

Running Head: WHY TRUST MATTERS

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Why Trust Matters: How Confidence in Leaders Transforms

What Adolescents Gain From Youth Programs

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#### Abstract

Youth's trust in program leaders is considered a key to the positive impact of youth programs. We sought to understand *how* trust influences youth's program experiences from their perspective. We interviewed 108 ethnically diverse youth (ages 12-19) participating in 13 arts, leadership, and technology programs. Analysis of these accounts suggested five ways in which youth's trust in leaders amplified program benefits. Trust increased youth's: (a) confidence in leaders' guidance in program activities, (b) motivation in the program, (c) use of leaders for mentoring, (d) use of leaders as a model of a well-functioning relationship, and (e) experience of program cohesiveness. Across benefits, trust allowed youth to draw on leaders' expertise, opened them to new experiences, and helped increase youth's agency.

*Keywords:* youth programs, trust, youth-adult relationships

## Why Trust Matters: How Confidence in Leaders Transforms

### What Adolescents Gain From Youth Programs

- *Now that I trust [the leader] it motivates me to work harder.* (Jenayah at Rising Leaders)
- *If we didn't trust him, we probably wouldn't have taken his advice.* (Xavier at High Definition)

A majority of high-school-age youth are involved in at least one youth program (including community and school-based arts, technology, leadership and other programs). Research indicates that these programs can have significant effects on social and emotional development (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins & Zarrett, 2009). Positive relationships between youth and staff are described as a “linchpin” (Rhodes, 2004), a “powerful force” (Walker, Marczak, Blyth, & Bordon, 2005), and as “critical mediums” of development in these programs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Longitudinal research substantiates that young people’s experience of stable supportive relationships with program leaders is one of the strongest predictors of program outcomes (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015).

Youth’s *trust* in leaders is often seen as a key to the power of these relationships (Halpern, Barker, & Mollard, 2000; Hirsch, Roffman, Deutsch, Flynn, Loder, & Pagano, 2000; Strobel, Kirshner, O’Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008). Eccles and Gootman (2002) propose that youth’s trust in leaders “magnifies” the influence of the program. But little research has been done on how this magnification might occur. It is important to understand how trust alters youth’s program experience and learning processes.

In this exploratory, theory-generating study we sought to understand these processes from youth’s perspectives. Quantitative and qualitative research shows that effective youth programs are contexts in which youth become highly engaged in program activities: they become active

learners (Durlak & Wiessberg, 2010; Larson, 2011; Vandell et al., 2015). It is important to ask how trust in leaders might contribute to these active learning processes. Theory and research across fields of social science demonstrate multiple ways in which trust can enhance the functioning of individual behavior and human interactions (Dirks, 2006; Giddens, 1991; Rotenberg, 2010), and we drew on this literature as a starting point. But our primary goal was getting adolescents' own accounts, as program participants. We asked: how does trust facilitate youth's thought processes, decision-making, actions and interactions? Understanding the ways in which trust contributes to youth's participation in programs is important both to research on positive development and to helping front-line program staff better use this trust in ways that are beneficial to youth and their development.

### **Literature Review: Why Trust Might Matter**

#### **Definition and Facilitative Functions of Trust**

Trust is defined as confidence in another person – a judgment that the person is dependable and has one's best interests in mind (Rotenberg, 2010). It entails expectations of the person's present and future goodwill in relation to one's goals and needs (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Li, 2007). Assessment of trustworthiness involves cognitive and affective judgments of the person's benevolence, integrity, and abilities to provide useful assistance within a domain of concern (Banerjee, Bowie & Parsons, 2006; Mayer, Davis & Shoorman, 1995).

General research and theory suggest how trust in a person can facilitate processes that lead to benefits for the trustor (if the person is indeed worthy of trust). Trust increases the trustor's willingness to rely on, receive care from, and be influenced by the person (Banerjee et al., 2006; Szczesniak, Colaço, & Rondón, 2012; Watson, 2003). This trust in the person (e.g., in their advice and goodwill) can be especially valuable in helping the trustor deal with situations of

vulnerability (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Li, 2007). For example, trust in information and advice from the person can help trustors take risks. Confidence in the future benevolence, abilities, and availability of the person can reduce uncertainty about a course of action (Mayer et al., 1995).

### **Processes in Youth Programs That Might Be Facilitated by Trust**

Similar facilitative processes may occur when young people trust program leaders. First, in most programs for high-school-age youth, members work together or alone on projects (e.g., theater, videography, social activism projects), and program philosophies typically support youth's ownership of this work and youth-driven learning processes (Mahoney et al., 2009). But doing these projects often requires youth to take risks and navigate uncertainties (Heath, 1999). Leaders have content knowledge (e.g., about videography, effective leadership) that can help youth succeed in their projects, but youth may not use this knowledge if they do not trust leaders (Halpern, 2005). Trust may "magnify" by increasing youth's use of leaders' input.

Programs also intend these projects to be vehicles for youth to learn socio-emotional skills (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003), and trust in leaders may facilitate this learning. Research suggests that youth learn these skills through their experiences in the work, for example, through experiencing strong, disruptive emotions (i.e. vulnerability) in response to obstacles or setbacks and through experimenting with strategies for dealing with these emotions (Larson, 2011; Rusk et al., 2013). Leaders appear to play valuable modeling and "coaching" roles that facilitate this learning. But again, youth's degree of trust in leaders may influence whether this learning occurs (Halpern, 2009; Mekinda & Hirsch, 2013).

Scholars have suggested another beneficial process in programs that may depend on trust in leaders. Youth sometimes utilize program leaders as "natural mentors" for help with personal issues (Hirsch et al., 2000; Strobel et al., 2008). Rhodes posits that trust is prerequisite to youth's

willingness to draw on a person for mentoring activities such as using the person as a “sounding board” or asking for advice on personal issues (Rhodes, 2005; Rhodes & Lowe, 2009). But knowledge is limited on whether and how trust influences youth’s use of leaders for mentoring.

