The Social Formation of Youth Leadership

Ben Kirshner, University of Colorado, PO Box 249, Boulder CO 80309-0249, ben.kirshner@colorado.edu

Abstract: In recent years policymakers and educators have called for greater youth voice in school reform and neighborhood revitalization. Few studies, however, have examined adult assistance strategies that enable youth to assume responsibility for complex campaigns or formulate policy proposals. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork in an urban after-school leadership group, this article examines how adults and youth jointly created a "youth-led" environment, in which youth took responsibility for making decisions and monitoring their work. Data analysis focuses on the cultural tools that youth appropriated in order to assume leadership of the project, including group agreements, group organizing routines, and a youth empowerment ideology. The paper concludes that to support youth voice adults must do more than just fade into the background, but must also seed the learning community with tools. Implications address how adults can help young people lead efforts to improve their schools and neighborhoods.

Youth activism groups comprised of high school students and adult supporters have successfully carried out campaigns to shape policies affecting young people (Youniss & Hart, 2005). For example, they have won subsidized bus passes for low income youth, exposed environmental polluters, and persuaded policymakers to find alternatives to "super jails" for juvenile offenders (Kwon, in press). Activism campaigns like these exemplify a progressive educational tradition in which young people tackle meaningful social problems through project-based, collaborative work (Dewey, 1902).

Although researchers have begun to document the political accomplishments of such groups, we know little about assistance strategies employed by adult leaders. How do adults lend support in ways that foster youth autonomy and initiative? This article, based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, presents a case study of adult assistance strategies in a multiracial group that aspired to be "youth-led" (1). The paper focuses on routines and practices that students appropriated in order to assume leadership of the project.

Youth-led Activism

Youth-led groups re-organize hierarchical adult-youth relations so that youth are responsible for organizing and managing the group. For example, in a youth-led group, young people might formulate campaign goals, create ground rules for participation, and monitor the group's work, while adults would occupy the role of "advisor" or "facilitator" (Camino & Zeldin, 2001, Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005).

Adults who work in such groups often experience dilemmas about how to foster youth leadership and voice while also providing assistance that is critical to campaign success (Kirshner, 2005). For example, adults may want to develop students' leadership skills and sense of ownership of a campaign by leaving decisions and task responsibilities up to youth. But there also may be times when the complex demands of campaigns compel adults to participate—by advising youth in their campaign strategy, instructing them in certain skills, or completing mundane, but necessary, tasks, such as scheduling transportation (Larson & Hanson, 2005).

A Cultural Practice Perspective

Studies of youth leadership programs often use surveys or interviews to examine youth perceptions of the extent to which they have a say in decisions, feel safe speaking their minds, and play leadership roles (Roth et al., 1998). What remain unexamined in such approaches are the ways that youth's authority is supported and reinforced in particular kinds of social interactions between adults and youth (Greeno, 2001). Youth voice does not signal just an accomplishment of youth themselves, but instead an accomplishment of all the members of a shared social practice. The unit of analysis, therefore, should shift from a narrow focus on youth to a broader attention to youth and adults working together, linked by a shared set of resources for accomplishing goals (Rogoff, 1995; Saxe, 1991).

Practice based approaches often examine three elements of a social practice—the division of labor among members, the goals that motivate their activity, and the cultural tools or artifacts that people use as resources to accomplish their work together. Although these three elements are all present in this paper, I focus explicitly on the third element—"cultural tools." Cultural tools refer to resources that people use to accomplish goals together,

whether material, such as pens, or symbolic, such as language or ideology (Wertsch, 1998). This paper will focus specifically on the features of the shared activity system that enabled youth and adults to move from an adult-initiated project to one that for which youth assumed major responsibilities. It is organized in terms of two related research questions. First, in what ways did the distribution of responsibility for decision-making and planning change over time? Second, what resources helped members shift leadership responsibilities from adults to youth?

