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Connecting Youth to High-Resource Adults: Lessons From Effective Youth Programs

Patrick J. Sullivan[1]
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Abstract

Adolescents benefit from contact with high-resource community adults, but intergenerational obstacles make these interactions difficult, fragile, and rare. This qualitative research investigated the success of seven, primarily urban, leadership, and arts programs that attempted to facilitate these interactions within their programming. Program advisors and 71 ethnically diverse program youth (mean age = 16.5) were interviewed biweekly over 3 to 4 months. Analyses indicated that programs were effective in facilitating these interactions through organizing activities that entailed structured, meaningful youth-adult role relationships. Substantial brokering efforts appeared to be required of advisors. Although these contacts involved one-time interactions or, at best, longer-term superficial relationships, youth described obtaining valuable information, skills, and access to adult worlds. The findings illuminate the challenges, limits, and benefits of attempts to bridge youth and adult worlds.

Keywords

youth development program, social capital, youth-adult relationships, youth-adult partnerships, positive youth development

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Introduction

To make the transition into adulthood, young people need and benefit from contact with high-resource adults in their communities. These contacts provide them with information, socialization, and access to the adult worlds they eventually need to join (Benson, 1997; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Modern Western society, however, provides few opportunities for youth to interact with adults other than family members (Darling, Hamilton, & Shaver, 2003; Schlegel & Barry, 1991), and reciprocal negative attitudes between youth and adults create barriers to these interactions (Gilliam & Bales, 2001; Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). It is important for our knowledge of positive adolescent development that we understand the conditions under which positive cross-generational transactions occur. When do they work and what makes them work?

Youth development programs provide a rich source of diversity for studying these questions. Many programs attempt to bring youth into contact with experienced and knowledgeable adults in the community, and they do so in varied ways, ranging from presentations by adults to collaborative relationships (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). This grounded theory research sought to learn from the experiences of youth and leaders in seven high-quality programs. What structures did these programs create for youth-adult interactions? How were these transactions experienced by youth and what resources did they gain? What strategies did program leaders employ to facilitate effective transactions across the barriers between youth and adults?

Background

The benefits that youth obtain from interactions with high-resource adults have been articulated by a number of scholars. Successful transition to adulthood in the global society of the 21st century requires abilities to move between diverse social and institutional worlds. Youth need to develop connections to community members "who can help them navigate systems of education, employment, housing, health care, and so forth" (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verma, 2002, p. 49). Through contacts with community adults, it is argued, young people gain information about how these diverse worlds function, have experiences playing meaningful social roles, and gain access to future opportunities (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2007; Wynn, 1996; Zeldin, 2000). These adults provide youth with what has been called "bridging social capital": contact with people from circles

outside their own who provide access to otherwise inaccessible information, connections, and other assets (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

Substantial obstacles, however, stand in the way of youth's interactions with community adults who can provide them assets. To begin with, the age segregation of society limits the opportunities for youth and adults to interact. Daily activities rarely bring youth into meaningful contact with adults other than family members and teachers (Darling et al., 2003; Steinberg, 1991; Zeldin et al., 2003). Second, adults and youth often hold ambivalent or negative perceptions of each other, and these perceptions discourage interactions when opportunities are available and reinforce mutual separation (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Gilliam & Bales, 2001; Jones & Perkins, 2005). Third, even when adults and youth make good-faith attempts to work together, problems often arise. Camino and Zeldin have reported that the status and power differential between youth and adults create pitfalls to collaborative relationships. As adults typically have greater experience, knowledge, and other forms of power, they often approach these interactions in ways that youth experience as over-controlling, paternalistic, or patronizing (Camino, 2005; Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

These intergenerational obstacles occur across demographic groups; however, they appear to be particularly significant for low-income youth. In urban areas, residential "hypersegregation" by social class and ethnicity intensifies low-income youth's isolation from high-resource adults (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Jarrett, 2003; Wilson, 1987). Furthermore, American adults hold more negative stereotypes of minority and low-income youth (Gilliam & Bales, 2001), and these are likely to increase the barriers youth encounter when opportunities for interactions with resource-bearing adults occur (Camino, 1995).

The record of attempts by organizations to create deliberate "youth-adult partnerships" begins to suggest how these obstacles can be overcome. Camino (2000, 2005) reports from this work that youth desire to be, not just beneficiaries, but active participants in relationships with adults, and she found that youth-adult partnerships were most successful when youth felt respected, were able to contribute, and played meaningful roles that drew on their strengths (Camino, 2000). Given age differences in experience and power, however, this can be difficult to achieve. Across diverse types of arrangements, working relationships between youth and community adults can easily break down due to divergent expectations and misunderstandings that lead to situations in which youth feel disrespected and belittled (Hogan, 2002; Ozer et al., 2008; Zeldin et al., 2003).

Camino (2000, 2005) concluded that part of the challenge in creating collaborative youth-adult partnerships is that many adults lack skills for

interacting with youth on a basis of equality and mutual respect. She reports that these partnerships were more successful when adults received training. Other scholars observe that youth also benefit from training and support for interactions with adults (Ginwright et al., 2007; Kirshner, 2008). Camino (2005) suggests that youth-adult partnerships are more likely to succeed when a "third party" provides coaching and support to *both* adults and youth.