High-school-age youth are developing new executive skills that may enhance how they are influenced by or use trusted leaders in these ways. Research suggests that teens in programs employ these executive skills to become more actively engaged as conscious and deliberate agents of their own development. They are able to learn in programs through use of foresight, analysis of possible courses of action, and critical reflection on outcomes of work (Kirshner, Pozzoboni & Jones, 2011; Larson, 2011). Trusted leaders may contribute to these advanced learning processes through coaching and modeling (Heath, 1999). Blakemore and Mills (2014) suggest that adolescents become more able to *use* the perspective of others to guide decision-making and integrate their learning. Adolescents may become able to use leaders’ advice and modeling in more abstract, reflective, and creative ways – again, providing they trust the leader.

Theorists have identified a set of central active ingredients of program effectiveness, typically including relationships with leaders, program activities, and youth’s active engagement (mentioned above); some add the program culture and peer relationships to this list (Hirsch, Deutsch & DuBois, 2011; Lerner, 2004; Lerner, Phelps, Forman, & Bowers, 2009; Vandell et al., 2015). We anticipated that trust in leaders might enhance program processes involving most or all of these active ingredients.

### **This Study**

This study was designed to obtain youth’s accounts of these processes in programs that served ethnically diverse youth and that varied in types of projects (e.g., making videos, rehearsing a play, growing vegetables). Data were collected as part of a larger study aimed at

understanding processes associated with positive development in different social-emotional domains (e.g. responsibility, motivation, strategic thinking). Because the overall goal of the larger research was studying positive processes (including those related to trust), we selected programs that had characteristics of effective programs – in order to increase the likelihood of observing these processes. We employed grounded theory and related qualitative analytic methods because we wanted to identify the variety of processes in contexts as experienced by the participants in those processes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Gergen, Josselson & Freeman, 2015).

The lexicon of words used above to describe the possible contribution of trust -- linchpin, key, “prerequisite to”, increases willingness, magnifies – suggests that trust might be best conceptualized as a moderator of the effects of programs and leaders on youth. In statistics a “moderator” represents a variable that is not a principal cause, but is rather a contributor that influences whether and how strongly a process occurs (Holmbeck, 1997). In research on youth development, moderators may take the form of “amplifiers” that enable or increase beneficial processes (Hansen & Larson, 2007). For this investigation, we wanted to be open to the possibility that trust influences youth in multiple ways in different situations, nonetheless we were attentive to the possibility that trust might function in this way.

### **Methods**

Data were collected as a component of the Pathways Project, a longitudinal mixed-methods study on developmental processes in youth programs. Data from youth were obtained at four points in time, spread over the full course of the program cycle (typically a school year). Interview questions on trust were asked of youth interviewed at Time 2 and Time 4.

### **Sample of Programs**

The 13 programs in the research served high-school-age adolescents and were from three locations – central Illinois, Chicago, and the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area. We looked for programs that had low turnover of youth and staff, served low-income and working class youth, and were project-based. The programs were centered around short or long-term projects with a focus on arts, leadership, technology, and science (Table 1). All names of programs, youth, and program leaders identified in this article are pseudonyms.

The 25 primary adult leaders at these programs were experienced youth professionals. They had worked with youth for a median of eight years (range 4 – 42). Most, 76%, had a college degree and 40% had formal training in or a degree in youth development. A majority of the leaders were white ( $n = 16$ ) and female ( $n = 14$ ). They ranged in age from 24 - 62 years (Median = 35 years).

### **Participants**

The interview data for this article came from 108 youth (53 male, 55 female) at the 13 programs. The sample included 46 Latino, 36 African-American, 21 European-American, and 5 youth of other ethnicities. The average age was 15.7 with 92% of youth between ages 14-17 (full range: 12 – 19 years). Youth had attended the program for an average of 1.5 years at the time the study began (range: 2 months to 6 years). Half of the sample for this paper ( $n = 54$ ) were part of the “prospective” subsample, selected at the beginning of the study. These youth responded to questions about trust at Time 2 (circa November in most programs). The other half of the sample ( $n = 54$ ) were part of a separate “retrospective” subsample and responded to the trust questions at Time 4 at the end of the program cycle.

These interviewees were chosen using purposive quota selection (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014) aimed at obtaining a sample that included equal numbers by gender and was



approximately representative of the members of each program on ethnicity, program experience, and other variables. Our objective was to select 12 youth for the interviews from each of the Central Illinois sites and 8 youth from each urban program. We selected half of the interviewed youth at each program to be in the prospective (Time 2) subsample and, later, selected an equivalent number to be in the retrospective (Time 4) subsample.

The selection of subsamples at each program was performed through examination of questionnaire data obtained from all program participants. Males and females were listed separately, to facilitate selection of equal number of males and females. The selection of specific males and females was guided by the goals of: balancing novice and experienced youth, a representation of each program by the ethnicities of youth in the program, and--for the goals of the larger study-- different degrees of parental support (for Time 2) and responsibility development (for Time 4). In order to maintain balance on these variables, these decisions were also informed by consulting our ongoing records on the demographics of the interview sample within each program and across the entire sample. The final numbers of youth at several sites were somewhat below target due to the small size and high attrition at those programs. Statistical comparisons of the youth in the final interview sample with the other 244 youth in the 13 programs found that the interviewed youth did not differ significantly from other youth in ethnicity, gender, age, and years in program.

### **Interview Questions**

Interviewers first asked the youth to identify a leader (if any) they trusted most. Youth who named a trusted leader were asked three questions about how that trust influenced them:

- a. How has it [the trust] helped with your work and learning in the program? Can you give me an example?

- b. How do you think your experience in the program would be different, if you didn't trust him or her?
- c. How has this trust helped you deal with other things in your life? Can you give me an example?