Program Background

Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) was based in an urban high school but funded and staffed by a nearby university. Academic achievement levels at the high school, which was located in a high poverty neighborhood, were below state and national averages. For example, in 2003 (the second year of my research) 20 percent were at or above national reading scores and 37 percent passed the math portion of the state exit exam, compared to 74 percent statewide. YELL's purpose was to train high school students in research and leadership skills so that they could gather evidence about conditions in their school and develop proposals based on their findings. The program met twice a week after school from October through May, with culminating events in June. Youth received stipends of $120/month. YELL participants were African American, Asian American, and Latino youth ranging in age from 9th to 12th grade. The adult staff included one director, who was European American, and two AmeriCorps members. In the first year both AmeriCorps members were African American; in the second year one was Korean American and the other was Egyptian American.

In its first year YELL conducted research, including focus groups, interviews, and surveys, to understand students' experiences that would contribute to school reform processes that were underway at the school. In the second year participants changed the project, because they wanted to respond to the overwhelming number of negative portrayals about youth of color from their neighborhood in local print and televised news. They developed a campaign, called Don't Believe the Hype, whose purpose was to improve the accuracy of stories presented in the media. Participants conducted focus groups and then worked in small groups to produce a magazine, website, and video to promote their goals. They shared these documents in meetings with local journalists as well as at a community forum attended by the school board president, journalists, students, and community residents.

In year one the YELL project began with eighteen youth; nine months later eight youth were actively involved. In year two the group began with nineteen youth and concluded with twelve. Attrition in both years was due to a variety of factors, including: students who moved out of the area, students who lost interest in the program goals, or students whose parents wanted them to spend more time on their school work. A core group of seven students—who were called "youth staff" in their second year—remained in the program from year one to year two.

Methods

This paper draws on ethnographic data collected for a larger multi-site study of youth activism (Kirshner, 2005). Data sources include field notes, interviews, and program documents. Field notes were taken by hand during weekly visits to the program and then typed. Interviews were conducted with each participant at the beginning and end of both years. In interviews youth were asked to describe their experiences in the program as well as their views on social and political issues facing the school and surrounding neighborhood. Interview transcripts and typed field note entries were compiled and entered in N6 (qualitative data analysis software).

I employed interpretive methods to analyze data (Becker, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1984). I began by looking at the distribution of leadership responsibilities. For example, I coded activities as either youth-led or adult-led (or both). Youth-led activities were those that were initiated and facilitated by a youth participant. I also coded other kinds of leadership tasks described in the field notes, such as developing agendas for group meetings, and identified who had been responsible. My next step was to look for recurring patterns in the kinds of resources that participants appropriated when taking on leadership roles. For example, I noted that on multiple occasions youth participants invoked *group agreements* in order to limit or challenge adult authority. This led me to examine the process by which group agreements were formed and all the occasions when youth talked about them in interviews. Also, I compared instances when youth were more or less successful in assuming leadership. For example, YELL was divided into four "small groups" that worked with minimal adult assistance. One of the groups (the "magazine group") routinely accomplished its goals, stayed on task, and shared responsibilities within the group. I looked more closely at processes across the groups and observed that the magazine group was the only one to regularly use *group*

organizing routines that had been introduced by adults, such as assigning a facilitator and using a timeline. The other groups struggled to accomplish their goals and often ended up requiring adult assistance or intervention.

Results

Question #1: In what ways did the distribution of leadership roles change over time?

As shown in Table 1, from October 2001 to October 2003 the distribution of leadership roles changed in recognizable ways. Whereas at the program's inception adult staff members took responsibility for most planning, decision-making, and monitoring, over time youth took on a greater share. I generated this list by reviewing my field notes for examples of tasks that appeared essential for the functioning of the group. I then identified whether youth, adults, or some combination carried out that task. For example, in the program's first year adults took responsibility for recruiting, interviewing, and hiring youth participants. In the second year veteran youth recruited other students, took part in interviews, and participated in hiring decisions. Also, in the program's first year adults took responsibility for deciding the agenda for group meetings and facilitating them. In the second year youth jointly planned agendas with adults and often facilitated meetings on their own.

