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Directivity and Freedom

Adult Support of Activism Among Urban Youth

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Community-based youth organizations represent potentially powerful settings for activism among marginalized urban youth. This article uses quantitative and qualitative data collected in one such organization to examine the link between youth–adult relationships and youth activism. Survey data point to adults as contributing to youth's activist development and reveal pathways that lead to this outcome. Interview and observation data clarify youth's perceptions of adult support, highlight the complexity of building egalitarian relationships, and situate youth–adult interactions within broader public action. Analyses direct attention to transformations among youth and convey the challenges inherent in breaking out of conventional patterns of youth–adult interaction.

Keywords: *adolescents; activism; community-based organizations; urban youth; youth–adult relationships*

Researchers and theorists express concern over young people's lack of participation and commitment to the public realm. Describing today's youth as self-concerned and disengaged, they cite studies showing declines in voting rates among young people aged 18-24 (Conference Consensus Paper, 1999), increases in materialism and decreases in social trust (Rahn & Transue, 1998), and negative results in tests of students' civic competence (Berman, 1997). A widespread perception exists that youth are incapable of engaging in productive democratic efforts to improve their communities. Even in those institutions created to "develop" youth, young people face ambivalence from adults regarding their ability to participate in real-world decision making and action (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2000). Many young people express frustration, feeling as though they are not taken seriously and presented with significant opportunities for public involvement. As one

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young participant in the current study put it, adults do not see youth as “actual people” able to effect change in the world.

Youth in urban areas are further marginalized from the public realm by rising poverty and inequality, increased isolation, and decreasing support from communities, families, and schools that limit their opportunities and power to influence the world around them (Blanc, 1994; D. Hart & Atkins, 2002; R. Hart, Daiute, & Iltus, 1997; Torney-Purta, 1999). Espinosa and Schwab (1997) talk of the need for *alternative spaces*, where these marginalized young people can meet, talk about their problems and experiences, reflect on their rights, and work to create change in their communities. Research suggests that community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) hold the potential to create the spaces for such youth activism, in which young people work together to solve public problems (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; R. Hart, 1992; R. Hart et al., 1997; McLaughlin, 2000; Pittman, Ferber, & Irby, 2000; Torney-Purta, 1999; Weis & Fine, 2000). Being grounded in the community, CBYOs are uniquely situated to create a bridge for youth between their local experiences and the broader public. Furthermore, as alternative sites for civic development (O’Donoghue & Kirshner, 2003), CBYOs may provide the means for youth to learn democratic skills and political knowledge to empower them as community activists. Although there has been much discussion and anecdotal evidence about the potential of CBYOs, there exists little empirical research on these settings and the relationships and processes within them that influence youth power, agency, and activism.

The development of young urban activists entails a process of identity change as youth come to understand their power and their role in the public realm in new ways (O’Donoghue, 2006a). Urban youth from marginalized backgrounds need a place to develop their collective sense of public efficacy and confidence in their capacity to effect change (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Flanagan & Faison, 2001; D. Hart & Atkins, 2002; Kahne & Westheimer, 2002). In addition to experiencing increased efficacy, urban youth need the opportunity to appreciate their group role in and responsibility for making change happen (O’Donoghue, 2006a). Not only do urban youth need to believe that they can effect change, but they also need to see themselves as youth who actively engage in change efforts.

Urban youth are seldom invested with significant power, particularly in comparison with the adults who have authority over their lives (Griffin, 1993). These power inequalities raise questions about the place of adults in CBYOs that aim to support the development of youth activists. Do urban youth need to be free of adults to find their sense of power? Although some researchers have linked youth agency and autonomy with adult absence (Barry, 2000), others maintain that the highest levels of youth development are achieved when adults and youth work together as partners, with young people incorporating adults into projects that the former design and manage (Camino, 2000, 2005; R. Hart, 1992). Indeed, intentional adult support of youth voice within CBYOs can promote their civic competence, public efficacy, and social responsibility (O’Donoghue, 2006b; Zeldin & MacNeil, 2006). Moreover, community settings offer critical opportunities for a transition from “hierarchical and paternalistic

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relationships" between youth and adults to those characterized by "close bonds and collective purpose" (Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005).