In youth development programs, most efforts to create contact between youth and community adults involve shorter-term interactions than in the youth-adult partnerships described by Camino, Zeldin, and others. Nonetheless, the more diverse array of activities and community adults involved makes them a valuable context of study for gaining useful basic and applied knowledge.

This Research

This qualitative discovery research was aimed at understanding how the obstacles to youth-adult interactions are addressed in effective community- and school-based youth development programs. By studying programs with a reputation for high quality, our objective was to observe how these interactions were facilitated in favorable institutional contexts in the hands of skilled leaders. In all of the programs in the research, approaches to facilitating these transactions had been developed over several years. By examining these approaches and how they worked, we hoped to gain knowledge about youth-adult relationships and their potentials. Five of the seven programs studied were urban and served low- and middle-income youth of color. This allowed us to focus primarily, but not exclusively, on how youth-adult interactions were facilitated for this population. We addressed three research questions.

Our first question, which emerged from preliminary analyses, dealt with the activities around which these youth-adult interactions were organized. We found that the seven programs employed a handful of the same types of activities, and each appeared to create distinct role relationships and opportunity structures for youth-adult transactions. Our analyses examined how each activity shaped these transactions and was experienced by youth.

The second question focused on the role of program leaders as "third parties" supporting these interactions. What did they do to address the obstacles to youth's transactions with community adults? We felt much could be learned by understanding what was required of leaders to facilitate successful interactions across the gap between youth's and adults' worlds.

Our final question concerned the resources youth report obtaining from these interactions. This is the "so what?" question: Were there significant

benefits to youth? Although this question was addressed in prior analyses of data from three programs in this study (Jarrett et al., 2005), we felt it is essential to address it here for all seven programs in order to weigh the resources youth obtained *in relationship to* the requirements placed on leaders (the findings for the second question). Were the gains for youth proportional to the demands on the program? The prior analyses identified four types of resources that youth obtained from these interactions, many of them specific to the projects youth were doing in the program (information, assistance, exposure to adult worlds, and support and encouragement for work on their projects). In this article, we focus only on the resources youth gained that potentially facilitated their transition to full-time employment or higher education.

Method

Data for this study come from a larger research project focused on youth's developmental experiences within 12 urban and rural arts/technology and leadership/service youth development programs (Larson, Pearce, Sullivan, & Jarrett, 2007). Programs were selected that had reputations as being high quality within the local youth development community (McLaughlin et al., 1994). Local youth development professionals were asked about good programs in their areas. A program that was mentioned by more than one person was visited, observed, and staff and youth were interviewed to verify that it had features associated with high-quality programs (McLaughlin, 2000; National Research Council Institute of Medicine, 2002). In this report, we focus on the seven programs (from the 12) that actively engaged youth with adults in the community. These included five leadership, service, and civic action programs and two arts programs (Table 1). The two arts programs (The Studio and Art-First[1]) were job readiness programs that included career preparation activities along with arts training. The seven programs drew youth from low- to middle-income families. We followed each program over a natural period of participation, ranging from 3 to 4 months (Sullivan, 2007).

Members of the research team conducted longitudinal interviews with 71 youth from the seven programs. This sample included 8 to 12 youth from each program, who were selected to be representative of the program's membership in terms of age, length of participation, gender, and ethnicity. The 71 youth ranged in age from 13 to 21 years ($M = 16.5$ years) and included 33 males and 38 females. This sample was ethnically diverse, including 24 (33.8%) Hispanic, 21 (29.6%) European American, 19 (26.8%) African American, 5 (7.0%) biracial, and 2 (2.8%) Asian youth. Face-to-face interviews

Table 1. Summary of the Programs, Youth in the Study, and Number of Youth Interviews Conducted

Program name	Content focus	Population served	Location	No. of youth in study	No. of youth interviews	Gender	Ethnicity	Mean age
The Studio	Arts (Sound production and graphics)	Urban	Community	10	44	1 female, 9 males	6 African American, 4 Hispanic	18.3
Art-First	Arts (Visual)	Urban	Community	12	76	8 females, 4 males	6 Hispanic, 2 Asian, 2 European American, 2 Biracial	16.6
Youth Action	Leadership (Civic action)	Urban	Community	10	62	5 females, 5 males	5 Hispanic, 4 African American, 1 Biracial	16.8
Harambee	Leadership (Civic action)	Urban	School	10	52	6 females, 4 males	9 African American, 1 Biracial	16.5
El Concilio	Leadership (Youth council)	Urban	Community	10	56	6 females, 4 males	9 Hispanic 1 Biracial	16.6
Clarkston FFA	Leadership (Agricultural)	Rural	School	11	74	6 females, 5 males	11 European American	15.9
Prairie Co. 4-H	Leadership (Planning activities for children)	Rural	Community	8	58	6 females, 2 males	8 European American	15.9
Total	2 arts, 5 leadership	5 urban, 2 rural	5 community, 2 school	71	422	38 females, 33 males	24 Hispanic, 21 European American, 19 African American, 5 Biracial, 2 Asian	16.5

were conducted at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the study period. These interviews were supplemented with shorter, biweekly phone interviews. A total of 422 interviews were carried out with these youth.