### **Data Analysis**

The goal of the analyses was to understand the range of processes youth described accompanying their experience of trust in the leaders. Before beginning, we identified youth in the sample who reported trusting at least one program leader. All but four of the 108 youth reported having a leader whom they trusted. Nearly all reported that this trust had grown since they began the program. As a result they were able to compare changes in their program experiences associated with this increase in trust. We dropped an additional six youth from the sample, leading to a final sample of 98. Dropped youth include those who were not asked the questions as written in the interview protocol ( $n = 3$ ), misunderstood the questions about how trust influenced them ( $n = 1$ ), or reported that trusting the leader did not help them ( $n = 2$ ).

Our work analyzing the data involved two steps. First we focused on evaluating youth's reports of the *benefits* of trust on youth's thoughts, feelings, and actions. In the second step, we went deeper and focused on youth's accounts of the *specific processes* underlying each type of benefit.

**Step One: Identifying categories of beneficial processes that stem from trusting the leader.** We first conducted analyses aimed at identifying different ways that the 98 youth described how trust in the leader benefited or helped them. A three-person team engaged in an iterative process of developing categories of benefits. One coder did initial line-by-line coding of a small set of data to identify a set of 'starter codes' (Charmaz, 2014). Two coders then

progressively coded the remaining interview transcripts, engaging in constant comparison of coded data excerpts and iteratively revising initial operational definitions of codes to better represent the core dimensions of each benefit (Charmaz, 2014). These coders met throughout the process to discuss their coding in order to come to a consensus, following procedures recommended by Hill, Knox, Thompson, Williams, Hess, and Ladany (2005). Any time there was a disagreement on the coding of an excerpt, the coders both stated their reasoning and they made a decision together on the coding before moving on to the next section coded. A third team member served as an auditor, periodically reviewing the operational definitions for codes, verifying that they were faithfully represented in the coded data, and suggesting changes when warranted (Hill et al., 2005).

The final coding yielded four categories of benefits that were reported by a substantial number of youth (at least 25). These included: “increased use of leaders’ guidance in program activities,” “increased motivation in program work,” “use of leaders for mentoring on personal issues,” and “use of leaders as a model of a well-functioning relationship.” A smaller number of youth ( $n = 12$ ) reported a fifth category, “increased experience of program cohesiveness.” Given the limited number of cases for the fifth category, we did not have the depth of evidence to analyze it as fully in Step 2 of the analyses, so our summary of findings for it is brief. A sixth “other” category ( $n = 13$ ) included responses in which youth stated a benefit that was unclear, vague, or rarely mentioned. These were not analyzed.

Many youth ( $n = 50$ ) reported more than one of the five benefits. Forty-eight percent of youth reported one benefit, 39% reported two benefits, 12% reported three benefits, and 1% reported four benefits. We evaluated whether the rate of reporting the five categories differed by youth’s gender and ethnicity using chi square tests. No significant differences were found.

**Step Two: Identifying specific processes underlying each category of benefits.** In

Step Two we engaged in theoretical analyses aimed at identifying the underlying processes and mechanisms associated with each benefit (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Two team members iteratively compared the narrative passages *within* each of the five categories of benefits in order to abstract the underlying processes in each. They regularly met, drafted conceptual memos, and repeatedly returned to data passages to compare the emerging theory with the youth's accounts.

We sought to generate "in vivo" codes for these beneficial processes that were grounded in the words of participants (Charmaz, 2014). To illustrate, in analyzing passages initially categorized as "increased motivation in program work," we observed that a frequent theme was that trust influenced youth to work harder and invest effort in their projects, which in turn enhanced their work and learning. The range of phrases used to identify this code, included youth's reporting that trust made them: "work even harder," "want to stick to it," "try my best", "want to do better," and "put all your effort into it"; and several said that without trust, they would not "take it as seriously" and "care as much." Methodical evaluation of all the passages receiving this code led us to this description of the trust-elicited motivational process: Trust led youth to *become more invested, work harder, and care more about doing well.*

As part of these analyses, we drew on "sensitizing concepts" from the trust and other pertinent literatures where they were helpful in conceptualizing these processes (for example the concepts of vulnerability, risk-taking). We followed recommendations by Charmaz (2014) that these concepts "may guide but not command inquiry, much less commandeer it" (p. 30). Our goal was to describe the processes as they were experienced and conceptualized by the youth.

The idea of trust as a moderator or amplifier of trust served as a similar sensitizing concept. Youth often described the benefit of their trust in the leader by making comparisons to

other relationships with adults or to their relationships with the leader before they felt trust (these were often prompted by interview question b.). Across the categories of benefits, youth reported that these processes did not occur or occurred less for the comparison relationship and were stronger with the current trusted leader. This consistent finding provided evidence that youth often experienced trust as a moderator – as a facilitator, necessary precondition, or amplifier of the processes.

Step Two of the analyses concluded, first, with identifying representative quotes for use in the Findings section to illustrate how individual youth experienced and enacted the processes in the program. Second, we conducted theoretical analyses across all the processes, which led to identification of three contributions of trust evident across many or most of the processes. These were synthesized into five propositions reported in the Discussion section. It is important to recognize that the methods of this research are those of theory-generation not theory testing.

### **Findings: Processes Through Which Trust Benefited Youth**

We identified five benefits of trust in the program leaders and specific underlying processes that generated each of these benefits. The first two involved ways in which trust magnified youth's work and learning within program activities: it increased their use of leaders' guidance and increased their motivation. The second two involved benefits that went beyond the program: trust facilitated youth's use of leaders as mentors for personal issues and it facilitated youth's experience of their relationship with leaders as a model of a well-functioning relationship. The final, less frequent benefit was that trust increased youth's experience of program cohesiveness and belonging.

#### **Increased Use of Leaders' Guidance in Program Activities**

Some youth ( $n = 32$ ) said trust made them more likely to use the adult leader's guidance in their work. Trust made them more confident in and receptive to the leaders' input; and they used this input in ways that enhanced their work and learning.