In this article, we examine youth–adult relationships in a CBYO that aimed to support and engage urban young people as public actors. We address the following question: What are the characteristics of youth–adult relationships that influence the development of powerful youth activists? We look first at young people's attitudes toward their potential role as activists, analyzing how their perceptions of relationships with adults are related to their sense of public efficacy[1] and social responsibility. Then we take a deeper look at the characteristics of these relationships by exploring the complexities of youth–adult interactions in support of youth activism.

Method

We rely on quantitative and qualitative data collected over a 2-year period (2001-2003) in an ethnically and economically diverse CBYO located in a midsized low-income urban city in the Northern California Bay Area. Youth as Effective Citizens (hereafter, Effective Citizens) describes itself as a youth–adult collaborative that creates community projects and enterprises to "develop a strong, just community and a diverse generation of daring leaders" (mission statement). Youth community projects have included the creation of a charter high school, youth-run media studio, youth employment program, child care center, and community garden. In addition, youth from Effective Citizens have organized community members to construct a skate park; they have facilitated statewide, national, and international workshops around youth development and educational change; they have hosted candidate forums around local elections; and they have made presentations to the school board and city council.

Over the 2-year period of this study, Effective Citizens worked with 112 youth between the ages of 14 and 18 (see Table 1 for demographic information for youth and adult participants). Forty adult staff members worked with these youth, playing a variety of roles, from project coach to administrative helper to consultant and staff support. The demographic breakdown of the staff varied significantly from that of youth, with the majority being White and female.

Quantitative data included questionnaires administered in the fall and spring of both years. Only a small number of youth completed both the fall and spring surveys during the 1st year of data collection; therefore, for this article, we analyze survey data collected during the 2nd year of the research project. A total of 50 youth who completed both surveys are included in the sample for the quantitative analysis. Based on youth and staff feedback, the questionnaire administered in Year 2 of the study was divided into two parts. The first focuses on youth's experiences within the organization, including their relationships with adults. The second asks youth to rate themselves across a variety of developmental categories, including activist attitudes.

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Table 1
Demographics of Organization and Sample (in Percentages)

	Staff in CBYO	Youth in CBYO	Youth Interviewed	Youth Surveyed
Gender				
Female	73	57	59	53
Male	27	43	41	47
Race/ethnicity[a]				
African American	5	19	22	24
Asian	5	4	6	2
Caucasian	70	23	25	20
Filipino / Pacific Islander	13	13	12	20
Latino	5	8	7	14
Multiracial	—	22	13	10
Native American	—	5	7	2
Other	3	6	9	7
	$n = 40$	$n = 112$	$n = 54$	$n = 50$

Note: CBYO = community-based youth organization.
a. Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

To explore the characteristics of youth–adult relationships that relate to youth's activist beliefs, we relied on three sets of scales from the surveys. The first set measures youth's perceptions of youth–adult relationships at Effective Citizens. In particular, the scales ask young people about the extent to which they feel a close and trusting bond with the adults, as well as the degree to which they believe that adults support meaningful youth voice in decision making at Effective Citizens. The second set assesses activist-related outcomes. A Public Efficacy Scale includes questions about youth's confidence in their abilities to effect change in their community, and an Activist Role Scale includes questions about the extent to which youth characterize themselves as being actively engaged in community change efforts. A General Efficacy Scale was included in our analyses to examine the possibility that youth's general efficacy beliefs mediate the relations between youth–adult relationships and activist outcomes. Sample questions and internal reliability for each scale are provided in the appendix.

Qualitative data collection included observations and interviews. Biweekly observations were conducted of program activities, meetings, and performances over the 2-year period. Formal interviews were completed with youth from the organization in the fall and spring of both years. In our sample of 54 youth over the 2 years, 16 youth were interviewed once, 23 twice, 10 three times, and 3 four times.[2] Demographically, the interview sample roughly paralleled the youth population within the organization as a whole. Formal interviews were conducted with a sample of 10 adult staff members in the 2nd year of the evaluation. The seven adults having the most direct and time-intensive relationships with youth, the *coaches*, were interviewed two to three times over

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the course of the year. Interviews were also conducted with the adult co-directors of the organization and with an adult-staff support person.

To allow for an iterative and continual conversation, we engaged in qualitative data analysis throughout the study, with formal interpretive work coming at the end of the data collection period. Observation notes and interview transcriptions were coded using NUD*IST software, according to a descriptive and interpretive coding scheme (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In reading through data retrieved under the broad category of *youth–adult relationships*, we identified precise themes and patterns. Throughout this process, we attempted to keep our focus youth centered, relying on youth voice and descriptions to point us to the aspects of their relationships with adults that most influence their development and power as activists.