Table 1: Youth and adult involvement in YELL leadership tasks

YELL Tasks	2001-2		2002-3		2003-4	
Fundraising for the program		A		A		A
Writing program curriculum		A		A		A
Holding participants accountable for attendance		A		A	Y	A
Determining roles for youth and adults in program		A	Y	A	Y	
Recruiting, interviewing, and hiring youth participants		A	Y	A	Y	A
Planning agenda for group meetings		A	Y	A	Y	A
Facilitating and debriefing meetings		A	Y	A	Y	A
Deciding ground rules for the group	Y		Y		Y	
Deciding on campaign topic and research methods	Y	A	Y		Y	
Facilitating small group projects		A	Y	A	Y	
Presenting ideas to the public	Y		Y		Y	

*Y = youth; A = adults

Program roles also changed over time. What started with a simple distinction between adult staff and youth participants became increasingly differentiated (see Table 2). Whereas in year one there was only one role available to youth—"participants"—new roles were added each coming year. In the third year there were four different positions available to youth, which were earned depending on different levels of experience in the program and the level of commitment one wished to make. The "youth staff" was comprised of students in their second or third year; these youth met regularly to discuss problems and make long term decisions about program direction.

Table 2: Increasing differentiation of roles

2001-2	2002-3	2003-4
Adult staff members	Adult staff members	Adult staff members
Adult researcher	Adult researchers	Adult researchers
Youth participants	Youth staff	Youth staff coordinator
	Youth participants	Youth staff members
		Youth leaders
		Youth allies

In interviews at the end of the second year, most youth interpreted these changes as a steady movement towards greater autonomy and leadership. They described ways in which the program had become less adult-directed over the course of their time in the program. For example, Dolores, a youth staff member, said:

Interviewer: Now that the year is over, how do you feel about how it went?

Dolores: This year I think it was harder because last year the adults were more involved with the groups. And they helped pull us through and they kinda had an agenda and what they wanted us to

get done during that day and, they planned…And this year it was more like, "We're gonna let them do everything and we're just gonna sit back and watch and if they need help we'll be there but we're not really gonna take charge of the situation…" And I think that's good though, 'cause that's what YELL's about: you making your own choices, you getting your things done.

Dolores observed that adults made room for youth input and ownership by detaching themselves from the project and letting youth make key decisions. Another veteran youth, Ellie, made a similar comment when I asked her to compare YELL to the Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC), where she was also a member:

> Well, um..ROTC has a teacher. And he always, the first sergeant always tells us what to do but in here...they don't tell us what to do - we *know* what we should do (interview, spring 2002).

These examples of changes in the distribution of roles, and how youth interpreted them, suggest that YELL made a transition from adult-led to a program where youth had a great deal more input, autonomy, and leadership. In the next section I discuss how youth and adults relied on certain resources to achieve this shift.

Question #2: What resources helped youth and adults shift the program from adult-initiated to youth-led?

I focus on three aspects of YELL that youth and adults used as resources to support youth leadership: *group agreements*; *group organizing routines*; and *program ideology*. Each of these resources served slightly different ends. *Group agreements* helped create a democratic basis for authority in YELL. The agreements removed authority from adult staff members and situated it in a collective process. *Group organizing routines* became resources for youth to regulate and manage their work independently of adults. *Program ideology* about youth empowerment served as an ideal to which youth and adults held each other accountable.

Group Agreements

Several meetings were devoted to establishing detailed ground rules, such as expectations for behavior and consequences for violating those expectations. For example, youth defined unexcused absences, spelled out how many warnings students should receive for absences, specified the consequences of disrespecting others, and differentiated acceptable curses (directed towards oneself) from unacceptable curses (directed towards others). Adults facilitated but did not offer their own input. The deliberations took several afternoons. Some students found the whole exercise foreign. During a conversation at the beginning of the first year, one student said, in frustration at the slow pace, "I think ya'll *(the adults)* should make the rules."

