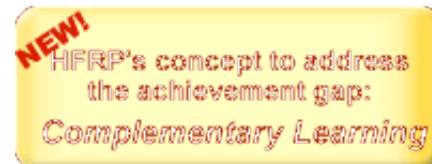


h f r p



## [The Evaluation Exchange](#) [Volume X, No. 1, Spring 2004](#)

### Issue Topic: Evaluating Out-of-School Time Program Quality

#### Beyond Basic Training

### Life on the Ground: Balancing Youth Ownership With Adult Input

*Kathrin Walker and Reed Larson from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign describe their research on the dilemmas adult leaders in youth programs face and how they address these dilemmas to improve program quality.*<sup>1</sup>

The practice of youth work is replete with real-life dilemmas. A group of youth who have been planning a citywide youth summit want to make major changes at the last minute, when there is not time to think through these changes. Two adult advisors of a high school service club turn over the planning of a day camp to the club's members, but as the date of the camp approaches, the youth haven't yet come up with a plan for the camp. Wanting to avoid this type of situation, the advisors of an arts program create in advance a structure for the work youth will do, but then have difficulty getting the youth motivated.

The daily life of practitioners is not formulaic. It brings complex situations that require deliberating the merits of different paths of action. Practice is carried out on the "rough ground of paradox and contingency, ambiguity and fragmentation."<sup>2</sup> Effective youth practitioners are effective, in part, because they are good at anticipating and responding to these types of dilemmas. We suspect that their skill comes, also, from a regular process of self-evaluation.

We are examining the critical role

#### Related Resources

Larson, R., Hansen, D., & Walker, K. (in press). **Everybody's gotta give: Adolescents' development of initiative within a youth program.** In J. Mahoney, R. Larson, & J. Eccles (Eds.), *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after-school and community programs.* Mahwah, NJ:

[v about HFRP](#)

[v research areas](#)

[v publications](#)

[v news](#)

[v evaluation exchange](#)

[v FINE network](#)

[v contact HFRP](#)

adult leaders play in supporting youth's process of development and self-change. We are exploring the dilemmas these leaders face in their work and their strategies for addressing these challenges. Of course, every situation is unique—we do not believe research can identify a prescriptive set of responses for the diversity of programs, youth, and real-life contingencies. Rather, our goal is to learn about the salient features of these situations and to identify the repertoire of responses on which adult leaders draw.

One dilemma involves balancing youth agency and ownership with adult direction. When adult leaders stand back completely, youth can get off track, as happened with the planning of the day camp we mentioned above. But when adults assume control, youth will not experience the ownership that drives important developmental changes. Ownership is crucial to the growth of multicultural competencies, the development of initiative, and the formation of social capital, among other processes.

The adult leaders we have studied are highly skilled at avoiding the horns of this dilemma. Our data suggest that the techniques they use promote youth ownership *at the same time* that they provide guidance to help keep things on track. These techniques include:

- *Following youth's lead* – supporting goals set by youth
- *Cultivating a culture of youth input* – instilling norms and expectations that emphasize youth leadership
- *Monitoring* – attending to how the work is proceeding, with careful intervention to encourage rather than undercut youth
- *Providing intermediate structures* – helping youth structure or break down tasks to make them more manageable
- *Stretching and pushing youth* – encouraging youth to try out new roles and ideas; nudging them to go beyond their comfort zones

Allowing youth to have ownership and keeping work on track are not inevitably at odds. In the programs we studied, when adults intervened, they did so in ways that shored up rather than undermined youth ownership.

What adult leaders do is often more art than science. Much of their expertise consists not in applying a standardized routine, but in

Erlbaum.

Larson, R., Jarrett, R., Hansen, D., Pearce, N., Sullivan, P., Walker, K., et al. (in press).

**Youth programs as contexts of positive development.** In A. Linley & S. Joseph (Eds.), *International handbook of positive psychology in practice: From research to application*. New York: Wiley.

University of Illinois Youth Development Research Project website.

[web.aces.uiuc.edu/youthdev](http://web.aces.uiuc.edu/youthdev)

reflecting on and responding to different situations, developmental goals, and groups of youth. It should be recognized that finding and maintaining this balance between youth ownership and adult intervention is only one of the many dilemmas adult leaders face. By attending to this dialectic of dilemmas and responses to these dilemmas, we can better understand, evaluate, and elevate youth development practice.

<sup>1</sup> The research described herein was supported by grants from the William T. Grant Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Schwandt, T. A. (2003). “Back to the rough ground!” Beyond theory to practice in evaluation. *Evaluation*, 9(3), 353–364.

**Kathrin Walker**  
**Coordinator of Research Programs**  
**Tel: 217-265-8413**  
**Email: [kcwalkr1@uiuc.edu](mailto:kcwalkr1@uiuc.edu)**

**Reed Larson, Ph.D.**  
**Endowed Chair in Family Resiliency**  
**Tel: 217-333-2837**  
**Email: [larsonr@uiuc.edu](mailto:larsonr@uiuc.edu)**

**Department of Human and Community Development**  
**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**  
**1105 W. Nevada Street**  
**Urbana, IL 61801**

[> Go to next article](#)  
[> Go back to Table of Contents](#)

[^ Back to top](#)

All rights reserved. Information on this site may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission from [Harvard Family Research Project](#).

© 2006 President and Fellows of Harvard College  
Published by [Harvard Family Research Project](#)  
3 Garden Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
Tel: 617-495-9108  
Fax: 617-495-8594  
Email: [hfrp@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:hfrp@gse.harvard.edu)