We also interviewed the 1-2 principal adult leaders in each program, following the same schedule. The 9 leaders we interviewed (4 women, 5 men) had worked in their programs from 2 to 19 years, with a median tenure of 4 years. All 9 leaders were paid youth professionals with college degrees (5 with bachelor's and 4 with master's degrees). The ethnic make-up of the group of leaders was 2 (22.2%) African Americans, 1 (11.1%) Hispanic, 1 (11.1%) Arab American, and 5 (55.6%) European Americans. A total of 68 leader interviews were completed. Data were not collected from the community adults with whom youth had contact.

Interviews with youth and leaders were conducted using a semistructured format. Following Patton's (2002) interview guide approach, interviews consisted of a predetermined set of questions on issues we expected to be important, and interviewers were encouraged to probe and ask follow-up questions to elicit more in-depth responses. In the youth interviews, questions about interactions with community adults through the program were in the initial and final face-to-face interviews. Youth were asked about adults they had met through this program, the context of these interactions, how they experienced these interactions, and what youth had gained from these interactions. The leaders were asked pertinent questions in their initial, middle, and final interviews. These dealt with their philosophy of youth development, how they viewed their roles in promoting youth-adult contacts, and what they did to help youth develop and manage those contacts. Information on youth's interactions with community adults was also obtained from youth's and adult leaders' descriptions of ongoing program experiences in the biweekly interviews.

Data Analysis

The goals of the analyses were to identify and describe how programs connected youth to community adults in ways that led to youth gaining resources. Grounded theory analyses (Charmaz, 1983; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) followed a series of stages. At the first stage, we identified all youth and adult interview data relating to interactions between youth and adults in the community. Passages were selected that dealt with any contacts made through the program with adults from outside the program who might be inferred to possess resources of positive value to the youth (e.g., experience, power, and status relevant to prosocial adult worlds).

In the second stage of analyses, we read through all the data identified in the first stage looking for major patterns and issues. This led to the formulation of our three research questions, as described above. At the third stage, all data pertinent to each question were then identified. These questions (and subquestions) were used to construct matrices organizing the data. In these matrices, the questions represented rows whereas the seven programs made up the columns. Given the nature of our questions, nearly all of the data on youth-adult activities (Question 1) and on the resources youth gained (Question 3) came from the youth and most data on leaders' role (Question 2) came from the leaders.

In the fourth stage, we then used these matrices to analyze the data for each question and subquestion (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For Question 1, we first identified the most frequent types of program activities through which interactions with community adults occurred. Then we evaluated youth's descriptions of the activity, role relationship with adults in this activity, and the types of favorable and unfavorable experiences they mentioned. For Question 2, on the leaders' roles, our analyses first separated out actions leaders had taken with the youth versus with the community adults to facilitate these interactions. Then we conducted descriptive analyses aimed at identifying the types of actions and strategies that leaders had employed with each (youth and adult) that appeared to facilitate their interactions. Question 3 addressed the types of resources youth gained from these interactions that were valuable or potentially valuable for their transition to adult roles. Three categories emerged dealing with information about, skills for, and access to adult worlds. As part of the analyses for all three questions, we identified representative quotes to communicate the findings in the text below.

A final stage of analysis involved comparing programs to determine whether there were salient differences in patterns for the research questions by program type (arts vs. leadership), location (urban vs. rural), and neighborhood socioeconomic status that might influence the findings. The only notable difference was that greater network closure appeared to be at work in the two rural programs (Wynn, 1996). These programs more often connected youth to community adults who knew them or their families, and youth were somewhat more likely to describe seeing these adults "on the street" (although a similar pattern was also described in urban El Concilio, which was part of a neighborhood-focused community organization). The urban programs, by contrast, more often connected youth to adults whom the leaders knew or contacted through institutions or "communities of interest" (e.g., political activists or professional artists). Beyond this, there were not clear differences in the types of youth-adult activities organized by the

programs, the roles of leaders, or the resources youth gained between categories of programs. Thus, we do not discuss these factors below, but given the small number of programs, these analyses should not be seen as ruling out possible differences.

Findings

Activities That Structured Youth-Adult Interactions

Our objective for the first question was to evaluate how youth experienced the most frequent activities around which youth-adult interactions occurred. What kind of an opportunity structure did each provide? Were youth's experiences favorable, and if so, how was the activity structured to address the obstacles to youth-adult interactions? The analyses identified four activities that occurred across the majority of the programs: presentations by experts, soliciting donations, collaborative activities, and lobbying institutions.[2] We found that each created a distinct role relationship between youth and adults that appeared to facilitate interactions.

Before presenting these findings, we note that six of the seven programs held training sessions to prepare youth for the latter three activities. Youth were tutored and coached on what to expect, how the pertinent group of adults thought and acted, and how to manage their interactions. Training included direct instruction by program staff as well as role playing activities. Members of Youth Action, for example, were prepared for a meeting to petition the Chicago School Board by learning about the board, developing presentations adapted to board members' ways of thinking, rehearsing responses to possible questions, and preparing for challenging and hostile responses from school board members.

