Adult-Driven Youth Programs:
An Oxymoron?

By Kathrin Walker, Ph.D., and Reed Larson, Ph.D.

Youth-led programs are "in." It is argued in some youth development circles that youth leadership is a necessary and essential ingredient of a quality program. In the youth-driven approach, youth exercise significant control over daily activities, while adults play a supportive role as mentors and facilitators. The assumption is that when young people hold the reins they become active participants and learners. The more that youth are in control, the more it is thought they will learn (Lansdown, 2001; Larson, 2000).

It is further argued that an adult-driven approach—where adults set the direction and run daily program activities—has limits and liabilities. From an educational perspective, Freire (1970) warns that when teachers are positioned as authorities, students' ownership, creativity and authentic learning are undermined. Developmental psychologists have theorized that the asymmetry in knowledge and power between children and adults inhibits youth's development within youth–adult interactions because they defer to adults' authority (Piaget, 1965; Youniss, 1980). Transposed to youth programs, these arguments suggest that young people experiencing an adult-driven approach may be more likely to become disengaged. This has led many to dismiss youth programs with strong adult leadership as incongruent with youth development.

Yet perhaps the adult-driven approach deserves a closer look. The rationale for an adult-driven approach is that adults' greater knowledge and expertise positions them to guide program activities expediently and purposefully. Often, the primary objective of programs using this approach is to teach specialized skills; thus, it is particularly common in sports and performance arts where there are specific technical skills that youth desire to learn. Current literature advocating an adult-driven approach makes the argument in terms used to advocate authoritative parenting and student-centered teaching, emphasizing the importance of adult leadership that is sensitive and responsive to youth. They advocate an approach that is adult-driven but youth-centered, not an extreme version where adults control everything with no input from youth. Adults are encouraged to create rules, structures, and roles that give youth latitude for exercising initiative and control within this framework.

We argue that trying to judge one approach to be "better or worse" is the wrong goal. Different frameworks for youth–adult relationships may be suited for different situations and program objectives. It is important for program staff to consider how much input, daily decision making, and authority should be vested in the adult leaders versus the youth participants for a particular program. Might there be circumstances in which the adult-driven approach is appropriate, and ways in which the liabilities attributed to it can be avoided and its potentials realized?

Research on the Daily Life of Youth Programs

Our research has employed a case study method to ask how youth- and adult-driven models play out in the daily life of four high-quality programs for high school-aged youth. We examined the unfolding of youth–adult interactions and youth's experiences over a three- to four-month period in four highly-regarded programs, two representing the youth-driven approach and two the adult-driven approach (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005). Our designation of programs as youth-driven and adult-driven were based on a set of eight criteria we developed that dealt with how much youth and adults had input and control over program activities.

Four programs, of course, is a very limited sample size, and we emphasize that these four cannot begin to represent the wide variations occurring among programs employing the two approaches. Our strategy here trades breadth for depth: We used in-depth investigation of what happened in these few programs to begin to examine the real-life dynamics of the two approaches and raise issues for further inquiry. To get this in-depth picture we obtained data at repeated points in time from multiple perspectives: biweekly qualitative interviews with a sample of 10 to 13 youth and one to two adult advisors from each program; and participant observations on a similar schedule. All interviews and observer notes were transcribed, and data were coded and analyzed using established procedures for analyzing qualitative data.

> *It is important for program staff to consider how much input, daily decision making, and authority should be vested in the adult leaders versus the youth participants for a particular program.*

The youth-driven approach was employed with a group of FFA youth who planned a 2-1/2-day summer day camp for 4th grade children in order to teach the children about agriculture and to interest them in joining FFA when they reached high school. The second youth-driven program studied was Youth Action, a youth activism program where youth identify and research problems that directly impact their lives—most often in the city schools—and then organize action campaigns to address them. The adult-driven approach was employed by Art-First, a visual arts program where youth participated in internships and collectively painted a set of murals. The second adult-driven program studied was *Les Miserables*, a high school theater production.

Adult-Driven Youth Programs: An Oxymoron?

Because we are interested in taking a close look at the adult-driven approach, we begin by describing one of them in depth, the high school theater production. (For a more thorough examination of all four programs, see Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005, available at http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/youthdev/.) Then we outline the trade-offs we found to be associated with the adult-driven approach as compared to the youth-driven approach in the programs we studied. Lastly we describe techniques used by the leaders in the two adult-driven programs that appeared to make them successful.

