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Natasha Blanchet-Cohen and Liesette Brunson

Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Département de Psychologie, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

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Creating Settings for Youth Empowerment and Leadership: An Ecological Perspective

NATASHA BLANCHET-COHEN

Department of Applied Human Sciences, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

LIESETTE BRUNSON

Département de Psychologie, Université du Québec à Montréal, Montréal, Québec, Canada

Youth development programs are increasingly focusing on youth empowerment and leadership, a shift which often requires adult staff to adopt new roles and practices. This article explores staff practice in the context of a multisite initiative designed to engage marginalized youth in social change through youth-led grants. Interviews with youth workers and managers revealed practices at multiple ecological levels. Individual-level practices supported youths’ capacities to participate. Group-level practices fostered social interactions and activities that actualized the youth-led approach. Setting-level practices created structures that supported and protected group activities while organization-level practices promoted a favorable environment for youth leadership. Analyzed from an ecological and activity settings perspective, these results contribute to understanding the multifaceted and complex nature of youth work in power-sharing practice models. Practice implications include identifying training needs to help practitioners navigate across multiple ecological levels and suggesting reflection questions for practitioners.

KEYWORDS activity setting, empowerment, practice, ecological, youth worker

One of the central developmental tasks of adolescence is to gradually assume adult roles requiring initiative and responsibility. However, many youth advocates have argued that young people have relatively limited opportunities to...
develop and exercise these capacities (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, 2004; Larson, 2000; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). Youth development programs increasingly seek to address this gap by providing youth with developmentally appropriate opportunities to practice leadership and agency (Larson, 2000; Walker, 2006; Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). These models share a view of youth as vital contributors to their communities and seek to engage youth as citizens working in partnership with adults on issues of common concern (Evans, Sicafuse, Killian, Davidson, & Loesch-Griffin, 2010).

Fostering these power-sharing approaches often requires redefining the roles of adult staff hired to work with youth participants (Larson & Walker, 2010; Larson, Walker, & Pierce, 2005; Zeldin, Petrokubi, & MacNeil, 2008). What is the role of adult youth workers in programs that seek to foster empowerment and responsibility among youth? This article addresses this question by examining youth workers’ and program managers’ reflections on their practices in the context of YouthScape, a four-year initiative implemented in five communities across Canada which was designed to engage marginalized youth in social change through youth-led grants. Our objective was to learn from the experiences of staff who supported youth in these programs, in order to better understand adults’ role in fostering youth empowerment.

UNDERSTANDING ADULTS’ ROLES IN YOUTH-LED INITIATIVE

Youth advocates have long believed, and recent research has confirmed, that youth thrive when provided with developmentally appropriate opportunities for responsibility, leadership, initiative, and agency (Larson, 2000; Lerner et al., 2005; Wood, Larson, & Brown, 2009). Accordingly, youth-related organizations are increasingly adopting power-sharing approaches to working with young people based on child rights (Hart, 1997) and positive youth development theory (Hamilton et al., 2004). These approaches depart significantly from traditional youth programs in which problem prevention is the focus, adults take responsibility for running programs, young people are seen primarily as program recipients, and youths’ views on program content and process are infrequently solicited. Instead, these approaches recognize youth as major stakeholders in society with knowledge, skills and ideas that make them important actors in developing healthy communities (Blanchet-Cohen, Manolson, & Shaw, 2012). For example, youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) foster opportunities for youth and adults to work together democratically over a sustained time period to address common concerns (Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005; Zeldin et al., 2008). Similarly, youth-led initiatives provide the opportunity for youth to define concerns they wish to address and work toward goals that they have defined for themselves (Delgado & Staples, 2008).
Increasing theoretical and empirical attention has focused on the roles and practices of adult staff in youth programs in general and power-sharing models in particular (Davidson, Evans, & Sicafuse, 2011; Larson & Angus, 2011; Larson & Walker, 2010; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Smith, Peck, De- nault, Blazevski, & Akiva, 2010; Walker & Larson, 2006; Zeldin et al., 2008). Although researchers and practitioners both agree that adult guidance is necessary for the successful outcome of youth leadership (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010), the changing youth worker role that is necessary for these power-sharing arrangements is not always well understood (Sebba et al., 2009; UN-Habitat, 2012). Both managers and staff feel unprepared for these power-sharing roles, in part because of an often implicit belief that adult involvement and guidance is contradictory to youth-led principles (Kirshner, 2007; Wong et al., 2010).