First, they said that trust made them more likely to *listen and to follow the leaders' suggestions*. Riley, a youth in Rising Leaders, described how trust in the leader affected his work in planning school and community events:

If you don't trust somebody you're not really gonna listen to them. I mean sometimes you have to listen to them and you know it's right, but you're less likely to, "Oh, what did you say?" – like [you] miss out on something just because you're not completely focused in on that mistrustful person.

Trust made a difference in whether Riley would "focus in on" the leader's suggestions.

Similarly, Victoria recounted how gaining trust changed how she responded to leader input. She was in On Target, a 4-H program in which youth learn firearm and leadership skills. She described how increased trust in the leaders affected her:

I used to lean back a lot [when firing a gun]. And a couple of the coaches I really didn't know-- I really didn't like the way they coached other people-- kept trying to tell me, "Lean forward, you want to lean forward like it's a shotgun." But I didn't really listen to them because I didn't know them, I didn't really trust them as much.

Without trust, Victoria discounted the coaches' recommendations, and wasn't willing to try a different stance. But with the new leaders: "because I trust them, I listen easier to the tips they give to be a better shooter or a better youth leader." These and other youth said that trust opened them up to listening to the adults' guidance.

It was not just that trust helped them listen, it influenced them to *actively engage* with the leaders' advice. Jaime at High Definition described how trust in the leader "helps me dive right into it." Donny at Urban Farmers reported that this trust was critical to helping him develop effective strategies for watering plants "so the water reaches the roots." Other youth reported that trust led them to think more deeply about the challenges, ideas, and choices within the projects. They didn't just follow the leaders' advice, they used it as a catalyst for their thinking; sometimes they adapted or reworked it.

Youth reported that this listening and engagement that came with trusting the leader had a positive impact on their projects and learning. Frankie at Emerson High School Drama Club pointed to the role trust played in producing quality productions. If he did not trust the Director, Linda Williams, he said:

I would probably not always listen to what she has to say. And with one of the shows we did last year, she had a very interesting interpretation of how we were going to do it. If I hadn't trusted her – with the part that I had in that show – I would've done a horrible job.

And if the other people in the show hadn't trust her, it would have been a disaster.

In Frankie's view, their trust in the artistic skills and vision of the Director was an essential ingredient to the youth creating a successful play. Success can be important to youth's development because it helps validate the lessons they learned at each step in achieving that success, for example, about how to develop a character for a play, plan an event, or water plants (Heath, 1999; Larson & Brown, 2007; Priest & Gas, 2005).

In sum, trust appeared to have a transformative effect in youth's use of guidance from leaders. Without trust, youth reported that they would often not even listen to leaders' input. But

as they gained trust, they not only listened, leaders' guidance elicited active processes of engaging with and using leaders' advice.

### **Increased Motivation in Program Work**

The second benefit was that trust in leaders increased and helped sustain youth's motivation in program activities. Summarizing decades of research, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) concluded that motivation depends significantly on a person's answers to two questions: Do I want to do this task? And, can I do this task – am I able to do it? Youth's ( $n = 44$ ) descriptions of how trust in leaders helped them were affirmative answers to these two questions.

First, many youth described how trusting the leader increased their investment in the work, it increased their *wanting* to do it. A common theme was that trust led them to *become more invested, work harder, and care more about doing well*. Geoff at Reel Makers, a program in which youth created videos, said of the leader, Tyler Bates: "If I didn't trust him, if he wasn't who he was, then I probably wouldn't be as motivated to work hard. I really wouldn't care as much. He really cares about it all and I wouldn't want to let anybody down." Because of trust, Tyler's motivation influenced Geoff's own motivation to work hard, invest thought, and create a high quality video. Because Tyler cared, Geoff cared.

Similarly, when asked whether her experience at High Definition would have been different if she did not trust Lora Parks, the leader, Rosana said:

I don't think I would take it as seriously. I think our bond helped – helped me be more responsible because it's like I didn't want to disappoint her in a way because like of our bond. So it helped me, like it pushed me a little.

Rosana and other youth described how this trust influenced them to adapt the invested and serious mindset modeled by the leader. They reported that they didn't experience it as



“pressure.” They worked harder due to a sense of loyalty and obligation to the leader. Several youth also said that they wouldn’t attend the program if they didn’t trust the leader; one said, it would be a “deal breaker”. Because of youth’s bond of trust in the leader, youth were influenced by leaders to be more invested in the work; in Eccles and Wigfield’s terms, it increased their wanting to do it.

Wanting to do something, however, is often not sufficient to sustain motivation if you doubt your ability to do it: if your answer to “can I do it?” is uncertain. Doubt can be frequent in project-based programs, because youth’s work often involves taking risks, facing difficult challenges, and trying to achieve things they have never done before (e.g., creating a character in a play, lobbying public officials; Larson & Rusk, 2011).

Our second finding under motivation was that trust in the leader *strengthened youth’s confidence in their ability to do the work*. It helped them feel more confident about taking risks. Brice at Reel Makers said that his trust in the leader, Tyler Bates, made him “feel like I can do this, I feel like I can accomplish something.” Several youth said that trusting the leader made the work “easier.” Nadir at Emerson Drama Club said of Linda Williams that: “because she knows me, I know that when she tells me I can do it, I can do it.” Youth felt that the trusted leader understood their capabilities. The leaders’ confidence in them made them feel more confident in themselves.

Part of youth’s confidence was due to feeling secure that the trusted leader would be available to help if they encountered difficulties. Trust entailed confidence in the leaders’ future goodwill and abilities. Airelyn at Voces Unidas, a leadership program, explained this: “I feel confident, because I know if I do something wrong I can trust on them – be able to ask them,

‘Could you help me now I did wrong?’” Because she trusted the leaders, she felt comfortable asking for help when needed.