Group agreements became an important resource for dealing with problems that came up in the group, ranging from interpersonal conflicts to absenteeism. When used artfully, the agreements shifted rule enforcement from adults' personal discretion to a more consistent and impartial set of rules established by the group. Even though adults played a role in this system, by holding youth accountable for violations of attendance rules, youth acknowledged that the rules were a product of their own deliberations. For example, in one case adults expelled a male student, Earl, for missing too many days. When I asked him why he had left, he said, "Well, actually I chose to use my last unexcused absence." He went on to say, "what is fair is fair. I broke all the…Well, not all the ground rules, but enough of them to be out of the program, so that is pretty fair." Earl's quote suggests that even though adults enforced the consequences of the attendance rule, he felt some agency in the decision, perhaps because of his role in shaping the rules. As another participant, Marlene, said in an interview, "If we break the rules, we couldn't get mad because we were the ones that put them in force…"

Group Organizing Routines

Over the course of the second year there was a steady increase in the percentage of activities facilitated by youth versus those facilitated by adults. Whereas 41.5 percent of activities were facilitated in October and November, 91.5 percent of activities were facilitated in April and May. This shift resembles a pattern in apprenticeship learning, in which experts begin by modeling but over time fade so that novices can take over (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991).

But what enables youth to take over when adults fade? In this case *group organizing routines* played an important role. By the middle of the year most of the work took place in small groups—video, magazine, website,

and focus group. The small group projects were challenging enough that youth needed some coaching from adults. But at the same time, adults wanted the projects to represent youth's authentic interests and goals; they did not want youth to think they were "taking over." Adults therefore introduced certain routines that lent structure to youth's work while still leaving them accountable for it.

Of the different small groups, the magazine group was most successful staying on task and working collaboratively. The magazine group chose to design and author a magazine that would represent youth's views about stereotypes. Beyond the technical skills associated with magazine layout and story-writing, this task required complex planning and collaborative skills: youth developed a three month timeline for completing the magazine, delegated tasks, and monitored their progress from week to week—all while using an egalitarian form of decision-making in which no one person was the boss. The following episode provides an example of how youth relied on certain group organizing routines to get their work done. Here I focus on two particular routines: using "agendas" and assigning roles.

<blockquote>

YELL Observation: Working on small group projects

Today represents a new development in YELL: based on a vote taken among youth last week, adults will hang back from the small group projects and only help out if questions arise.

The meeting starts with Ellie (a 10th grader in her second year) reviewing the agenda and facilitating a brief game that uses role plays to reinforce the group ground-rules. When the game is over, Ellie announces, "Now we're working in research groups. Remember to pick a facilitator and note taker. You guys have to do that every single time."

After Ellie's instructions, youth assemble in their four groups: magazine, video, website, and research. Adults pursue other tasks: The program director is fixing the internet connection on a computer; another is working in the office. I go with the magazine group as an observer. Four youth are present.

The first thing the magazine group does is pick a facilitator (Arun), and a note taker (Marlene). Arun asks, "What are our goals today?" They refer back to the timeline they had completed last week and formulate their goal for the day, which is to decide on the purpose and contents of the magazine.

After the group brainstorms ideas for contents of the magazine, there is a pause and Arun asks, "Is there anything else to add?" Marlene, the note taker, says she wants to rewrite the list because it is messy, but the other members of the group say they can read it. Then Marlene offers a new idea for the content of the magazine, which she follows by saying, "but that's just my opinion, don't just agree." This provokes Arun to say, "You're trying to take my job away!" Another youth agrees, saying "Arun's the facilitator." Marlene smiles, and says, "I'm sorry, I'll stop."