Research has suggested general principles that underlie youth-led approaches, such as the need for a blend of creativity and intentionality when youth and adults work together. Linds, Goulet, and Sammel (2010) describe the location of this collaboration as the *ecotone*, a place of tension and innovation where two ecological zones meet and transition into one another. Similarly, Krueger (2005) uses a metaphor to describe youth work as ‘modern dance’ where presence, rhythmic interaction, meaning-making, and atmosphere define staff practices. Zeldin and colleagues (2013) identify authentic decision-making, natural mentors, reciprocal activity, and community connectedness as core elements for successful partnerships between youth and adults. A growing body of work has documented youth workers’ practices in a variety of settings (Camino, 2005; Larson & Angus, 2010, Larson & Hansen, 2005; Larson & Walker 2010; Larson et al., 2005; Walker & Larson, 2006; Wood et al., 2009; Zeldin et al., 2005, 2008, 2013). As part of the growing interest in how power-sharing values and principles are translated into practice in the day-to-day work that youth practitioners undertake, this study examines staff members’ reflections on their practice aimed at fostering youth-led approaches in a specific practice context.

**USING ACTIVITY SETTING THEORY TO UNDERSTAND YOUTH PROGRAMS**

Supporting youth’s capacity for youth-led approaches requires providing a supportive and empowering context. A number of influential scholars have proposed activity settings theory as a useful framework for understanding the contexts offered by youth development programs (Case & Hunter, 2012; Granger, 2010; Hawe, Shill, & Riley, 2009; O’Donnell & Tharp, 2012; O’Donnell, Tharp, & Wilson, 1993; Seidman, 2012). Settings are the common everyday places outside the home where people interact and where daily life unfolds. Settings are organized around joint activity (O’Donnell et al., 1993)
that can be more or less structured (e.g., classroom teaching vs. hanging out with friends). Participation in smooth-running joint productive activity leads to mutual understanding and shared goals among participants. Settings are composed of resources such as people, symbols, time, and physical structures. Other features of settings relate to patterns in the organization of these resources, including roles and social regularities (Case & Hunter, 2012; Hawe et al., 2009; O’Donnell et al., 1993; Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

In the tradition of Bronfenbrenner (1979), a setting lens moves the focus from the individual to the interactions between context and people (Seidman, 2012). It offers a useful framework for understanding how youth’s experiences are shaped and structured by elements in those settings, such as roles, relationships and activities (Granger, 2010). In addition, settings are seen to be embedded in nested ecological systems. While settings are situated at the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model, they are also nested within larger organizational, community, and societal systems which inevitably influence what happens at the setting level. This study adopts, an activity settings perspective explicitly based in an ecological framework to highlight the context that surrounds and structures the activities and interactions that occur in youth-led programs.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

In this study, we adopt an ecological and activity settings perspective to examine the practices of adult youth workers in the particular case of YouthScape, a four-year, five-site initiative designed to engage marginalized youth in social change through youth-led grants. Specifically, we seek to examine what happens in youth programs by focusing on the point of view of youth workers and managers who play a critical role in fostering and nurturing youth-led principles on the ground. While the youth perspective is essential in ultimately understanding the transactional nature of these relationships and the actual effects of these practices, in this study we felt it important to describe, from a staff point of view, how they conceptualize their role, and what practices they intentionally adopt to successfully fill this role.

**METHOD**

**Research Design and Setting**

This research uses a case study approach (Yin, 2009), an appropriate method to illuminate the “how-to” of youth work practice in youth-led programming. Specifically, the case was YouthScape (YS), a $2.1 million, four-year youth engagement initiative envisioned as a multisectoral initiative with the aim of bringing about social change by engaging young people in the process of planning and implementing projects supported by youth-led grants
The name YouthScape reflected the intent to transform the landscape of youth programs and create “new reflexes” for working with young people in Canada. The initiative mandated direct allocation of funds to youth through youth-led grants and placed emphasis on youth empowerment, a youth-led philosophy, and community development. The five sites involved in the initiative collectively allocated a total of 191 youth grants, ranging from $300 to $15,000 CAD, to over 1,000 youth (individually or in groups) ranging in age from 13 to 24. Grants covered a range of issues: over half dealt with creating youth space, art/media projects, skill sharing, and dance or active living activities, while others dealt with a range of broader issues such as the environment, the legal system, and entrepreneurship.