A third finding was that trust in leaders *decreased youth’s perception of vulnerability to undesired emotions*. Daivonne at Rising Leaders, explained that trust in David Dunn, “makes me have like, ‘no worries,’ about what I’m doing. Like, if I get it wrong, he won’t get mad at me and if I get it right, he praises me, like, ‘Good job, you’ve done it, you can relax now.’” Youth said trust in leaders protected them from other strong negative emotions associated with the risks of trying new courses of action. These included fear, embarrassment and aggravation. When asked how trust in the leader, Enrique Ceballos, helped her, Lucy at La Prensa explained:

I feel comfortable learning there. I like the fact that I can ask questions without feeling embarrassed. Like if I don’t know how to do editing, if I don’t know how to render a video, I’m not scared -- even if he showed me like seven times -- I will still ask him, “Hey, how do you render a video?” and I won’t be like, “Uh, I don’t want to ask him.” You know? I’ll just ask him.

Research shows that when adults give youth feedback it can easily make them feel embarrassed or humiliated (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The youth’s trust in the leaders included confidence that they were adults who would not make them feel embarrassed by mistakes.

Youth’s trust in leaders, then, contributed to sustained motivation by increasing the leaders’ positive influence on youth’s investment and effort in their work. This trust also helped youth rely on the confidence leaders’ expressed in their abilities – and reduced the doubt and worry that can come from the risks in trying new things. It is notable that these influences of trust on motivation appear to substantially influence youth’s expectations about the future horizon of their work. Youth’s trust in the ongoing goodwill, abilities, and integrity of leaders

appeared to facilitate youth's investment of hard work toward their goal and protect them from anxieties about things going wrong.

### **Use of Leaders for Mentoring on Personal Issues**

Some youth ( $n = 34$ ) reported a third benefit to be that trust in leaders made them feel secure in employing the adult as a resource – a mentor – for navigating personal issues. Trust *helped youth open up to leaders* about ongoing issues about friends, classes, emotions, and future life choices. As Durrell at Rising Leaders explained: “Knowing that I’m able to trust them, I’m able to tell them a lot of different stuff, like a lot of personal stuff.”

Trust and this opening up about personal issues, in turn, created conditions for the type of mentoring aimed for within formal mentoring programs: for youth's *use of the leader as a sounding board or for personal advice* (Rhodes, 2002). For instance, Elena at Unity House explained that trusting the leader helped because “sometimes you need to talk to someone to like let it all out. And she’s somebody I would talk to.” Nadir described how the trusted director at the drama club “can help you through a personal problem [by letting] you know what your options are. How you can go about something.”

A factor that made this “natural mentoring” powerful was many youth's perceptions that the trusted leaders were readily available to them. Thus, youth were able to receive mentoring when they needed it. They could catch leaders before or after the program, stop by their office, or (for a few youth) contact them by phone. Daivonne described the importance of his access to David Dunn, the leader of a school-based leadership program:

If I feel like I need to talk to somebody at school, I'll go to him. Even if I'm at home, if I need to talk to somebody, I know I can at least call him and we can talk. He's like a third parent.

Many of these youth stated that the trusted leader was “always there” when they wanted or needed someone to talk to about a personal matter.

The trusted leader, then, served as a safe person to talk to when life got messy. Youth who used leaders for guidance on personal issues expressed a certainty about the adult’s accessibility and willingness to help by saying “I know that....” Alan at The Station said, “I know that these people are always here for me.” Nick at the drama club said of Linda Williams, “I know that she’s a person at school that I could talk to. If I really need something serious I can go to her. That’s a great thing to lean back on. If I need it.” Eloisa at Rising Leaders explained how this certainty and ready availability was important to her:

Besides my mom, I don’t really have anyone else to talk to, and my mom is always working. So I know that if I ever needed help with anything at all, even if it’s not related to school, they’ll be there for me.

For youth like Eloisa, this third benefit of trust-- having an accessible, dependable adult to go to – increased the options for mentoring when they wanted input on a personal issue.

Youth’s belief in the leaders’ current and future goodwill allowed them to take the risk of opening up to leaders about personal experiences and decisions. Trust helped youth accept this vulnerability and feel safe in using leaders as a sounding board or a source of personal advice.

### **Use of Leaders as a Valuable Model of a Well-Functioning Relationship**

Fourth, somewhat fewer youth ( $n = 25$ ) described how experiencing the dynamics of a trusting relationship with the leader provided a model that helped them learn how to foster successful relationships with others. Drawing on attachment theory, Rhodes (2002) suggests that mentors can provide “blueprints” for positive relationships. Youth in our study reported that their

trusting relationships with leaders provided this kind of blueprint, and that they transferred it to other relationships in their lives.

The relationship with the leader, these youth suggested, provided lessons. They *learned and practiced* ingredients of a good relationship: mutual respect, expressing feelings, and give and take in daily interactions. A major theme in these lessons was the necessity of taking an active role to build a trusting relationship. They learned active strategies for “how to get close to people,” “how to win people over,” and “that I can let my guard down for a little bit.”

The importance of opening oneself up was a related theme in these lessons. Durrell described having developed a strong trusting bond with both David Dunn and Sadie Jensen at Rising Leaders. When asked how this trust helped him deal with other things in life, he said:

It shows me that once you get to know somebody you don't want to be in a shell, you want to open up. And you don't want to keep yourself covered thinking that, “Oh I don't really know this person.” You have to really—I would say—you have to throw yourself out and give them a chance to know you in order to know them better.

Opening up and “throwing yourself out,” Durrell discovered, are things he has to do to initiate a reciprocal process of mutual knowing. This ability to analyze and conceptualize reciprocal points of view is an achievement not typically seen before middle adolescence (Selman, 2003).