An In-Depth Look at an Adult-Driven Youth Program

"I can see things in people they can't see in themselves," said Ann, the director of *Les Miserables* at Sycamore Valley High School. She believes that all youth have gifts, often unrecognized, that she can help them discover and bring to life. Ann is a piano teacher in town, and every spring she is hired to direct the school's locally-renowned musical production. This year it enlisted 110 enthusiastic students as actors and crew—about one-seventh of the students in this middle-class, white, small city high school. The head of the school's theater program served as producer, handling the business end of production, crew management, and numerous other tasks.

It was understood by all youth and adults that Ann, as director, was in charge. The musical was adult-driven because of the large number of students involved, the short 3-month production schedule, and the adults' goal of teaching youth theater skills. The key adults chose the musical and held several planning meetings weeks before any student was involved. At the first meeting with students, before auditions, Ann presented her vision for their production and passed out a contract with rules that students and parents had to sign in order to participate. After the adults selected the cast, they set up a rehearsal schedule, and Ann ran the rehearsals from the piano just below center stage. The language she used on set was often a language of authority: "You're going to …" and "Where is my Javert?" In the middle of a scene she would sometimes shout "freeze," which stopped the action and allowed her to instruct actors on something she wanted them to do differently.

Although the adults held control, they most often used it in ways that were responsive and supported students' active learning. Ann provided positive encouragement for students to develop their individual roles. In early rehearsals, for example, she often had students improvise and let a scene develop from the actors' and her critiques of what worked well. The observers were also struck by Ann's ability to maintain a friendly, respectful, and encouraging attitude at all times. She clapped enthusiastically when things went well and never lost her smile and humor, even when she had to repeatedly ask off-stage students to be quiet. The students praised the adults' almost infinite patience, in the words of one youth: "There are times when I won't get a dance step and I'll have to go over it, over and over again. But they're understanding."

The adults' control allowed them to use their expertise in ways that created a rich and intentional learning environment for all students. They implemented the philosophy that every youth mattered. In Ann's words, "Whether you punch tickets or have a lead role, I consider what you do just as important." They included a student with special needs in the cast and were vigilant that a gay youth was not treated differently by others. They tried to see that every youth was learning and being challenged at her or his level of ability. Ann often stayed late to work with individual students. To facilitate learning, the adults used good student-centered teaching methods.

Ann employed theater games to help youth work on specific issues, such as practicing French accents. She used the domestic abuse portrayed in the play as an opportunity for the cast to discuss the reality of domestic violence in contemporary families. Given this environment, it is not surprising that the students reported learning numerous skills of theater and stagecraft, such as "how to yell," how to ad-lib, and sewing techniques, as well as fundamental communication skills. They also reported developing greater self-confidence and growth in other domains of social and emotional development.

The adults' effectiveness in fostering student development was illustrated in the first rehearsal for the song "One Day More." Ann gathered the actors for this song around the piano, and asked them to sing it through. But the first bars they sang were off key and the students stopped, groaned, and asked to work on only one part at a time. Ann, however, just laughed and said, "We're going to keep plugging through it." After a few more bars, a student said, "We can't plug this." But another countered that they had successfully plugged through a song like this with Ann before. Once they reached the end, Ann had them work on individual parts. She also discussed the contrasting emotional states of Javert and Valjean, and the irony in the lyrics: "This is a nuts song. It is so hard. … Now, Cosette, you have three notes up here in the middle of nowhere [plays notes]. It's a cry of help really." Ann provided repeated encouragement as they worked, "Okay, everyone look at me [and say], 'I've got hope.'" Indeed they were starting to sound better, and the students and Ann continued to practice and discuss what they did right and what could be improved. After only 15 minutes, the students asked to sing it through one more time, and the observer reported "an inspired coordination of voices, with each singer coming in on cue with their 'One Day More' in a beautiful cascade of distinct voices and characters." The students were elated at what they had accomplished and all clapped at the end. "That's amazing," several said. In this short amount of time Ann demonstrated remarkable success in bringing out the "gifts" of these youth.

> **The adults' control allowed them to use their expertise in ways that created a rich and intentional learning environment for all students.**

Trade-Offs Associated With an Adult-Driven Approach

We found that adult-driven programs like this production of *Les Miserables* were not categorically better or worse than their youth-driven counterparts. Instead, our analyses suggested that each approach provided distinct developmental experiences for youth, and each presented distinct day-to-day challenges for adults. In the two youth-driven programs we studied, the youth experienced a high degree of ownership and empowerment, and they reported development of leadership and planning skills. In the two adult-driven programs the adults crafted student-centered learning experiences, which facilitated the students' development of specific talents.