YS was implemented in five cities across Canada. In each site, a convening organization involved in youth services implemented and managed the youth-led program and hired staff to work directly with youth in the youth-led granting. In addition, a steering committee was established in each site with partners from local youth-serving organizations and municipal departments. While the size and mission of the convening organizations varied across cities, they were all youth-serving organizations with registered charitable status. Convening organizations had varying levels of experience in youth-led programs, although none were youth-led organizations per se. At one site, the convening organization was the United Way, which focused on working with Aboriginal young people. At another site, the convener was a youth development center which partnered with the municipal recreation and leisure department. A third convening organization was a child- and youth-focused community coalition working with city programming and services on the inclusion of marginalized youth. At a fourth site, a youth engagement organization worked to connect service providers and support youth leadership. The final convening organization was a center for research and innovation in youthwork that partnered with local actors to engage a diversity of youth in decisions that affected them. Learning and reflection were explicitly supported by the funder, and a national organization created opportunities to share experiences across sites.

Throughout YS, the focus was on marginalized youth, defined as youth who are more likely to be under-served because of poverty, racism, addiction, and feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging. As reported elsewhere (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2010), these diverse experiences and sources of marginalization called for specific methods of engagement that were distinct from those that are typically used with high-functioning and privileged youth.

Both authors were participant-observers in YS, with the first author engaged at all sites in documentation with the national organization, and the second author involved as an evaluator at one site. Research interviews and analysis took place after the authors’ contractual relationships with the sites
had ended. Our positions gave us unique access and insight into the project, a condition favorable to the validity of this type of qualitative research.

Data Sources and Research Participants

Consistent with the case study method, the analysis was informed by multiple sources of data: participant observation, field notes, project documents and interviews with adult program staff. All sources indirectly informed our analysis, but only interview data from local adult program staff was coded.

Interviews were conducted at all 5 program sites with 8 program managers and 20 youth workers who worked directly with youth participants. We use the term youth workers to refer to employees hired by the convening organization to work directly with youth. The youth workers ranged in age from early 20s to late 40s. Half had no prior formal training in youth work. Of workers, 6 were men. We use the term “managers” to refer to individuals who were directly involved in programming but in a position of oversight and leadership, either within the convening organization or on the steering committee. The 8 managers ranged in age from their 40s to mid-60s. All but one had more than 5 years experience in a managerial position; and 3 were men. Of our interviews, 4 were group interviews with 2 youth workers, resulting in a total of 24 interviews, with 28 participants across the five sites.

Ethical clearance was obtained from Concordia University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were conducted in English or French during the last three months of the initiative. Lasting on average 75 minutes, the interviews involved 14 open-ended questions that invited participants to reflect back on their experience in YS as a whole. In particular, we encouraged participants to give concrete examples of situations that they had faced in YS. Interview questions included, among others:

- How is the YS approach similar/different to the ways you worked with youth before?
- Did you ever feel that there were tradeoffs or tensions between adult control versus encouraging the youth’s ownership and responsibility?
- What organizational supports have you found helpful and what could have been improved?
- What insights are beginning to emerge for you about your work with youth as a result of participating in Youthscape?

Data Analysis

Data from complete interview transcripts were analyzed using applied thematic analysis (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011). This inductive qualitative analysis approach is aimed at “describing and understanding how people
feel, think and behave within a particular context relative to a specific research question” (p. 13) and focuses on describing those experiences as accurately and comprehensively as possible. Our search for themes was grounded in the data and sensitized by the research literature cited in the introduction. We focused on specific practices that were reported across multiple interviewees and sites. Over the course of the analysis, we noted that participants talked extensively about aspects of their work that reflected important principles as well as particular challenges occurring at multiple ecological levels. These emerging higher-order themes became the framework that we used to organize the results.

Data was coded using the QDA Miner software. We only retained higher-order themes mentioned in more than 50% of interviews and across at least four sites (see Table 1). In our findings, we share illustrative quotes from the sites identifying them by number for confidentiality.