Presentations by experts. The most frequent program activity that brought youth into contact with high-resource adults was presentations by experts. In all seven programs, leaders arranged for adults with a specific expertise to talk with youth, either on site or at the adults' work place. The presenters included local government officials, business representatives, reporters, artists, activists, and people in different professions. Their presentations were typically oriented to providing information pertinent to youth's projects or about careers that interested them. The youth at Art First, for example, met with officials from the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) who provided information relating to the murals the youth were going to paint for their local transit station. Youth at Prairie Co. 4-H toured a veterinary clinic and met with the veterinarian to learn about careers in her field.

These presentations typically involved one (or more) adult, cast as an authority, interacting with youth, cast in the role of learners. So they replicated the usual hierarchical role relationship between adults and youth. Yet the structure of these presentations was almost always informal and youth-friendly. The adults not only shared their knowledge but also gave youth opportunities to ask questions and, sometimes, to discuss their projects. Lydia, a 17-year-old Latina, described the Art-First meeting with the transit authority, "Like today the CTA representatives were offering information. Really just people with really helpful dispositions, just being able to say, 'If you have any questions, come to us and we will explain it.'" After the sessions, a number of youth reported talking with these adults about personal interests.

Although expert presentations positioned youth in the deferential position of learner, they almost always described them as productive and helpful. The adults had knowledge about adult worlds that the youth wanted. The adults were respectful of them and were responsive to their questions. In a few instances, youth were frustrated or bored because the presenters were ill-prepared, too formal, or did not provide information they wanted. But more often, youth described these sessions as "fun," "pretty cool," and "interesting," especially when the presentation took place at the presenters' business and involved hands-on demonstrations. Only rarely did one-time presentations lead to an ongoing relationship between a youth and the adult. Nonetheless, youth reported that these interactions were useful. The role relationship appeared to provide a comfortable, informal opportunity structure for youth to learn from (and pump) adults for information they valued.

Soliciting donations. Participants from six of the seven programs solicited adults in the community for donations, either to support their work or assist local charities. Often this involved going door-to-door or contacting a selected list of people to ask for contributions or sell items to raise money. Members of two programs regularly contacted local businesses to request in-kind donations. At El Concilio, for example, members asked local businesses to contribute food and materials for events they organized aimed at keeping neighborhood youth off the streets and out of gangs.

For these activities youth also played a deferential role—as a solicitor asking for contributions. To play this role, youth learned in advance how to introduce themselves and engage in a conversation around their request. Katherine, a 14-year-old White, described the script she learned for fundraising for the Prairie County 4-H,

> I would go up to somebody's door and I'd be "Hello my name is Katherine I am wondering if you would like to buy some candles for

my 4-H club?" I'd mention that I am in 4-H and I would mention what we do with that money. We help families that need help, we basically use it for community service. And I tell them that so they know what they are buying and it's going to help someone.

These scripts drew on the youth's identity as a member of the program to provide entrée and to legitimatize brief interactions with adults. Sometimes, these interactions grew into longer conversations, especially if the adult knew the program.

Youth who contacted businesses for in-kind donations often engaged in more lengthy and complex transactions. At El Concilio, the leader, Rainero, coached youth on how to approach small businesses in ways adapted to owners' ways of thinking. What was in it for the business? Why should they contribute? If the owner was interested, youth had to negotiate what the business would contribute, make arrangements to pick it up, and see that the business was properly acknowledged at the event. When youth worked with the same businesses over multiple events, these transactions often led to ongoing acquaintanceships between the youth and adults. Youth at the Clarkson FFA also worked with businesses, and Caroline, a 14-year-old European American, said that, as a result, "There's a lot more people in the community that I've become, not necessarily on a first name basis with, but more familiar with, just because I've had to call them or talk to them." She said that now when she saw these people in public, they sometimes started conversations.

Although these activities put them in a deferential role to adults, youth generally described these interactions in positive terms. A couple of youth going door-to-door reported encounters with rude adults, but most were friendly or respectful of the youth's objectives. Youth reported that this activity helped them develop confidence and skills for interacting with adults, and—especially with business owners—learning how to adapt their actions to the adults' ways of thinking. Soliciting donations provided an opportunity structure for youth to develop skills for approaching unfamiliar adults and engaging with them around this specific type of transaction.

Collaborative activities. In all seven programs, youth engaged in activities in which they collaborated with community adults around a shared project. These included running a community toy show for children, organizing a neighborhood street festival, and working with adults to research the impact of public transportation cutbacks on their precinct.

All of these collaborative activities positioned youth in functional roles, but the nature of the role relationships differed. In some instances, youth were positioned as assistants to adults bagging donated toys for the marines

to hand out or unloading cars at a recycling station. The Clarkston FFA had a set of regular yearly activities that involved working with adults in the community. Lori, a 16-year-old European American, described signing in donors at their blood drive:

> I ran all the paperwork for this lady [a nurse] who knows my aunt, but hadn't really met me, but recognized me and my name, you know, and was like, "Oh yeah, are you . . . ?" So I met her, and she's from the community. So yeah, I definitely interacted with people that live here in town that I wouldn't have got to interact with had I not been part of it.