Youth described how they transferred the lessons and blueprints they learned from their trusting relationship with the leader to other relationships. Some of these relationships were with peers in the program. For example, Alexis at Rising Leaders stated: “if it wasn't for him [the leader] easing me up a little bit, you know, I would probably be hard-shelled, kind of [with] communication with others.” Roberto said without trust in the leader at Urban Farmers, “I would probably still be shy and all types of stuff like that, not really interacting with people.” Although

his relationship with Melissa Vaughn was “kind of iffy” at first, he discovered that the trust and openness he eventually developed with her carried over to peers in the program and more generally taught him “to give people chances, because you never know, like, it could be a good friend.”

Youth also described using this blueprint to improve their relationships outside of the program. Aerris, at Urban Farmers, described how trust in Melissa Vaughn helped her open up to and trust a couple of her friends more, saying: “[it] probably took me a month to start talking to Melissa, and after that month, a couple weeks later I just began to trust them [her friends] because we’ve been friends for a while.”

Youth also transferred what they had learned to how they related to other adults. Youth who attended school-based youth programs mentioned how experiencing a positive trusting relationship with the leader made them think more highly of teachers. For example, Jordan said trust in Linda Williams at the drama club:

...showed that there are good teachers and good people out there. Because sometimes you just feel like all the teachers are the same, they don’t care. But I think she, I think it taught me that there are people out there looking for your best interests at heart. And I think she’s one of those people.

Other youth felt their relationship with the leader allowed them to recognize that all adults are not the same and that there are caring adults in the world. Lucy at La Prensa said that in her previous experiences with adults they were “grumpy” and tended to keep boundaries up, which put her on guard. However, she pointed out that trusting Enrique Ceballos, “changed my perspective on adults in general. Not all adults are always going to criticize you, you can actually talk to most adults like an adult. You don’t have to be disrespectful and stuff like that.”

Given that many adolescents are suspicious of adults (Jarrett et al., 2005), it is noteworthy that youth described how experiencing a trusting relationship with the leader made them more optimistic about adults and potential relationships with adults.

Rhodes and Lowe (2009) suggest that experiencing a positive relationship with a mentor can be “corrective.” It can counteract expectations youth developed from previous relationships and show a young person what is possible. This was what youth in the study described. They learned lessons and blueprints for positive relationships from the trusting relationship and were inspired to apply these elsewhere in their lives.

### **Increased Experience of Program Cohesiveness**

A final benefit mentioned by significantly fewer youth ( $n = 12$ ) was that trust in the leader increased their experience of program cohesiveness. This process may be linked to the processes of modeling and transfer reported for the prior influence. Youth reported that the trust they (and other youth) had in the leaders created a trusting program climate that made it easier for them to integrate themselves into the group and experience a sense of belongingness. Youth reported that the feeling of the program would be different if they did not trust the program leader. William at Emerson High School Drama Club explained:

I don't think the program would be as upbeat or as fun as it is because we trust her... We're okay to be ourselves here. We're okay to have fun. If there was no trust, it'd be like in the classroom: we're just going through the motions.

Like William, other youth described this benefit using “we” and reported an influence on the group as a whole – on group cohesiveness and positive functioning. At the same time, youth said their experience of this cohesiveness (facilitated by trust in the leader) improved their individual experience. Katie at Rising Leaders felt that if youth did not have trust in the leaders,

it would not feel like a family and she, in turn, would not have as strong a sense of group membership. Trust in the leader both created a sense of group cohesiveness and allowed individuals to feel they belonged.

### **Discussion**

Prior research suggests that youth's experience of trust in caring relationships with program leaders is an important contributor to beneficial program outcomes (Halpern, et al., 2000; Hirsch, et al., 2000; Strobel et al., 2008; Vandell et al. 2015;). This qualitative study was aimed at understanding how these benefits from trust unfold – what are the processes? The findings suggest a set of processes through which trust in the goodwill, integrity, and abilities of leaders can increase youth's use of leaders' expertise and lead to youth becoming more actively engaged in developmental experiences. The limits of the study (e.g., a restricted sample of programs and youth, its use of exploratory methods) require that generalizations be made with appropriate caution. The study's strength is that findings are based on 98 ethnically diverse youth's narrative accounts of their ongoing experiences, decisions, and actions.

Our final theoretical analysis of youth's accounts led to five preliminary propositions about the processes through which trust in effective leaders enhances youth's developmental experiences in programs. Along with this we formulated a model, introduced in steps below, that synthesizes how the processes unfold over time (Figure 1). The propositions are:

**1. Trust in program leaders can contribute to *multiple distinct beneficial processes*.** **These may differ between youth.** Our analyses suggested four frequent beneficial processes (listed on the left side of Figure 1. These are labels for the processes that unfold to the right). These include two that enhance youth's developmental benefits from program activities: use of leaders' guidance and increased motivation in program work. (A less frequent fifth process –



increased experience of program cohesiveness – may also contribute to benefits from program activities.) The other two general processes directly enhance youth’ lives beyond the program: use of leaders for personal mentoring and use of leaders as a model relationship. Our findings suggest that different youth experience different processes. A youth whose trust in a leader increases her or his motivation in program activities may not use the leader for mentoring or vice versa. Variations in experiences *within* each process were also evident.

**2. Trust in leaders often functions as an “*amplifier*” – a factor that enables or magnifies beneficial processes.** In some cases youth described trust as similar to an enabling *on switch* to these processes. For example, some youth described trust as a precondition to listening to leaders’ advice or taking the first step of sharing a personal issue with the leader. In other cases youth suggested that trust amplified in degrees. Greater trust appeared to increase their confidence in leaders’ belief in their abilities and their experience of group cohesiveness. In statistical language trust often resembled a moderator: a factor that influences the strength of the pathway between two variables (hence it is represented in Figure 1 as a downward arrow influencing the pathways from column A to B). But we recognize that the dynamics may take different forms, possibly including those not well represented by statistical concepts.