**FINDINGS**

Analysis revealed practices used by adult youth workers at multiple ecological levels, including those related to individual relationships, group dynamics, setting structure, and organizational policies (see Table 1). Below, we present specific information about practices reported by youth workers and managers at each of these ecological levels.

### TABLE 1 Frequency of Themes for the Practices of Youth Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>% Cases</th>
<th>Sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individual-level work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build trust and two-way</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivate and build confidence</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group-level work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support, structure and guard the</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active adult role in setting up</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for success</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Setting-level work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and manage the setting</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect the boundary between</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>youth-led setting and the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational-level work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote a favorable</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizational context</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support youth worker</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network with outside</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>organizations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis revealed practices used by adult youth workers at multiple ecological levels, including those related to individual relationships, group dynamics, setting structure, and organizational policies (see Table 1). Below, we present specific information about practices reported by youth workers and managers at each of these ecological levels.
Individual-Level Practices

At the individual level, participants mentioned practices that we grouped into two themes: (a) building and maintaining relationships and (b) supporting youth’s confidence and motivation. The first theme, mentioned in more than half (58%) of interviews, centered around building and maintaining relationships with individual youth. Adult youth workers affirmed that their relationships with individual youth allowed them to get to know what youth wanted and needed, a process that took considerable time. As stated by youth worker Lily (site 3), “Relationship-building is key. [You] need to build that and really get to know what they want to do and help them with that, [and it] does not happen overnight.” Successful relationship-building involved practices that created and emphasized mutual respect. Participants emphasized their respect for young people, and they insisted on being respected in return. Empathetic listening was also key; participants stressed that youth needed to feel that they were heard and that their opinions and experiences mattered.

Successful relationship-building also required adult youth workers to be accessible using youths’ preferred means of communication. Facebook, emails, phone calls and texting were identified as ways of keeping in touch and sharing, not just on a project level, but also on a personal level, even outside work hours. As youth worker Laura (site 1) said, “Thank god for Facebook; I always know what they are up to.” Continuous availability was not easy for adult youth workers; on the one hand, they wanted to create meaningful relationships with youth, but on the other hand, they often found it necessary to establish limits because of work hours, their own personal lives, and even the end of the program. As youth worker Jan (site 1) reported, “When youth are texting me about their day, I’m so happy that I have that relationship. But when I already worked a 10-hour day, where is my responsibility [or] obligation to pick up the phone?” Successfully managing these tensions helped to establish strong, trusting relationships, which were a key condition for allowing youth to participate fully and assume ever-increasing leadership roles.

A second theme that emerged at the individual level was the importance of supporting individual young people’s confidence and motivation, mentioned in almost three-quarters (71%) of interviews. As manager Annie (site 5) stated, some youth had “to do stuff with themselves before modeling with the community.” Participants felt that young people gained confidence and self-esteem from seeing that someone believed in them and from experiencing success as they took on new roles and challenges. This confidence allowed youth to go further. Participants talked of the importance of discovering what young people were passionate about and interested in doing. They observed that some youth were motivated by personal interest, others were motivated by social justice, and some were simply motivated to be...
a valued member of the group. Bran, a youth worker at site 5, observed, “What they do care about is doing good, [and] feeling [that] they are part of something, [and] that they are liked and comfortable.”

In sum, building and maintaining relationships with individual youth was one important part of how participants viewed their role. In addition, participants identified practices that they enacted at higher ecological levels, including the group, setting and organizational levels.

Group-Level Practices

Participants spoke a great deal about managing dynamics at the group level, a key site for youth-led processes. These practices fostered the types of social interactions and group activities that were at the core of a youth-led approach.

A central theme at the group level, mentioned in more than three-quarters (83%) of our interviews, related to a role of supporting, structuring and guarding group process, rather than leading. Participants stressed that it was not always easy to judge when to stand back and when to intervene or to know how to participate without taking over. Yet a strategy of facilitation rather than leadership had the advantage of fostering ownership and responsibility among youth. As manager Eve (site 2) pointed out, “From the moment we seek participants’ creativity and involvement, we cannot try to control their actions.” A strategy of facilitation rather than leadership also had the advantage of fostering ownership and responsibility among youth.