Lori's role was working "for" this nurse. Nonetheless, it created opportunities for Lori to have conversations with her and with other community adults. Another youth working on this blood drive, Sarah (a 15-year-old European American), described the adults as "supportive" and "real nice."

In other instances, youth's role involved providing expertise to adults, a role relationship that put them on more equal footing. Laida, a 21-year-old Mexican American at El Concilio, described how they were asked by a police captain to work with them to develop opportunities for youth in their precinct: "They actually look for our opinions. They ask us, like 'What kind of ideas can you give us [that] we can do with our youth over here?' . . . So it's like wow, we feel all important." Similarly, youth at Art First described positive interactions working with a shopkeeper who wanted them to paint Christmas scenes in his window. In these instances, youth were cast in the role of experts and reported feeling appreciated because they were providing a service that drew on their knowledge and skills.

Youth generally reported more positive experiences when the collaboration gave them this kind of equal status or power. Nonetheless, as with Lori, positive interactions also occurred when youth had a role assisting adults, providing that the adults respected youth's contributions. The few times youth were disgruntled in collaborative activities occurred when they felt adults did not take them seriously, for example, when an adult took over planning an event that youth felt they could do. The key factor, as described by Camino (2005), appeared to be that youth experienced their roles as important and meaningful. Collaborative activities provided an opportunity structure for youth to work with adults, get to know and learn from them, and receive validation for their contributions.

Lobbying institutions. In four of the seven programs (Youth Action, Harambee, FFA, El Concilio), youth lobbied adults in governmental institutions. This lobbying was aimed at local city and village councils, the school board, and

the city transit authority. For example, Nancy, a 17-year-old European American in the Prairie Co. 4-H, described making a presentation to the town council asking for the yearly funding for their program. Members of Youth Action took part in a long-term campaign to lobby the city school board about enforcement of its disciplinary policies.

As in soliciting donations, this activity put youth in a position of trying to influence more powerful adults. Lobbying cast youth in a civic role that has strong legitimacy in a democratic society. Richard, a 16-year-old African American at Harambee, described being part of a group of community members who lobbied the city transit authority about planned service reductions to their community:

> I'd go to those meetings and I didn't act like I was from Banks High School. I acted like I was one of the people who came in to speak about their problems, and I spoke up for the whole group. . . . I didn't treat it like it was a funny situation. I was real serious about it 'cause it felt like something important.

Richard felt confident in playing the role of a citizen, petitioning a government institution on behalf of a group.

Many youth, like Nancy and Richard, encountered supportive adults and described positive experiences. However, as youth were sometimes taking an adversarial position, they reported more conflict and negative feelings than in other activities. They described occasions in which they were patronized or dismissed. Members of Youth Action reported that some school board members displayed little enthusiasm for their input and recounted occasions when they were cut off and did not get to say what they wanted because they had gone over time. Lobbying required youth to interact with public officials in highly formalized ways. In most cases, however, youth described learning what the rules were and how to play their role, including dealing with the dismissive attitude that some officials showed toward them. As a result of lobbying activities, a number of youth described forming ongoing acquaintanceships with either the adults they were lobbying or with other community adults who were working with them. In sum, this activity provided an opportunity structure for youth to experience affirmation playing a meaningful civic role. Although this activity subjected them to more negative experiences, they also learned how civic institutions worked, developed skills for influencing them, and sometimes formed acquaintanceships with adults.

Conclusions: Opportunity structures that facilitated youth-adult interactions. How did these four activities avoid the usual obstacles to interactions between

youth and community adults? A key feature across activities appeared to be that each provided a structured framework for these transactions. Each cast youth and adults in a defined role relationship that provided meaningful roles for youth (as well as the adults). In some of the collaborative activities, these role relationships put youth in a position of equality with adults because they were providing services for the adults that drew on their strengths (for example, advising the police on planning activities for teenagers). More often, however, these role relationships (expert/learner, solicitor/donor, and lobbyist/public official) paralleled the more typical power hierarchy between youth and adults. Nonetheless, these role relationships provided a clear structure for interaction, and youth usually still found these transactions meaningful because adults treated them with respect, they felt validated, and they were achieving ends they valued.

Leaders' Roles in Facilitating Interactions

Up to this point, we have discussed these activities as though they ran on their own. From the youth's accounts, it was the structure of the activities and the attitudes of the community adults that made them successful and positive. Our analysis of the program leaders' interviews, however, indicated that leaders played a critical role in facilitating these transactions by working, often behind the scenes, both with youth and with the community adults. They did a lot of work to create conditions for positive interactions between the divergent worlds of youth and adults.

Working with youth. The leaders worked with youth before and after activities with community adults (especially for soliciting, collaborations, and lobbying). To prepare youth, leaders not only organized training sessions, as already described above, but also worked with individual youth and small groups. Leaders from six of the seven programs reported preparing youth by coaching them on strategies, language use, self-presentation styles, or hair styles. Leaders at The Studio even found clothing for low-income program members to wear to job interviews. In several programs where youth were going to make presentations to adults (for example, as part of a lobbying effort), leaders helped them rehearse and hone the presentations.