Analysis: Youth–Adult Relationships and the Development of Urban Youth Activists

Our analysis of quantitative and qualitative data explores features of youth–adult relationships that seem to contribute to young people's sense of public efficacy and responsibility. The survey data allowed us to focus on two constructs that characterized youth–adult interactions: close and trusting relationships (*trust*) and support for meaningful youth voice (*youth voice*). We then looked to see if these constructs were statistically related to youth's activist attitudes. Themes that emerged from our interview and observation data reveal similar but much more complex and multidimensional constructs and patterns. In fact, youth pointed us to three qualities in particular regarding their relationships with adults that affected their development as activists: Such relationships were supportive, egalitarian, and embedded in public action. In this section, we present our analysis of the survey data and then share the in-depth discussion that our qualitative data made possible.

The Role of Youth–Adult Relationships in the Development of Activist Attitudes

Analysis of the survey data offers a broad overview of youth's experiences at Effective Citizens. In this section, we begin with a summary of youth's activist attitudes and then consider various explanations why some youth develop stronger senses of themselves as public actors than others. After reviewing differences according to various demographic characteristics, we present three analyses that explore the relations between youth's activist attitudes and their perceptions of their relationships with adults at Effective Citizens.

A total of 50 youth completed the survey, representing a range of grade levels, ethnicities, and experiences in the organization. As seen in Table 2, youth's self-reported public efficacy and identification with an activist role appeared to increase

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Table 2
Mean Scores (and Standard Deviations) on Activist Outcomes

	Fall	Spring
Public efficacy	3.05 (0.80)	3.19 (0.81)
Activist role	2.76 (0.76)	2.85 (0.67)

Note. $N = 50$. Public efficacy based on a 5-point scale; activist role based on a 4-point scale.

slightly over the course of the year, though not statistically significant for the group as a whole.

Before looking at relationships with adults, we focused on youth's demographic characteristics. Interestingly, we found no gender or grade-level differences on any of the variables included in the study. In terms of ethnic differences, African American youth in the sample reported significantly higher means on the Activist Role Scale in the fall ($t = 2.34$, $p < .05$), yet there were no ethnic differences with regard to activist role in the spring. Time spent in the organization was another important factor to consider. In the spring, those who had participated for more than 1 year reported a significantly higher mean score for public efficacy in comparison to those who had participated for only the year during which we collected data ($t = 2.00$, $p < .05$). Subsequent analyses take into account the effect of time spent in the organization.

Three Analytic Approaches to Understanding Youth–Adult Relationships and Youth Activism

Grouping youth according to their mean activist attitudes. For both activism-oriented outcomes, we created a high-scoring group and a low-scoring group—comprising, respectively, those youth whose mean scores for public efficacy were above the sample mean and those whose mean scores were below the sample mean. High-scoring and low-scoring groups were created in a similar way for the scale measuring youth's identification with an activist role. As seen in Table 3, youth in the high–public efficacy group perceived greater trust and support for meaningful youth voice from adults in comparison to the low–public efficacy group. Differences in perceived relationships with adults were not statistically significant among the high and low groups based on youth's identification with an activist role.

Correlations between relationship features and activism outcomes. Bivariate correlations were used to examine the relations among youth–adult relationships, activism outcomes, and general efficacy beliefs. The trust and youth voice measures of youth–adult relationships were highly correlated with each other (see Table 4).[3]

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Table 3
High and Low Group Means (and Standard Deviations) for Each Variable

	Public Efficacy		Activist Role	
	High	Low	High	Low
Youth–adult relationships				
Close and trusting	3.95 (0.57)	3.18** (0.98)	3.71 (0.68)	3.37 (1.02)
Support for youth voice	3.88 (0.50)	3.14*** (0.90)	3.70 (0.59)	3.41 (0.98)
Mediating process				
General sense of efficacy	3.34 (0.56)	2.49*** (0.80)	3.13 (0.72)	2.79 (0.83)
Youth activist outcomes				
Public efficacy	3.77 (0.29)	2.51*** (0.66)	3.48 (0.64)	2.92* (0.90)
Activist role	2.99 (0.61)	2.70 (0.71)	3.40 (0.37)	2.33*** (0.41)
	$n = 27$	$n = 23$	$n = 21$	$n = 22$

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Perceived trust and support for meaningful youth voice were positively correlated with youth's general sense of efficacy as well as youth's public efficacy. However, perceived trust was the only relationship feature significantly correlated with youth's identification with an activist role.