To create room for youth to take on leadership, participants tried to avoid consulting youth on decisions that had already been made, or providing a limited and/or token choice, both of which were seen as more typical ways of doing youth work. Participants stressed the importance of recognizing and making room for the fresh ideas and energy that youth brought to the table. As manager Sophia (site 1) described, “Youth see things that they want to have changed and adults don’t think it is possible. It can be done more [often] than the adults think it can be done.”

Tension sometimes arose around differences between adults’ and youth’s pace of work. Most participants felt that youth learned more, and better, from living through the entire process of making and implementing decisions, no matter how long it required. Youth worker Marise (site 2) explained, “It was long, writing with young people . . . I could have done in a week what took three months . . . but I wanted to include the youth.” One important practice was allowing enough time for youth to talk things through in order to make decisions. For example, youth worker Serena (site 1) stated, “When we had a decision to make, we gave them a lot of time to introduce the subject and it was done in an interesting way, not just giving them a 90-page document.” Participants supported young people’s search for consensus by adopting practices such as voting, conducting
check-ins around the table, and actively soliciting the opinions of less vocal members.

Even though participants described the youth worker role in terms of shepherding a group process that created room for youth decision-making and control, they also described a vital, active, structuring role that adult youth workers played within this process. This theme was present in three-quarters (75%) of our interviews. One structuring practice was to provide information and contacts that were most likely to lead the group to success. Another was to ask pointed questions and challenge the group to think carefully about different alternatives.

Given the inherent power differences between adult staff and youth, participants found that a suggestion or an idea they offered was sometimes interpreted by youth as a directive or an instruction. Manager Mara (site 3) said, “I don’t think adults can participate at the same level until the youth feel they have the same amount of knowledge and power.” An important practice was therefore to allow time and provide knowledge and experiences that fostered group confidence.

Participants also described practices that fostered group motivation. These practices included structuring activities that kept things moving and kept them fun, given that youth rapidly lost interest in bureaucratic organizational processes and stagnant meetings. Group motivation was also enhanced by co-constructing short-term, achievable goals that were clearly linked to larger values and objectives. Manager Eve (site 2) stated, “It’s important to break things down into steps that can be completed in order to give a real sense of accomplishment.” Award ceremonies, public recognition and celebrations were also practices that highlighted and reinforced what the group had been able to accomplish and made it visible to others. Youth worker Anna (site 3) said, “Taking photos was just fun [and a] comfortable [thing] to do. . . . But seeing [their] finished product at City Hall was key.”

Participants also discussed group-level practices used to manage discipline problems and to resolve conflict. Discipline-related incidents were particularly delicate situations because they required assuming a power role which was seen as being in contradiction with the program goal of fostering youth leadership. To negotiate these situations, participants found it important to adopt practices that helped the group deal with conflict in positive ways. One set of practices involved reframing and redirecting challenges. Youth worker Serena (site 1) described, “It’s ok to ask questions and pose challenges. [But sometimes we] asked them to re-word. . . . [We told them] please feel free to bring that up, but be mindful that we have feelings, and ask them better.” Adult youth workers took steps to ensure that things were said in a constructive and respectful way that did not derail the group. Sometimes they found it helpful to laugh at a difficult situation or a tense moment; at other times, they asked everyone to reflect on the group’s process and come up with potential solutions. Participants stressed that there were
certainly times for adults to intervene, but that it was necessary to intervene with care and respect for the youths’ own dynamic.

Setting-Level Practices

In addition to practices related to individual relationships and group dynamics, participants also discussed practices relating to the setting itself. One theme mentioned in nearly two-thirds (63%) of our interviews related to creating and managing the setting structure. Participants spoke of practices put in place to maintain a safe space in which youth felt welcome and comfortable. Pete, a manager (site 3), spoke about providing a container: “In order for these kids to operate, they need rails.” Creating and maintaining the setting also involved managing who was in the setting. Youth came and left either in cohorts or because of individual circumstances, and thus youth workers found it necessary to develop practices to deal with the ebb and flow of youth participation. For example, recruiting new participants was often best done by the youth themselves.

Another important part of this structuring task involved setting up processes that allowed the group to function, including mechanisms that allowed for clear and efficient communication, as well as principle-based rules and boundaries. Manager Eve (site 2) discussed what this could look like: “There is a necessary self-regulation that must be done before things start. . . . So before problems arise, let’s talk about it. We discuss what time the meetings will start. We talk about paying attention. Cell phones can’t be used during meetings.” If these discussions took place when the group was first formed, these principles remained in the background as a scaffolding structure, and youth workers could take on the role of keeping track of decisions that the group had made and providing reminders when things went off track.