Some youth were apprehensive about interacting with community adults, which is not surprising given lack of prior interaction and most adults' low estimation of teens (Zeldin et al., 2003). Leaders reported working to build up their self-confidence and coaxing them along. Catalina, an 18-year-old Latina at Youth Action, reported feeling "scared of all these people" before speaking to public officials. So the leader, Jason, worked with her to develop

strategies that helped her feel more prepared and in control. She reported, "Jason would always tell us, you know, 'Just write it like how you would say it, like talking to your parents." Imani, one of the leaders at The Studio, had set up an opportunity for Jeffery, an 18-year-old African American, to interview for a job at a local company. But Jeffery balked at contacting the owner. So Imani kept on him, "I was like 'Jeffery, you need to go over there and talk to this lady; be the adult that you say you are.'" With this coaxing, Jeffery finally did the interview and got the job.

After youth's contacts with adults, leaders debriefed them on their experiences. Sharon, a leader at Harambee, held regular debriefing sessions after youth conducted surveys with adults on the street. She described asking them, "How did it feel to go out as surveyors? What were your thoughts about people who said 'No, I don't want to do this'? And what were ways we could have done better?" Many adults refused to be surveyed, and one of Sharon's goals was to keep them from becoming discouraged as well as helping them develop strategies for being more successful. Across programs, leaders described using debriefings to help youth process the ups and downs in their interactions with adults and sharpen their skills for future interactions. By working with youth before and afterward, leaders were helping youth adapt and accommodate to adults' ways of thinking and acting.

Working with community adults. Leaders from six of the seven programs also reported working with the community adults to help them adapt and accommodate to youth. First, leaders did advance work to select community adults whom they thought would give good presentations or who would be responsive to collaborations with or lobbying from youth. They kept track of public officials, businesspersons, and program alumni who were sensitive and friendly to youth. Leaders from all but one of the programs reported drawing on their network of friends and professional acquaintances. For instance, youth at Harambee were producing a video, and one of the leaders invited two friends who produced documentaries for a city television station to talk with the group about techniques they used. One of these women then accompanied youth on several of their shoots.

The leaders also coached the adults on their interactions with youth. A couple of leaders reported calling businesses or political figures to lay groundwork before youth contacted them with a request. Rainero, the leader at El Concilio, reported working with city council members to counteract their stereotypes of youth:

> I'm teaching the aldermen that these are young people who are not here to attack you. They're here to do positive things, and you can use these

young people for [inaudible]: "Hey, look at what my young people are doing in my ward."

Rainero helped the adults reframe their views of the youth and see them as resources.

Program leaders often played the role as mediators between youth and adults, relaying information, problem solving, and managing long-term relationships with the organizations from which the adult came. Leaders kept themselves attuned to how the interactions were experienced by both youth and adults and interceded when they saw potential problems emerging. Youth at Art-First had internships at local businesses, and the leader, Christina, met with their supervisors at the internship site and also talked regularly with the youth to see how things were going, so she could deal with any issues that arose. In some programs, leaders managed long-term alliances between their program and the adults' organizations. Imani, at the Studio, cultivated the program's ongoing relationships with a group of potential employers for youth, and she steered youth with appropriate job skills to them. Rainero, maintained relationships between El Concilio and city officials and local businesses. He coached both youth and adults to make sure their interactions went well and the relationship was continued.

Conclusion: Brokering interactions. Research shows that youth-adult interactions can be a tinderbox. Misunderstandings can activate mutual negative stereotypes between generations (Camino, 2005; Hogan, 2002). To ensure that these interactions came off well, the leaders worked both sides of the fence, before and afterward. They trained youth in how to talk with adults, coached them on everything from language use to clothing, worked to address youth's fears and build their self-confidence, and then debriefed youth afterward to help them process the interaction. Furthermore, rather than letting youth interact with any adult from the community, they often hand-picked youth-friendly people, frequently drawing on their personal networks. When possible, they also coached the adults and tried to manage their expectations. These results suggest why the youth often found the community adults friendly, respectful, and attentive. They were taking part in carefully orchestrated transactions.

Given the obstacles to youth-adult interactions, it is not surprising that leaders' task was labor intensive and sometimes difficult. Leaders worked hard to stay informed and took steps to manage both youth's and adults' experiences and behavior. Their efforts were not always successful, and problems occasionally emerged. Despite her efforts to meet regularly with internship supervisors and youth, Christina at Art First reported not finding out about a

problem between one youth and his supervisor until the end of the program. At a meeting between Harambee youth and a city alderwoman, the youth got angry and started yelling at her, requiring the leader to do damage control with the council member, the youth, and his own staff (Larson & Walker, in press). Nevertheless, most of these interactions appeared to be quite successful, we think, because of the work leaders did to manage them.

What Resources Did Youth Gain?

Our final question was, what long-term benefits did youth gain from these interactions? Most of these interactions, it should be noted, were one-time contacts, short-lived relationships, or longer-term acquaintanceships. After a methodical analysis, Sullivan (2007) characterized the nature of these inter-actions as "superficial but amicable" (p. 57). Even when there were continuing relationships, they did not have the emotional qualities associated with ment-orships (cf. Rhodes, 2002). As Laida from El Concilio described, "If I see them, it's, 'Hi, how are you doing?'—'Oh yeah, I remember you. How are things going?'"