The special benefits of an adult-driven program derived from the adults' ability to craft specially designed learning experiences and pass on their knowledge. In both adult-driven programs, the adults created student-centered experiential learning activities, where youth learned through doing. In *Les Miserables*, students were coached and given exercises that developed technical theater skills—from

developing a character to creating a set and costumes. At Art-First the adults provided high quality teaching of painting techniques, and the adults shared knowledge and social capital that opened viable careers in the art world to the youth. In addition to artistic knowledge, youth in both programs described development in other broader domains, including self-confidence, interpersonal skills, and a sense of responsibility.

The clearest liability we saw in the adult-driven approach was the threat of adults' control undermining youths' ownership. The producer at *Les Miserables* reported intermittent concerns about raising students' ownership, for example, when students chatted when they were suppose to be practicing lines or working on the set. At Art-First, we saw some disengagement from the internships and murals when students encountered adult-imposed rules and constraints, although all then reported adapting to these limitations. On most occasions, however, students reported being invested in the goals of the program (producing a good musical and good murals) and particularly their piece of the work. We think the high engagement of youth was partly due to the skills of the adults, which we will describe in a moment.

Compared to the two adult-driven programs, the youth-driven programs appeared to benefit from strong youth ownership over the direction of program activities, which led to youth taking greater initiative and learning leadership skills. But youth's inexperience appeared to create a greater risk of activities getting off track or stalling. In contrast, the adult-driven approach allowed adults to create a track for participation and learning, but risked diminished youth ownership which could undermine engagement in the crafted learning experiences (see Table 4.1).

Balancing Techniques Employed by the Adults

The adult advisors in the two adult-driven programs employed a number of techniques to address the liabilities of their approach. Given that a prime liability of the adult-driven approach is loss of youth ownership, we highlight techniques that kept teaching student-centered and youth ownership and engagement high.

First, adults in the two adult-driven programs put great emphasis on *listening to and obtaining feedback from youth*. "You do a lot of listening," Ann said. "And if you are not perceptive, you will lose half your kids." Rebecca, the leader at Art-First, reported that she always obtains both oral and written evaluations from youth: "They walk away knowing that their ideas count. I really try to draw out over and over again their ideas, what they're interested in." A frequent risk when adults hold control is that they become out of touch and project their own beliefs about what youth need onto the program. What the adults view as "on track" can easily diverge from the youth's view. Listening is a critical check and balance to keep this from happening.

A second technique involved *acts of humility*. Ann said:

> "The number one thing to be an effective leader is for me to be a servant, being willing to get down and get dirty, to get in there and do the sweat, do the work, do the listening, be tired when other people are tired, 'Can I do this for you?' when you're exhausted yourself. I think that makes a great leader because then I have validity. They know that I'm genuine, that I'm not just trying to get something out of them."

In the words of a student, Ann is "the kind of person who will stand on stage and jump up and down and scream and yell and just to make a fool out of herself." Freire (1970) argues that humility is essential to effective teaching, and Ann's self-deprecation, laughter, and occasional crying with students helped them see her as a fellow human being and collaborator, even when she was exercising authority.

A third technique involved *cultivating a culture of fairness and opportunity for youth*. We have found that teens in youth programs are very sensitive about unfairness, and theater, with its unavoidable differentiations between lead and secondary roles, is a breeding ground for bruised egos and resentment. Yet the leaders at *Les Miserables* and Art-First went out of their way to act fairly and, like good authoritative parents, to explain their decision-making processes so that students understood them.

These techniques permitted the youth in *Les Miserables* and Art-First to have a strong identification with the program: to feel ownership and sustain active engagement in the program's agenda. The adults used their authority on youth's behalf. Although students may not have had the level of ownership evident in the youth-driven programs, the adults created learning experiences within which youth became active learners. A critic might label this "paternalism," and the negative connotations of this term are surely deserved in adult-

Table 4.1
Rationales and Liabilities of Adult- and Youth-Driven Approaches as Suggested by the Research

ADULT-DRIVEN	YOUTH-DRIVEN
RATIONALE	**RATIONALE**
• Adults' greater knowledge and expertise can position them to guide program activities expediently and purposefully.	• Youths' ownership over the direction of program activities can lead to a sense of empowerment.
• Adults can teach specialized skills and facilitate youths' development of specific talents.	• Youth can develop leadership and planning skills and the ability to organize their efforts to achieve goals.
• May be appropriate for programs with a large number of youth, a tight timeframe, or an emphasis on the final product.	• May be appropriate for programs serving older youth, or programs with an emphasis on youth voice.
LIABILITY	**LIABILITY**
• Adult's control may diminish youth ownership which could undermine engagement.	• Youth's inexperience may create a greater risk of activities getting off track or stalling.