A second setting-level theme mentioned in nearly two-thirds (63%) of our interviews related to protecting the boundary between the youth setting and the larger organization. Only a few of the convening organizations were exclusively devoted to youth work, and for all, the youth-led approach was something new. The new ways of functioning being created by and with youth participants were not always compatible with the organization’s traditional ways of operating. When organizational needs and processes affected the youth-led setting, adult youth workers adopted practices to manage the interface between the youth setting and the larger organization.

This boundary work sometimes involved acting as watchdog to prevent adults from taking over and paying attention to whether the conditions were there for youth to participate. In some situations, organizational constraints were not truly necessary and could be modified. “What is the bare minimum to make youth feel a bare minimum of accountability, so it’s not based on paper work but the bigger idea?” questioned youth worker Serena (site 1).
In other situations, youth had to learn to be accountable to the organization. Manager Mara (site 3) explained:

> Developing understanding and helping the youth navigate the project so they understand their role and financing is important—they may be gung-ho about the project but yes, there is reporting, [there are] receipts [and] you have to learn to track all that.

When decisions were imposed because of organizational constraints or when youth were not able to participate in decision-making that affected them, adult youth workers made efforts to explain why. Balancing this tension was a key part assuring the authenticity of the youth-led approach as youth learned to navigate within real-world constraints.

Thus, adult youth workers used a number of practices in their role of structuring the setting and managing the interface between the youth setting and the larger organization. In addition, as described in the following section, they reported that an important aspect of their role was working at the level of the organization as a whole.

**Organizational-Level Practices**

In more than two thirds (71%) of interviews, participants spoke about the need for practices that fostered a favorable organizational context for youth-led processes. Participants strove to promote youth leadership not only in one isolated setting but, when and where possible, throughout the organization. Given that youth work was usually only a small part of the typical operating activities of the local convening organizations, participants encountered resistance as they tried to diffuse this new approach. Youth worker Tiffany (site 2) described the resistance: “There was a certain institutional inertia, and then this community organizing approach sprouted up within it. . . . It completely destabilized something that was oiled a certain way.” It was often challenging to get the organization to experiment with new ways of doing things. As manager Marc (site 2) noted, “You can work differently as an individual but the most difficult part is the corporate part. . . . The organization is difficult [to change] because staff have been raised with the approach that they should organize activities for youth.”

Transforming traditional ways of working with youth required a clearly articulated youth engagement philosophy at the organizational level that provided a framework for both staff practice and organizational policies and decision-making. Once articulated, the youth-led philosophy also had to be embedded in organizational policies and practices. Participants reported that having youth on the organization’s board was a particularly helpful practice for introducing the youth-led approach to the organization. As manager Mara
N. Blanchet-Cohen and L. Brunson (site 3) described, “Having youth be part of board [helped board members] realize it is not so large a risk. The fear of the unknown had to be overcome and now [they can] really start to understand the benefits.”

In a context of experimentation and risk-taking, helpful organizational practices also included establishing clear objectives for the program and criteria against which success could be evaluated. Participants felt that transparent objectives and criteria helped to focus on big picture goals and leave room for failures on specific activities, as long as the general philosophy and approach were being realized. Manager Annie (site 5) noted, “In YS it was ok to fail, [and] to learn from mistakes, if you can articulate [what was learned].” Underlying this element was a recognition that adult youth workers had to extend their involvement into spaces that were often unfamiliar. Manager Mara (site 3) said, “I did not have a vision of what this project looked like, and there was no one to tell me. It had to be found—a way to navigate the community, the organization, so many things.” Similarly, youth worker Anna (site 3) stated, “We are always testing the waters.”