Nonetheless, our final analyses identified three categories of resources, youth reported gaining, that were significant to their future lives.

Information. Participants from all seven of the programs reported gaining valuable information about adult worlds. This included knowledge about spe-cific career paths, academic options at particular colleges, and information about how civic, business, and other adult worlds work. This kind of infor-mation was the principle benefit reported from presentations by experts. For example, the youth at Harambee had taken a series of trips to different busi-nesses to talk with people working in diverse professions; and Tonya, a 16-year-old African American from Harambee, reported learning about career possibilities that interested her and the importance of college to entering those careers. Youth also reported gaining information about the functioning of adult institutions from their direct experiences in collaborations and lobbying. Nancy, from Prairie Co. 4-H, reported that her presentation to lobby the town council for their yearly funding helped her learn about the procedures used by the council to make budgetary decisions. Other youth described gaining infor-mation about running an art gallery, career options in veterinary medicine, and how business owners, police, and professional community activists think.

Skills. Participants from all programs reported gaining skills for functioning in adult worlds. These skills came from the youth's experiences in the more active activities they engaged in with community adults (e.g., soliciting donations, collaborating, lobbying). Many youth reported developing skills

for communicating with adults, including learning to prepare beforehand and organize their thoughts. Daren, a 16-year-old European American, described skills she gained from working with adults at Clarkston FFA: "I've learned how to communicate on a mature level where we can get points across and we can get things solved and set aside our differences." Youth also reported learning how to present a professional image and act in ways appropriate to specific adult contexts. Many said they learned how to dress, what language to use, and how to be effective in interactions with adults, for example, in job interviews. Enrique, a 21-year-old Latino, described the skills he gained from working with community adults at The Studio as follows:

> It taught me how to speak to an adult, like let's say a funder. And how to be more presentable. And how not to look like you know: "He's from the ghetto, why do we got to listen to him?" But look like, "Yeah, I'm from the ghetto but I have something positive to say."

The youth's experiences soliciting, collaborating with, and lobbying community adults gave them skills for being effective in different adult contexts.

Access. Youth from all programs reported obtaining access to adult worlds from these community adults. This included obtaining references to jobs, help with navigating the college application process, and entrée into professional circles. Enrique sometimes served as assistant engineer for adults who used the production facilities at The Studio, and he described obtaining a job through the connections he made. Other youth asked or planned to ask some of these community adults for letters of reference for employment or college. Harold, a 17-year-old Mexican American, received a scholarship for college, partly through his contacts with members of the city council he met through El Concilio.

A number of youth stressed the variety and the significant influence of the different adults whom they had come in contact with. Tito, a 21-year-old Latino, was interested in developing a career in music production, and he said, "I made a lot of different connections, people that helped me out in the long run through the Studio . . . , like in different types of businesses." Other youth pointed to the variety of people they had met in diverse professions, in public institutions, and "in higher places."

Conclusion: Obtaining scarce resources. In sum, youth in these programs were exposed to unfamiliar adult professional and institutional worlds, and they obtained first-hand experience from listening to, talking with, and working with adults in these settings. The resources they gained were pertinent to their future education, careers, and lives as adults. Although these

interactions did not lead to deep relationships, they helped youth obtain information, skills, and access—resources that are typically out of reach for adolescents, especially to low-income urban youth.

Discussion

Contact with high-resource adults is vitally important to adolescents' preparation for adulthood, especially for low-income urban youth of color (who formed the majority of youth in this study). However, there are formidable obstacles that make these interactions difficult, fragile, and rare. Negative mutual stereotypes and generational differences in knowledge and power create obstacles to successful transactions between youth and adults (Camino, 2005). This qualitative research aimed to learn about the potentials for positive cross-generational interactions through studying youth programs' efforts to foster them. By examining what appeared to make these interactions work in high-quality programs with skilled program leaders, our objective might be described as understanding the "art of the possible." What can be achieved in interactions between youth and community adults under favorable conditions?

Our analyses suggest three key components in programs' success in addressing the obstacles to these interactions. The first was employing activities (such as expert presentations, soliciting donations, collaborative activities, lobbying) that provide a defined role relationship which structured these interactions. A notable finding was that these role relationships often did *not* put youth in a position of equal status to the adults but rather in a role structure (expert/learner, solicitor/donor, lobbyist/public official) that replicated the normative power hierarchy between generations. It is argued that experiencing more equal status is beneficial to youth in various ways (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2003), but this does not appear to be an essential condition for successful interactions. In fact, it may be that these interactions were successful, in part, *because* they replicated a status differential that was familiar to both parties. Past research suggests that youth and adults often experience confusion in their interactions with each other because of ambiguities and complexities of "purpose, role, and power" (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Conner, 2005, p. 8). The defined and familiar youth-adult role relationship in most of these activities may have been successful because they provided clarity under conditions that youth could accept.

