a sense, by being so clear about the policy, the discretion of adult staff members (who took responsibility for implementing the consequences of these policies) was taken out of the equation.

When used artfully, these agreements accomplished an important end, which was to shift the enforcement of rules from adults' personal discretion to a more consistent, fair, and impartial set of rules established by the group. This indirectly supported youth leadership because it shifted the authority for rule-making (and consequence-making) from the personal whim of adults to the group as a whole. In doing so, adults, while still occupying a position of authority, did so in a way that could be interpreted by youth as neutral, as respecting their autonomy, as fair. Furthermore, the explicit nature of the rules gave youth more control over the terms of their own participation; that is, youth were equipped with the knowledge of what they needed to do to either stay involved with the program or leave it. This point came across in an interview with one student who was asked to leave the program midway through the year:

> *Interviewer:* I don't know what happened in terms of why you are not in YELL anymore. Do you want to tell me?
>
> *Youth:* Well actually I chose to use my last unexcused absence and I didn't account for it, and that is why.
>
> *Interviewer:* Whose decision was it for you not to be in the program anymore?
>
> *Youth:* Actually I don't know. But what is fair is fair. I broke all the…well not all the ground rules but enough of them to be out of the program, so that is pretty fair.

This example is also interesting because it served as an important point of contrast with a case from the prior year, when groundrules were less explicit and problems were resolved in a more personal and idiosyncratic manner.

Scaffolding of complex tasks

Changes in the division of labor in YELL functioned because youth leaders were able to take responsibility for complex tasks. What is interesting about this point is that most youth's ability to complete these tasks was dependent on scaffolding available in

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the YELL activity system. Scaffolding refers to supports that enable learners to perform complex tasks that they would not be able to perform alone, but which are in their "zone of proximal development (ZPD)" (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of the ZPD provides a useful description of youth-adult roles in groups like YELL because it captures what is distinctive about them—these programs put youth in leadership positions and charge them with responsibilities that they do not typically face in school or their everyday lives (O'Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003). Consequently, they are often engaged in tasks that they would struggle to complete on their own but that become attainable when scaffolded by people or cultural tools that provide assistance. Scaffolding in YELL took many forms, including explicit trainings about how to facilitate meetings, material artifacts such as lesson plans that youth could rely on as memory aids, and clear designations of roles and responsibilities that helped groups function together.

One interesting example of scaffolding took place in the small group projects that youth (in year two of YELL) were expected to manage with little direct adult instruction or supervision. (Roughly halfway through the year youth selected different projects that they wanted to work on for the campaign, which led to the formation of four different groups—video documentary, magazine, website, and focus groups). In the magazine group there were five youth who chose to design and author a magazine that would represent youth's views about stereotypes. Above and beyond the technical skills associated with magazine layout and story-writing, this task required sophisticated planning and collaborative skills: they needed to develop a 3 month timeline for completing the magazine, delegate tasks in a fair manner, and keep track of their work from week to week…all while using an egalitarian form of decision-making in which no one person was "in charge."

Like many other tasks in YELL, the magazine project was complex enough that youth needed some coaching from adults. But at the same time, adults did not want to be seen as "taking over." That is, adults saw places where they could help the work go more productively or smoothly but they were afraid to have youth experience this as undermining or overly meddlesome. A strategy, therefore, that adults employed was to develop cultural tools that lent structure to youth's work while still leaving them with accountability for it. Take, for example, the following excerpt from an observation I

made as YELL transitioned from its welcome check-in to small group work. I have underlined places in the text where youth explicitly refer to tools introduced by adults to help organize their work.

> Ellie, a youth participant who is facilitating today, says: "now we are working in research groups. <u>Remember to pick a facilitator and notetaker</u>. You guys have to do that every single time." People disperse to their different groups: magazine, video, website, and focus groups. I am the only adult who goes with the magazine group. They pick a <u>facilitator</u>, Sam, and a <u>notetaker</u>, Marlene.
>
> Marlene, the notetaker, says, "we need to rewrite this" (referring to <u>a timeline</u> written on a large piece of paper). She asks, "ya'll want me to rewrite this?" Sam, the facilitator, who appears to be trying to get the group started, asks, "what are our goals today?"
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> Using the timeline they had completed last week, the group discusses its purpose for the day, which they decide is to organize their past ideas and to write down the purpose of the youth-authored magazine. Then they begin to brainstorm new ideas for sections of the magazine. After doing this for a few minutes, there is a pause.
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> Sam: is there anything else to add?
> Marlene: I need to rewrite this (*the notes*).
> Cindy: I can read it.
> Henry: I can read them too.
> Marlene: What are the goals? *(of today)*
> Sam: To organize this *(list)*.
> Marlene: So I need to rewrite it anyway.
>
> Marlene begins to write the outline on a new piece of paper. Then Marlene offers a new idea, she talks about adding a page with everyone's picture on it, then concludes her suggestion by saying, "but that's just my opinion, don't just agree."
> Sam: "You're trying to take <u>my job</u> away!"
> Cindy: "He's the <u>facilitator</u>."
> Marlene: "I'm sorry, I'll stop."

In the excerpt above youth used a variety of cultural tools that had been introduced in YELL. These ranged from material artifacts such as the timeline to the discursive practice of designating a "facilitator" and "notetaker." Even though no program staff were present to guide the group through the process of designating these roles, the participants were familiar enough with the routine that they completed it without any confusion. Interestingly, at the end of the excerpt, when Marlene raised an issue for discussion with the group, both Sam and Cindy interpreted it as overstepping her bounds as notetaker. They regulated Marlene's behavior by referring to the fact that Sam was the facilitator, which Marlene accepted without protest and the group resumed its work.