Another organizational-level theme that emerged in more than half (58%) of the interviews was related to practices that supported staff who were implementing the youth-led approach. Certain organizational practices were favorable to helping staff do this work successfully, such as carefully selecting and training staff with the necessary skills and attitudes. This did not necessarily mean hiring workers with previous youth work training or experience. As manager Mara (site 3) explained, “In some ways it’s easier to bring on people who don’t have huge experience working with youth in the past, [but those who are] open to working with people.” More informally, it was helpful for staff to interact with others involved in the same type of work. Within the organization, staff appreciated having colleagues who shared a similar role with whom they could discuss general principles as well as specific decisions and dilemmas. As manager Sophia (site 1) described, “[It’s] nice to have that group of people to bounce ideas off of and [to help give] direction.” Participants also mentioned that the organization had to allow for the considerable amount of time that it took to foster youth leadership. The pace of the work was not always predictable, and staff needed time to be able to negotiate boundaries and differences and to modify structures and attitudes that were often resistant to change.

In more than two thirds (67%) of our interviews, participants identified additional organizational practices related to networking with other organizations and community leaders. Adult youth workers Irene and Lance (site 1) pointed out the benefit of public events which put “youth in a more positive light with policy decision-makers, so opinions [about youth] are shifting.” Manager Annie (site 5) noted the emergence of “a different conversation with community members where young people were viewed as legitimate.” However, networking also meant navigating political issues and existing alliances among organizations, which was a time-consuming and difficult task. As
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manager Mara (site 3) stated, “Impact-wise we stirred up quite a few places, [and generated] some negative feelings towards us. That was not positive. We were like the poking people, [and] our success rubbed some people the wrong way.” Despite the difficulties and time-consuming nature of these networking practices, they were seen as essential in order to contribute to community-level change, an important part of the YS mandate.

DISCUSSION

Despite an emphasis on youth leadership in the YS program, our research participants viewed adult support as an essential, albeit complex, ingredient of the process, and one that was quite different from the role of adults in traditional youth programs. Both youth workers and managers reported practices at multiple ecological levels, extending traditional conceptions of youth work at the level of individuals and groups, but also go beyond these levels to include practices at the setting and organizational levels. Specifically, practices at the individual level helped support young people’s capacity to participate in a youth-led setting. Practices at the group level fostered social interactions and group activities that actualized the youth-led approach. Practices at the setting level created structures that supported and protected the group’s interactions and activities. Finally, practices at the organizational level created a favorable environment for the youth-led setting and new opportunities for youth empowerment. Previous research has described youth work practice occurring at multiple levels (Camino, 2005; Larson & Angus, 2011; Larson & Walker, 2010; Zeldin et al., 2005, 2008, 2013). Placing these types of practices in an explicitly ecological framework helps to highlight the field’s growing understanding of how youth work practice in general and power-sharing models in particular can require complex and strategic boundary-spanning, role-changing and systems-level work (Hawe et al., 2009; Larson & Hansen, 2005; O’Donnell et al., 1993; Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

A theme that was transversal to practices across all these levels was the responsiveness and adaptability that participants saw as integral parts of this type of youth work practice. Implementing power-sharing practices required being highly responsive and creative in managing tensions and challenges encountered in any given situation. Rather than inducting youth into a clear ongoing activity structure, staff had to embrace the fact that goals and activities were being co-created with youth, and tensions that emerged from negotiating these roles had to be worked through along the way. Establishing boundaries in relationship-building, balancing among supporting, controlling, and withdrawing from youth processes, and promoting youth-led approaches at the organizational level while negotiating organizational constraints were other ongoing challenges. Our study thereby builds on Larson and Walker’s (2010) identification of dilemmas of youth work practice,
both by documenting similar practice dilemmas in a different national and program context, and by suggesting that innovative practices—practices that were new to the practitioner or the organization—often emerged from trial-and-error efforts to manage these dilemmas.

It is interesting to note that neither managers nor youth workers talked directly about how they conceived power relationships or how they learned to surrender power to youth, although our interviews directly question participants to reflect on how YS transformed their practice. It is important to note that four out of five of the organizations responsible for implementing YS were traditional youth-serving organizations with little experience in youth-led programs; the fifth site had more experience with youth-led approaches but was working to broaden and enrich this approach across the organization and with partner organizations. In this sense, the YS sites provide interesting examples of traditional youth-serving organizations working to implement a youth empowerment philosophy that was new to them. The difficulties that our participants had in naming power relationships suggest that explicit training on power-sharing issues could help practitioners be more explicit and intentional in their efforts to implement power-sharing models when those models are new to the organization. Further research on the nature of youth workers’ internal transformation and how they engage in self-reflection, surrender power, and overcome their own biases could help to inform and enrich this practice work.