As expected, a general sense of efficacy was positively correlated with youth's public efficacy. Surprisingly, though, a general sense of efficacy was not positively correlated with youth's identification with an activist role. Given the results from the bivariate correlations, we conclude that general efficacy does not play a mediating role in the relationship between youth–adult relationships and identification with an activist role but has the potential to mediate between youth–adult relationships and public efficacy.

Regression analyses predicting activism outcomes. Regression analyses allowed us to test the strength of the relations between relationship features and youth outcomes, after controlling for youth's prior beliefs and other relevant background variables. Sequential regression analyses were used to test the possibility that youth's general efficacy mediates the relations between youth–adult relationships and youth's public efficacy. According to criteria set by Baron and Kenny (1986), a regression must first establish that the predictors (youth–adult relationships) significantly predict the mediator (general efficacy). After controlling for the effects of general efficacy at the beginning of the school year, we found perceived trust to be the strongest positive predictor of general efficacy, $\beta = .30$, $p < .05$.

The second set of regressions established that perceived trust is significantly related to youth's public efficacy beliefs. As seen in Table 5, in the column labeled Model 2, perceived trust emerged as a significant positive predictor of public efficacy, $\beta = .32$, $p < .05$. Mediation was tested by regressing public efficacy on perceived trust

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Table 4
Bivariate Correlations Among Youth Adult Relationships, General Sense of Efficacy, and Activist Outcomes in the Spring

Subscale	1	2	3	4	5
Youth–adult relationships					
Close and trusting	—				
Support for youth voice	.83**	—			
Mediating process					
General sense of efficacy	.36**	.46**	—		
Youth activist outcomes					
Public efficacy	.45**	.45**	.72**	—	
Activist role	.31*	.26	.26	.35*	—
M (*SD*)	3.60 (0.87)	3.54 (0.80)	2.95 (0.80)	3.19 (0.81)	2.85 (0.67)

Note: $N = 50$.
$^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$.

in the presence of general efficacy (see column labeled Model 3). In the prediction of public efficacy, general efficacy, $\beta = .58$, $p < .01$, is the strongest positive predictor. Moreover, in the model that includes youth's general sense of efficacy, perceived trust drops out as a significant predictor, meeting one of the criteria for the detection of a mediating relationship among variables (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Our small sample size prevents us from making stronger claims; nonetheless, the set of sequential regressions provides preliminary support for the possibility that general efficacy beliefs mediate relations between youth–adult relationships and their public efficacy beliefs. Although the data do not support a mediated model in the prediction of identification with an activist role, perceived trust does emerge as a strong positive predictor, $\beta = .46$, $p < .05$.

By looking at survey data that allow us to isolate relations between variables and control for the effects of prior experiences, we are able to conclude that relationships with adults play a significant role in the development of youth activism. We reveal two pathways through which youth–adult relationships are linked to these activist outcomes. First, youth's relationships with adults at Effective Citizens are related to their sense of efficacy in general, which in turn affect their attitudes toward their potential as public actors. Second, perceived trust in particular is related to youth's self-identification as activists.

The Complexity of Building Youth–Adult Relationships in Support of Youth Activism

In this section, we turn to qualitative data to provide a rich picture of the aspects of youth–adult relationships that empower and constrain youth activists. We highlight

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Table 5
Standardized Regression Coefficients for the Prediction of Activist Outcomes

	Public Efficacy			Activist Role	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2
Predictor	β	β	β	β	β
Background variables					
Years of participation[a]	.21	.13	.08	.06	.20
Prior public efficacy	.43**	.36**	.21	—	—
Prior activist role		—	—	.37*	.46**
Youth–adult relationships					
Close and trusting		.32*	.16		.46*
Mediating process					
General efficacy			.58***		—
ΔR		.09	.27		.18
ΔF		$F(1, 46) = 6.09$*	$F(1, 45) = 30.62$***		$F(1, 37) = 10.13$***
Total adjusted R^2	.22**	.30**	.57***	.10	.27**

a. Coded as 0 = *1 year at Youth as Effective Citizens* and 1 = *more than 1 year*.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

three characteristics of the interactions that emerged in our analysis as being particularly salient to youth: supportive, egalitarian, and embedded in public action. In doing so, we extend our quantitative findings by adding detail to youth's perceptions of their close and trusting bonds with adults, by outlining the complexity of supporting meaningful youth voice through egalitarian relationships, and by situating youth–adult interactions within broad public action.