**3. What trust most directly amplifies is youth’s use of the *assets* of leaders -- their abilities, resources, and capacities for caring.** Most of the leaders in the study were experienced professionals; and experienced leaders have assets that are valuable to youth, including content knowledge (Halpern, 2009), abilities to anticipate risks in projects (Heath, 1999), knowledge of motivational and socio-emotional processes (Larson & Dawes, 2014; McLaughlin Irby, & Langman, 1994), and listening and mentoring skills (Krueger, 2005; Mekinda & Hirsch, 2013). Our leaders made these assets available to youth through advice-

giving, encouragement, being available for mentoring, and modeling mature relationships with youth (column A of Figure 1). But youth indicated without trust they did not use them. Trust increased youth's willingness to draw on the leaders' knowledge and skills.

#### **4. Trust in leaders enhances youth's active engagement in developmental processes.**

Column B of the figure shows how each of the leader assets influenced and was used by youth, when trust was present. In most cases the effect was that youth became more actively engaged in learning processes (e.g., listening, using leaders as a sounding board, and using their relationship with leaders as a model of a positive relationship). Youth said trust in leaders made program activities "easier": it helped them feel more confident, work harder and engage more deeply. A repeated theme was that trust in leaders made youth more able to take risks. Trust in leaders' knowledge and goodwill helped them take risks in their projects, for example, in trying out novel ideas for a video; and in human relationships, for example, in initiating new relationships and trying out lessons they had learned from their relationship with the leader. In attachment theory, trust provides a "secure base" that frees a person to act more independently (Cassidy, 2008). Youth did not simply follow leaders' advice. As in effective mentoring relationships (Rhodes, 2002), trust in these autonomy-supportive leaders helped empower youth to use leaders' input – combined with their developing adolescent analytic skills -- to actively engage with ideas, strategies, and decisions in their work and in their lives.

**5. Trust in leaders helps "open" youth to beneficial experiences that they would not otherwise have.** This included not just openness to leader's guidance, but opening them to working with peers in the program and opening them to new ways of thinking and new developmental opportunities. Trust in leaders quelled doubt and fears about their work that opened the future horizon to envisioning what could be accomplished in this work. It made them

“feel like I can do this...like I can accomplish something.” Likewise, mentoring conversations with leaders helped open up possibilities in their personal life; and participating in a well-functioning relationship with a trusted leader gave them a blueprint that helped them open up in relationships with peers and other adults. We have listed some of these widening, longer-term beneficial experiences in column C of the figure. We theorize that these longer-term beneficial experiences contribute to development of more general skills (in parentheses in column C), however without further research, this is speculative.

Our model, then, suggests how youth’s trust in effective program leaders can contribute to youth’s development by helping them benefit from the central “active ingredients” of programs. The proximal influence of trust is that youth benefit from their interactions with leaders and the assets effective leaders provide. These transactions increase youth’s active engagement and, in turn, may increase youth’s benefiting from program activities, the program culture, and from collaborative learning with peers.

### **Implications for Programs**

These findings suggest that youth’s trust in leaders is a “linchpin” or facilitator for youth obtaining benefits from programs. From the point of view of program management, youth’s trust in staff appears to magnify the impact of staff members and program activities. The clear implication is that programs should place a high priority on facilitating youth’s experience of authentic trust in leaders (we presume that inauthentic, undeserved trust will not have the same benefits). This and other research suggests several recommendations to cultivating this trust:

- It cannot be assumed that every staff member will have the skills and dispositions to foster positive, trusting relationships with adolescents (Dworkin & Larson, 2006;

Halpern, 2006). Development of trust-building skills should be considered as a component of training youth development practitioners.

- Program staff members need to be aware that youth's trust grows over time. It builds through youth's observations of leaders' interactions with themselves and with others, including interactions around youth's work and in informal conversations (Griffith, 2014). Adolescents gain trust when adults are honest, can be counted on, and are caring and sensitive to youth's emotions (Rotenberg, 2010). Program leaders can contribute to trust development by showing youth different sides of themselves in different kinds of situations (Griffith, 2014).
- As seen in our findings, trust in leaders appears to be key to youth's willingness to take risks and engage in new behaviors. Staff need space, time and support from program administrators to be reliable, caring, and follow through with youth (Hirsh et al., 2011).

### **Limits and Future Research**

There are many directions for future research and we can focus on only a few. A significant limit of the study is its reliance on youth's accounts. Trust typically involves two-way processes (Rotenberg, 2010). Data are needed from the perspective of program leaders: How does their experience converge or diverge from youth's? How do effective leaders cultivate trust and make decisions about sharing their assets when managing relationships with multiple youth? Closely related, it would be helpful to understand how the program setting— the program culture, peer dynamics, the relationships between multiple staff, and neighborhood context – might affect the trust processes discussed here. Research suggests that trust is shaped and experienced at multiple levels of analysis including the youth-leader dyad, group-leader relationships, and the youth organization as a whole (Hirsch et al., 2011; Noam et al., 2013).

Another need is for greater attention to individual differences among youth. Our aim here was to describe the variety of beneficial experiences. Future steps are needed to understand how individual differences – for example by age, SES, personality, mental health, and numerous other variables – might influence youth’s use of or need for trust. Research on mentoring suggests that youth with a history of insecure attachments may start from a position of greater mistrust and need more time before their trust is sufficient for them to gain developmental benefits (Rhodes, 2005). Our study suggests that all youth may not experience (and may not want) all five beneficial experiences. Halpern (2005) suggests that many older youth in programs may be uninterested in personal mentoring. Both in-depth qualitative case studies of individuals and larger scale quantitative studies have a role to play in future research.