Contributions and Limitations

The study contributes to the growing understanding of staff practices in youth-led approaches by focusing specifically on practices reported by adult staff members who were working to create empowering settings for youth in the context of a unique nation-wide Canadian initiative. Applying an ecological and activity settings perspective helped to elucidate the complexities of adults’ roles in implementing a youth-led approach. Consistent with previous research and theorizing, this emphasis on context contributes to moving beyond identifying the features which distinguish high quality youth development programs to a focus on helping “practitioners understand how these features may be achieved and sustained in the challenging situations of daily practice” (Larson & Walker, 2010, p. 348). Future work is needed to validate the applicability of these results to other settings and to integrate additional practices that promote youth empowerment.

Despite the usefulness of closely examining practice in the specific case of YS, the generalizability of our findings may be limited by the specific aspects of this case. Indeed, this study is based on the experiences of a small number of participants working within the same general program context,
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and in a unique context which may be difficult to replicate elsewhere. Specifically, the YS funder valued learning and reflection and provided substantial resources for co-learning activities across program sites, allowing for a fair amount of trial and error. Future work is needed to validate the applicability of our results to other settings.

A further limitation of this study is related to the decision to focus specifically on adult perspectives. A focus on this point of view was considered necessary to provide insight into the mindset of the individuals who have the responsibility of relinquishing power in ways that allow youth to take on more leadership. Interestingly, our description of staff perceptions of their own practices seems to be in line with other YS research that focused specifically on youth perspectives (Blanchet-Cohen & Cook, 2014; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2012). Further research explicitly comparing youth and adult perspectives in the same program context is warranted. Combining youth and adult perspectives would increase our understanding of the transactions occurring within youth led settings and help to reveal their impact on youth experience and development.

Implications for Practice

Drawing on our study, we have identified certain questions that might be used by youth practitioners to reflect on the practices that they use to facilitate youth empowerment at multiple ecological levels (see Figure 1). These have been identified as questions to reflect the dynamic nature of youth work, to allow for an evolving process of change at each ecological level, and to accommodate the uncertainty and ambiguity that results from this complexity. In this sense, providing reflection questions rather than guidelines is consistent with Krueger’s (2005) image of youth workers involved in modern dance.

These findings also suggest implications for training youth workers and managers. Our study suggests that youth workers could be better prepared to negotiate power-sharing in youth-staff relationships and to navigate both within and across different ecological levels. These changes could necessitate expanding the professional identity of youth workers. Peirce and Johnson (1997) describe the need for youth workers who are “boundary crossers,” equipped to bridge the worlds of individual youth, their groups and their organizations, while keeping in mind how the broader system serves the youth. Organizational and community development skills would prepare youth workers to access and negotiate support from within the larger context in which their programs operate, as well as to establish the favorable context for youth to take on leadership. To achieve this, one is reminded of the importance of integrating a systems thinking into the training of youth workers (Mann-Feder & Litner, 2004). Currently, this integrated approach
seems to play a limited role in the competencies of child and youth work practitioners in, for example, Canada, where competency frameworks focus on youth workers’ roles in specific program settings rather than the competencies necessary to navigate across multiple settings and ecological levels (Mattingly, Stuart, & VanderVen, 2010).

CONCLUSION

The ecological framework and activity settings lens used in this study helped to reveal practices used by adult youth workers to promote youth empowerment at multiple ecological levels. Our findings echo findings from previous research and provide further examples of power-sharing youth work practices at individual, group, setting and organizational levels. Placing these

**FIGURE 1** Questions for youth work practice in youth-led approaches.
practices in the context of an explicitly ecological framework helps to highlight how practice work requires strategic systems-level work. Finally, these results suggest questions that practitioners can use to reflect on their work and plan more successful practice.

Understanding the practices that youth workers can use to foster youth leadership is essential for organizations and practitioners who seek to depart from a traditional service delivery model which views youth as clients and recipients of services. We hope that these findings contribute to the growing body of practice-relevant work that document concrete strategies in specific practice contexts. This body of practice knowledge can be a useful resource for those who wish to embrace approaches to youth development that allow young people to exercise increasing initiative and leadership consistent with—and nurturing of—their developmental potential.

NOTE

1. We thank a reviewer of a previous version of this article for highlighting the absence of explicit reflection on power relationships.

REFERENCES


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