Adult-Driven Youth Programs: An Oxymoron?

driven programs when adults are condescending, disrespectful, and undermine youth's sense of agency. But in the case of this program, paternalism or, rather, "maternalism" (youth in both programs identified the adults as mother figures) was exercised with checks and balances that kept youth ownership high and the best interests of youth at the center.

We want to stress that the adult advisors in both the youth- and adult-driven programs did many similar things. The common feature across programs was the adults' intentionality in how they related to the youth. Whether the program was youth- or adult-driven, the adults had well-developed philosophies about what their goals were and how to work toward them. In all of the programs there were week-to-week challenges, setbacks, and dilemmas, and the adults were attentive in anticipating and thinking about how to respond in ways that were sensitive to the youth. Both approaches had particular benefits and risks, and the adult leaders in each framework employed different techniques to maximize their strengths and reduce their liabilities.

Implications for Practice

Both the adult-driven and youth-driven approaches for youth–adult relationships involved real-life challenges. It is easy to espouse a given philosophy, but it is quite another thing to make it work within the complex realities of daily life. It is important to understand the distinct dynamics associated with the two approaches and evaluate what approach, or meld, is suited to given objectives and contexts. For an organization or practitioner thinking about what approach to use, there are several considerations to weigh.

A first question concerns the developmental goals for youth. Data from our research suggest that good youth-driven programs can provide young people rich opportunities to experience leadership responsibility and develop strategic and teamwork skills. Given that adolescents have limited opportunities for these experiences in other parts of their lives (Larson, 2000), we think it important that all youth have abundant chances to participate in this type of program. Nonetheless, there are other competencies, such as developing artistic or other talents, which might be better learned in high quality adult-led programs in which adults use their expertise to shape student-centered learning experiences. Different frameworks for youth-adult interactions may be suited for different developmental objectives.

Second, situational factors might influence the approach taken for a given program. At *Les Miserables* the long-term sustainability of the program depended in part on the final product impressing program stakeholders. Thus a higher level of adult direction—to ensure high quality—may have been important. Also, the large number of youth involved and the tight timeframe warranted greater adult control. A program's contextual realities need to be assessed and negotiated.

A third set of factors to consider is who the youth are and what they are ready for. Cultures differ in the frameworks they provide for adult authority, and thus youth from different groups may enter programs with different working models for youth-adult relationships. Younger or less experienced youth are likely to be less developmentally ready for a youth-driven approach. Imposing either an adult- or youth-driven approach could be unsuccessful if it is not fitted to the individuals involved.

Our goal has been not to provide definitive answers but to stimulate further questioning—by administrators designing programs, practitioners thinking about day-to-day program activities, and researchers who want to contribute to this practice. We have suggested some of the conditions under which an adult-driven approach might be preferred, but there is more to be asked about when, where, and how this approach should be implemented. We have identified a small set of techniques used by practitioners to balance ownership with keeping youth on track, but keen attention and further research are needed to ask when these should be used and what other techniques are effective to achieve a fuller range of objectives across diverse situations. ⁓

Kathrin Walker   Reed Larson

Kathrin Walker, Ph.D., is project director for The Youth Development Experience (TYDE) study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where she earned her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. Reed Larson, Ph.D., is the Pampered Chef Endowed Chair in Family Resiliency and is a professor in the Department of Human and Community Development, Psychology, and Educational Psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

References

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* Translated by M.B. Ramos. New York: Continuum.

Lansdown, G. (2001). Promoting children's participation in democratic decision-making. Florence, Italy: Innocenti Research Center, UNICEF.

Larson, R. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist, 55,* 170–183.

Larson, R., Walker, K., & Pearce, N. (2005). A comparison of youth-driven and adult-driven youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults. *Journal of Community Psychology, 33*(1), 75–74.

Piaget, J. (1965). *The Moral Judgment of the Child.* Translated by T.A. Brown and C.E. Kaegi. Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews.

Youniss, J. (1980). *Parents and Peers in Social Development.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.