Longitudinal quantitative studies are required to test the preliminary theory generated here. For an adequate test, it is essential to include programs where leaders differ in assets and include youth who do not trust leaders (or who have not yet developed such trust, or lost trust). Longitudinal analyses are needed to evaluate whether low versus high trust youth moderates short-term processes (youth engagement in different process, i.e. propositions 2, 3, 4) and long-term outcomes for youth (learning content skills, SEL Learning, proposition 5). Mediation models should also be tested. If trust is indeed an “on switch” or amplifier for developmental experiences in programs, then it is important to understand every facet of how trust develops and how it influences these experiences.

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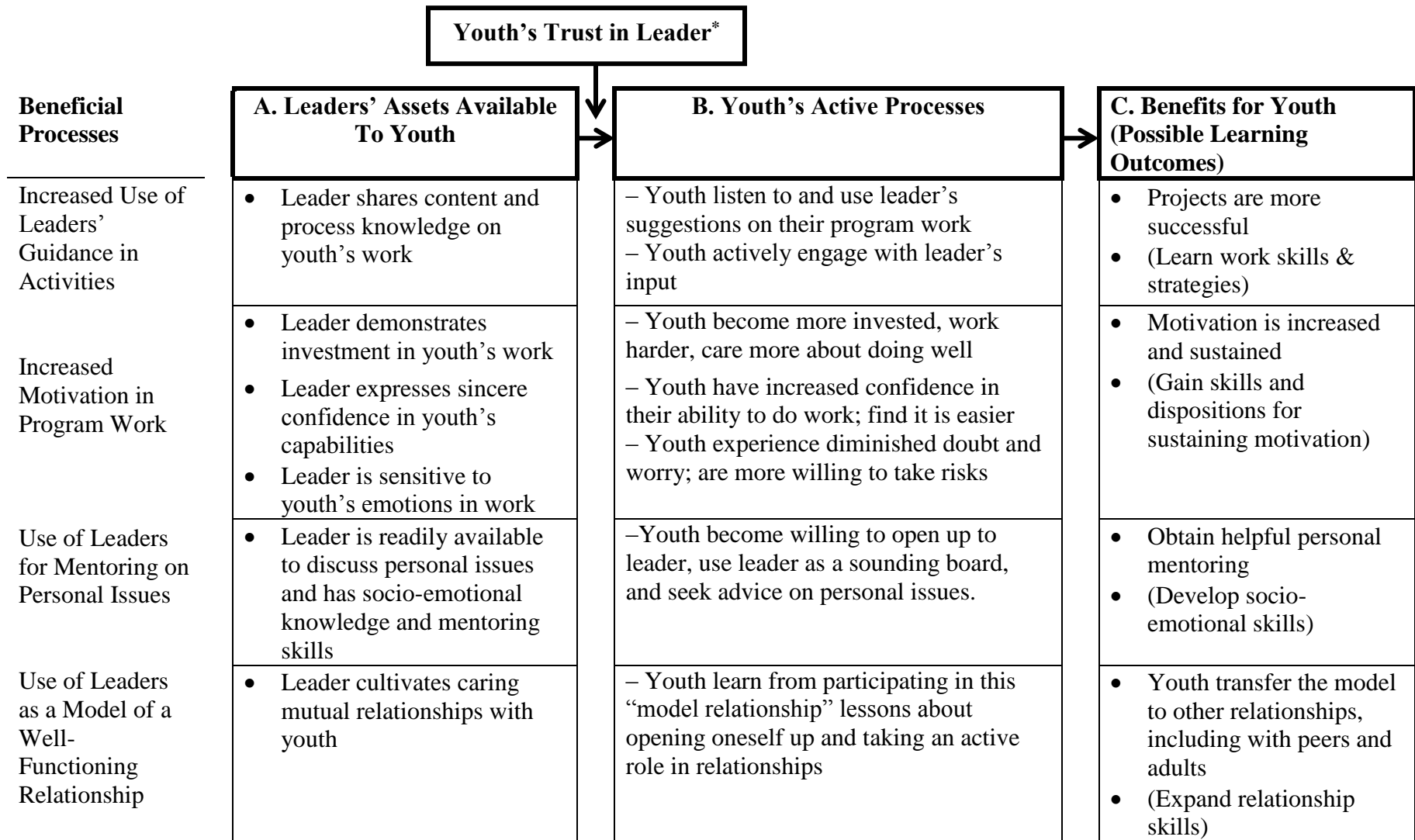
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Table 1

*Programs in the Research*

Pseudonym, Location	Focal Activities of the Program	Interviewee sample
Unified Youth, Central Illinois	Youth produce PSAs on positive health behaviors and organize events to promote understanding among culturally diverse youth.	9 youth
Nutrition Rocks, Central Illinois	Youth plan a five-week long summer camp for children that is focused on promoting healthy diets.	10 youth
Emerson High School Drama Club, Central Illinois	Youth produce and act in plays and musicals.	12 youth
Rising Leaders, Central Illinois	Youth organize school events and community service activities.	12 youth
High Definition, Chicago	Youth carry out multimedia projects, including producing and online magazine and creating videos.	8 youth
Reel Makers, Chicago	Youth learn video production skills through creating films.	6 youth
Urban Farmers, Chicago	Youth grow vegetables and sell them in the farmers market.	8 youth
La Prensa, Chicago	Youth make news videos about the local Chicago neighborhood.	9 youth
Toltecat Muralists, Chicago	Youth develop Graffiti art techniques and paint murals in city parks.	5 youth
Voces Unidas, Minneapolis	Youth create culture-oriented arts.	8 youth
The Station, Minneapolis	Youth plan all logistics of music concerts (scheduling, budgets, publicity, etc.).	7 youth
On Target, Minneapolis	Youth learn wildlife, fire arm and leadership skills.	6 youth
Unity House, Minneapolis	Youth work on leadership activities, plan a service project, and work on their college readiness plan.	8 youth

Figure 1. *How Youth’s Trust in Effective Leaders Amplifies What They Gain From Youth Programs*



\* If a youth has trust in a leader, it amplifies the pathway from the leaders’ assets (Column A) to youth’s active processes (Column B).