</blockquote>

In the above example Ellie, a youth participant, initiated the YELL meeting, facilitated an opening team-builder, and then directed people to their "small groups." In keeping with a group organizing practice that adults had introduced earlier in the year, she reminded each group to designate a "facilitator" and a "note-taker." The magazine group proceeded to a corner of the room and, after allocating roles, set an agenda for itself by reviewing its goals and timeline. When Marlene asked for a response to her suggestion, both Arun and Vannara interpreted her comment as overstepping her bounds as "note-taker." They reminded Marlene that Arun was the facilitator, which Marlene accepted without protest and the group resumed its work. This excerpt shows how certain resources helped the group to run smoothly without direct adult assistance. Youth's appropriation of these local practices, such as formulating goals and allocating roles, enabled them to work effectively together.

Program Ideology

Adult staff members in YELL abided by an ideology that the project would only be authentic and meaningful if it were truly driven by youth's interests and goals. As self-described "outsiders" to the high poverty community where YELL was located, adults believed that young people had greater wisdom and insight into the nature of the problems there and how to approach them. Planning meetings among adults revolved around this issue—how can we help organize things in such a way that youth feel and enact real ownership of the program?

I observed several situations where adults invoked this ideology explicitly in speaking with participants. For example, in their explanations of YELL at the beginning of the year, adults asserted that the program was to be

guided by the youth. As the year continued there were multiple occasions where adults reinforced this message, by saying things such as, "this project is up to you," "you chose the topic," or "it's not up to me to decide what to next." Adults often invoked the youth-led ideology when they were disappointed by youth's level of engagement. For example, on one occasion I was working with three students to develop survey questions about stereotypes, but they were quite reticent to generate ideas. Korina, one of the Americorps assistants, came over to help and said, "Well this is *your* topic, *you* came up with it, what aspects of the media do *you* care about?"

Over time this notion that YELL was supposed to be youth-led came to be a commonly accepted way that people described the program. For example, in an interview I asked a youth participant to describe the role of the adult who supported her magazine project: "She helped us a lot. But (then) she told me she didn't wanna do that, cause she might be doing too much…It's supposed to be the youth *[making decisions].*" Other participants appeared to endorse this notion when they voted, at the midway point of the second year, to have adults play limited roles in the management of small group projects; they wanted adults to be available to answer questions but to otherwise leave decisions and day to day work up to the youth.

In interviews three youth participants drew on the youth leadership ideology to criticize the program. For example, I asked one person, Joseph, what would "be the best role for an adult to play" in programs like this:

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

Joseph expressed concern that adults had too much influence, that they occupied a position above the youth participants. His comment suggests that in his eyes YELL did not fully achieve its goal to be youth-led. On one hand Joseph's statement can be taken as evidence that the program fell short of its goal of achieving authentic youth ownership. But it can also be taken as evidence that the group had generated an ideology that members took seriously and used to critically evaluate, and even improve, the program. It may also be that youth leadership was an elusive target—as young people gained a stronger sense of their own power their analyses of youth-adult relations in the group changed as well.

These different examples illustrate that the program ideology about youth voice became a recurrent narrative that members of YELL invoked to help organize youth-adult interactions. At times adults raised this point in order to try to motivate youth. At other times youth invoked it to limit adult involvement. And in some interviews, such Joseph's, the program ideology provided a standpoint from which to criticize the program for not living up to its ideals.

Conclusion

In this paper I set out to understand how a program initiated by adults evolved into a program for which youth assumed key leadership responsibilities. I started by describing changes in the distribution of responsibility for tasks among youth and adults. I then analyzed resources available in YELL that people used in order to organize each other's behavior, which included group agreements, group routines, and program ideology.

The principal theoretical contribution of this paper lies in its focus on the role played by cultural tools and resources in the shift from an adult-directed to a youth-directed activity system. Accounts of apprenticeship learning have focused primarily on changes in the behavior of experts to explain this process, through modeling, coaching, and fading (e.g., Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991). Similarly, Tharp and Gallimore's account of learning in the zone of proximal development focuses on the shift from assisted performance to solo performance (1989). Less attention has been paid to the enduring role that cultural tools play when adults "fade." This paper asserts that adult fading was possible because certain tools specific to the YELL learning environment, such as group organizing rituals and group agreements, were available to youth. Similar to other accounts of mediated action (e.g., Wertsch, 1998) even during occasions where youth worked ostensibly "alone" they were using these resources.