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It is important to point out that these scaffolding processes did not always go as intended. Although the magazine group managed to work productively together on a consistent basis, other groups, even with the same tools and resources, experienced conflicts and lack of productivity. Also, due to variations in styles of support among adults (each group had one adult playing an advisory role) as well as differing conceptions of what support should mean, some youth felt that they were not given the freedom to truly make mistakes and figure things out for themselves.

Nevertheless, this example helps to illustrate the general point, which is that the process of taking ownership and having voice is partly dependent on a minimal threshold of skills and expertise. Adults sought to help youth meet this threshold by offering forms of scaffolding that still respected youth's responsibility for their projects. Although members of YELL disagreed on where to draw this line, all shared the opinion that it was useful to have adults adopt some kind of coaching or supportive role. The key distinction that several youth drew was between giving input or technical advice and actually making decisions for them. This was a line that youth were sensitive to, and quite critical of, when it was crossed.

Program ideology

The third cultural tool that became part of the group's effort to create an egalitarian, youth-driven environment was a program ideology that emphasized youth voice and youth ownership of the project. Adult members of YELL were guided by a belief that the project was only meaningful and successful insofar as it represented the authentic interests and desires of the youth participants. They were highly reflective and conscientious about how to depart from normative relationships between teachers and students, in which educators are the primary repositories of information and youth depend on adults for their learning. Often this effort was socially reinforced among adults in debrief sessions; they would tell each other when they felt that one of them was being too controlling. Planning meetings among adults revolved around this issue—how can we help organize things in such a way that youth feel and enact real ownership of the program? This belief was reflected in decisions that were made about how to organize

the structure of the program, the importance of group agreements, the importance of youth facilitators, etc.

The point of interest here, however, focuses on the status of this belief as a resource that youth and adults made consequential in their interactions with each other. In other words, it wasn't just that this belief "guided" people's actions in the program, but also that it became a story that people told each other in face to face encounters that helped place boundaries on adult roles (see Wieder [1974] for a rich discussion of this process in another context).

Oftentimes this phenomenon could be seen in statements from adults to youth about who really should be taking responsibility for the program. For example, at the beginning of the year, when the program was being explained to new participants, adults stated this ideology explicitly, by asserting that the program was to be guided by the youth. This message was re-stated throughout the year. There were multiple occasions where adults asserted that "this project is up to you"; or "you chose the topic," or "it's not up to me to decide what to next." This kind of interaction occurred primarily at points where adults perceived that youth were frustrated, disengaged, or apathetic.

Over time this discourse came to be a commonly accepted assumption about how YELL was run; that is, it came to be treated as a given that the program was supposed to be guided by the initiative and leadership of youth. For example, in an interview I asked a youth participant to describe the role of the adult who supported her magazine project: "She helped us a lot. But she told me she didn't wanna do that, cause she might be doing too much…It's supposed to be the youth (*making decisions)*." Youth themselves drew on this same ideology to organize the division of labor; at the midway point of the second year there was a formal vote taken about the roles that adults should play in support the small groups. Youth agreed that adults should leave the youth to work independently and make their own decisions, but to be available to answer questions or give advice if problems came up.

These examples are intended to illustrate that beliefs about youth leadership were not just underlying philosophies, but that they became explicit stories that members of YELL told each other to help organize youth-adult interactions. Importantly, they also became a lens through which members of YELL could criticize these interactions. That

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is, both adults and youth drew on this logic of youth voice to point out occasions when it was violated in their eyes. In interviews some youth participants talked about times when they felt that adults overstepped their authority when it came to decisions about the projects. While on one hand such statements can be taken as evidence that the program fell short of its goal of achieving authentic youth ownership, they can also be taken as evidence that the group had generated an ideology or set of values that members grew to take seriously. Over time members developed a more discerning, critical standpoint from which to evaluate, and potentially to improve, the program.

Conclusion

In this paper I set out to understand the roles played by adults in social practices whose purpose is to become "youth-led." Because such projects focus so much on the actions of young people, there have been few studies that seek to make sense of what adult allies contribute to them. I started by describing transitions in the distribution of responsibility for tasks among youth and adults. I then analyzed certain resources available in YELL that people used in order to make these transitions successful, such as group agreements, scaffolding of complex tasks, and program ideology. Even during occasions where youth were working "alone" they were often using these resources or tools. Throughout the paper I tried to also point out when there was friction or disagreements among youth and adults as they sought to work out their division of labor.

One limitation of this paper is that it does not include a comprehensive analysis of actions or behavior by adults that appeared to work at cross-purposes with youth's ownership of the program. That is, I tried to focus my attention on those elements of the environment that helped facilitate youth leadership rather than undermine it. For example, future analyses might look into the implications of stipends for youth's initiative and ownership of the program. To the extent that they felt that it was a place of employment, youth may have been more likely to see adults as "employers," rather than allies or advisors, which would have consequences for the group's ability to be youth-led. Future analyses will also be improved through comparison with other youth leadership groups, in order to strengthen the generalizability of these claims to other settings that seek to foster youth voice.

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Despite these limitations, the findings in this paper help to point us in the direction of a deeper understanding of the strategies that adults employ to support youth leadership and the resources that youth and adults use to help each other re-arrange traditional roles. Advocates of youth leadership initiatives will be better served if we can become clearer about the ways that youth and adults can effectively work together. By adopting a social practice framework we can examine these groups as complex systems that function because of the joint efforts of youth, adults, and the cultural tools they use to accomplish their goals.

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