The second key component was these conditions. Part of what appeared to be critical, from youth's viewpoint, was experiencing these activities as providing something they valued. Often what these older adolescents valued

were resources pertinent to their preparation for adulthood (e.g., information about careers they were interested in), but they also included other things (e.g., donations to the program, getting officials to act on something youth cared about). What was also critical to youth, consistent with Camino's (2000, 2005) research, was that the roles they were playing were meaningful and that they were respected by the adults. Though they were often not equal, youth were not always demeaned. We believe that more than equality of power, it was experiencing meaning, gaining valued resources, and being respected that provided an opportunity structure for youth to transcend unfavorable expectations and stereotypes of adults (Jarrett et al., 2005).

Third, these transactions appeared to avoid obstacles because the program leaders played an active and energetic role in brokering them. Although leaders' objective was to facilitate direct youth-adult interactions, they did much separate work with both parties to make them successful. They trained youth, sometimes providing them with scripts. They hand-picked adults, drawing on friendships and people from their professional networks. They tried to address both groups' negative expectations about the other: building up youth's self-confidence and trying to help adults see youth in a positive light. They coached both sides before and debriefed them afterward, performing shuttle diplomacy to help them adapt to each other and create a fit between their divergent realities. The analyses suggest that these cross-generational transactions worked because the program leaders devoted a large amount of energy to steering youth and adults around the obstacles to their transactions.

Given the amount of effort required, it is important to ask whether it is worth it: Do the gains for youth justify the strenuous efforts that appear to be required to orchestrate these types of interactions? Despite all the leaders work, what they were able to achieve in most cases were often one-time youth-adult transactions or, at best, longer-term superficial relationships (Sullivan, 2007). What is important to recognize, however, is that these transactions created *bridging social capital*—connections for youth to worlds outside their own. Putnam, Gittell, and Vidal argue that bridging social capital can provide valuable resources from superficial relationships, what Granovetter (1973) called the "strength of weak ties." Indeed, the youth reported obtaining insider information, developing skills through direct experiences, and gaining access to diverse adult worlds that would otherwise not have been accessible to them. These are resources that are scarce, especially for low-income urban youth of color (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Wilson, 1987). Of course, this qualitative data did not permit us to measure and critically assess the long-term impact of these contacts. More systematic

cost-benefit analyses are needed. But the substantial efforts required to broker these transactions may well be worth it, if these resources increase youth's subsequent entrée to adult career and civic worlds.

Directions for Research

This question of subsequent effects presents the important test for further research. Do these, heavily orchestrated, small steps toward relationships with community adults influence youth's futures? Do the types of information, skills, and access described here open doors for youth to later, larger steps into adult worlds? Jarrett et al. (2005) found that youth in programs appeared to progress through three stages: an initial point at which they were disconnected from community adults and had negative perceptions to having experiences of positive interactions (often with selected youth-friendly adults in favorable circumstances) to forming more lasting connections and feeling more confident and skilled in dealing with adults met through the program. A possible fourth stage, which was reported by a few of the youth in this research, involved then using these new skills and confidence to interact with adults whom they contacted on their own and had not been preselected.

Further research should critically evaluate the pathways that most facilitate this progression, across different groups of youth. What types of pretraining, activities, and structured role relationships are most successful for creating the initial positive interactions between youth and community adults? How might this vary by age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of youth? Is the subsequent stage of gaining skills and confidence more likely when youth interact with adults in equal status roles and when interactions occur with community adults and youth of the same ethnicity?

To make these youth-adult interactions sustainable, it is also essential to understand these interactions from the perspective of the community adults. How do they experience different activities? What do they gain? Under what condition do they revise their negative perceptions of youth as a result of the interactions? And how does one best identify adults for these interactions? Research on attempts to create youth-adult partnerships suggest that the obstacles to these relationships lie as much if not more in the adults and their attitudes (Camino, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2003). It is important to understand adults' experiences interacting with youth across diverse activities and different types of youth-adult role relationships.

Answers to these questions can add to basic knowledge about intergenerational relationships as well as applied knowledge on how to foster them.

Implications for Organizations

This and future research can contribute significantly to policy and practice on facilitating youth-adult contacts in programs and other organized settings. The three keys suggested by the current study may provide guidelines: (a) Create activities in which youth and adult roles are clear; (b) Achieving equality of power between youth and adults may be less important than making sure youth feel activities are meaningful and that adults respect them; and (c) Successful interactions may require a substantial amount of work by intermediaries to steer clear of the typical obstacles and pitfalls to these transactions.

In addition, organizations invested in creating successful transactions should see to cultivating the organizations' networks for facilitating these interactions. Such organizations might look for institutions to partner with that provide a ready supply of youth-friendly high-resource adults. In some cases, these adults may be available within one's own organization. Youth in faith-based programs report having high rates of interactions with nonfamily adults, possibly because the church, temple, or mosque provides a ready pool of adults connected by a common faith (Larson, Hansen, & Moneta, 2006). Programs in this research also drew on program alumni, community organizations sharing common goals, and adults who were employed in career tracks represented by the program (e.g., arts, theater). Another implication of the research is that such organizations should consider the social network and networking skills of applicants for positions in the organization among the qualifications they bring to the job. City or regional intermediary institutions may also play a role in facilitating these transactions for some organizations.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for all programs, youth, and program leaders.
2. Other activities reported in one or more programs included field trips, attending conferences, internships, practice and real job interviews, and surveying adults on the street.

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