The main practical implication of this study pertains to how adults support youth leadership and autonomy in complex project-based activities. In YELL's first year adult staff members, as well as this researcher, sometimes made naïve assumptions about how youth would respond to open-ended tasks. That is, we thought that youth would become motivated and engaged simply because they were not being told what to do by adults. But engagement does not stem merely from freedom to act; it also depends on strategies for how to act, participation norms, and agreed upon goals. Seeding the learning environment with such strategies, or cultural tools, gives youth ways to regulate their actions and perform independently of adults, especially in settings where participants are performing challenging and novel tasks, such as youth activism campaigns. The process of seeding is most effective if done explicitly – when adults model strategies and comment on them.

Also, it is important not to forget that many activist groups have larger ends in sight, such as reclaiming images of youth of color or making schools more engaging and equitable. In these cases adult fading can be counter-productive if youth do not have the tools necessary to be persuasive in policymaking settings, such as meetings with journalists or school board members. For example, young people may need to support their opinions with empirical evidence or frame their proposals in terms of goals that have bipartisan support. Strategies such as these represent cultural tools that enable young people to be effective agents of change. It is important, therefore, that in the effort to foster a "youth-led" campaign veteran activists not overlook the critical roles they can play.

Endnotes
(1) Similar to definitions used by the groups studied, "youth" is defined here as high school age and younger.

References

Becker, H. (1998). *Tricks of the trade.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Camino, L., & Zeldin, S. (2002). From periphery to center: Pathways for youth civic engagement in the day-to-day life of communities. *Applied Developmental Science*.

Cervone, B. (2002). *Taking democracy in hand: Youth action for education change in the San Francisco Bay Area*. Providence, RI: What Kids Can Do & The Forum for Youth Investment.

Collins, A., Brown, J.S., & Holum, A. (1991). Cognitive apprenticeship: Making thinking visible. *American Educator, 15*(3) 38-46.

Dewey, J. (1902/1990). *The child and the curriculum*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Greeno, J. G. (2001). *Students with competence, authority, and accountability: Affording intellective identities in classrooms*. Stanford, CA.

Kirshner, B. (2005). *Assistance strategies in three youth activism organizations: Facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work.* Manuscript submitted for publication.

Kwon, S.A. (in press). Youth of color organizing for juvenile justice. In S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, & J. Cammarota (Eds.) *Beyond resistance: Youth activism and community change: New democratic possibilities for policy and practice for America's youth.* Oxford, UK: Routledge.

Larson, R.W. & Hansen, D. (2005). The development of strategic thinking: Learning to impact human systems in a youth activism program. *Human Development, 48*(6), 327-349.

Larson, R., Walker, K., Pierce, N. (2004). *A comparison of high quality youth-led and adult-led youth programs: Balancing inputs from youth and adults*. Society for Research on Adolescence, Baltimore, MD.

Miles, M.B. & Huberman, A.M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods.* London: Sage Publications.

Rogoff, B. (1995). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes: Participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. In Wertsch, Del Rio, Alvarez (Eds.) *Sociocultural Studies of Mind*. New York, Cambridge University Press.

Roth, J., Brooks-Gunn, J, Murray, L., Foster, W. (1998). Promoting healthy adolescents: Synthesis of youth development program evaluations. *Journal of Research on Adolescence,* 8(4) 423-459.

Saxe, G. B. (1991). *Culture and cognitive development: Studies in mathematical understanding*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tharp, R.G. & Gallimore, R. (1989). *Rousing minds to life: Teaching, learning, & schooling in social context*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Pres

Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Mind as Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Youniss, J., D. Hart. (2005). Intersection of social institutions with civic development. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 109*(Fall 2005), 73-82.