Supportive relationships: Caring, openness, and positive challenge. Youth and adults spoke of the importance of close, supportive relationships characterized by genuine caring and understanding as well as honest feedback and challenge. Youth described relationships with adults at Effective Citizens as being closer and on more of a personal level than relationships with adults in other settings. Adults at Effective Citizens, youth believed, were there for "more than just a job" (Sarina), and they really cared about "what's going on" (Danielle) with young people. Adults echoed these sentiments, emphasizing that their most important role was to provide support to young people. Nicole, an adult coach, stated her primary goal for youth as such: "Because of their relationship with me, they see relationships with adults as different"; she described as her area of greatest success "developing relationships, helping with individual problems, and being available to youth." Several other adults, including the co-director, talked of the "continued intentionality" about supporting youth growth.

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Youth placed great import on the personal care and attention that they received from adults. They reported that the adults cared "for you and about you" (Aleisha) and that they "try to get to know you" in a nonjudgmental way (Fallon). One youth, going through a personally hard time, spoke of how an adult coach put aside work the day before a big public event to talk about what was going on in her life. Caring for the individual, it seemed, came before everything else. Nicole described her approach with young people as follows: "I make an effort to interact with each youth . . . like, 'Hey, how's it going? What's *really* happening?' And I think that's a really big strength." Furthermore, these relationships extended beyond the boundaries of time and place. Adults made themselves available to youth in ways that broke down traditional work boundaries—youth and adults went to the movies and out to lunch, drove to and from the organization, and talked on the phone.

Youth described how these personal, caring relationships with adults changed them, making them more trusting and serving as motivation and a source of accountability in their public activism. They talked of the significance of knowing and being known by adults. One youth spoke of how, when trying to choose a college, she received help from several adults, who encouraged her to make a list of her qualities and then gave her suggestions for what types of schools would be a good match. The fact that these adults "really knew" (Vera) her affected her deeply.

In addition to feeling genuine care, youth at Effective Citizens appreciated that adults supported them by providing honest feedback. Adults reflected to young people an understanding of "how people really think about us" (Maggie). Adults helped youth recognize their power by providing feedback about what was possible and about their work and potential. Vera explained the connection this way: "Whenever adults say that I'm going to do great things in the world, that gives me a lot of sense of power." Sarina described this process as it related to her:

> Coming in here, I didn't know that I had power. Like, they would always, constantly tell me, "People follow you, whenever you do bad stuff, good stuff." And I didn't know that. It took me to this year to really look back and see that if I do this, then people will follow; if I do this, then people will follow. What decisions do I need to make for people to follow in the right direction or lead them in the right direction?

Sarina's reflection demonstrates a common theme at Effective Citizens: Youth came to the CBYO with little sense of their own power, but honest feedback from adults bolstered their sense of efficacy. In observations, adults consistently provided formal and informal feedback, ranging from critique of a practiced public performance to analysis and discussion of a young person's skills and behaviors. Indeed, feedback was seen to be so important that the organization created opportunities throughout the year for young people to receive feedback from adults in the community as well as from those on staff. For example, youth's reports to panels of community members regarding the youth's public projects and their learning proved particularly powerful.

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A third realm of support that youth and adults addressed was that of positive challenge, adults pushing youth beyond their comfort zones toward personal growth and learning. Youth talked of adults' pushing them to "do better" or "be successful" (Lily), which led them to take on greater leadership. Youth reported that adults "stick with you" (Hector, Jesse, Sarina), pushing youth to get and stay involved. This persistent challenge by adults completely changed the attitude and behavior of one youth. Rosalind explained that she spent months behaving badly because she wanted to "get kicked out" of the organization, "but they just wouldn't do it." Instead,

> the coaches came up and talked to me and told me that they feel that I can do better. . . . They know I can be successful, and they know I have leadership skills. And so I started to take on that leadership.

Similarly, another young person reported how adults would not let youth "just sit there and agree with everyone else" (Ellis); rather, adults pushed them to step up and make their own voices heard.

As such, challenging youth was seen not only as pushing but also as creating opportunities and helping youth gain the tools to meet the challenge. As one adult co-director described it, "it's the combination of high expectations, but then it's also, like, how are you working with folks to really understand right opportunities and skills and matching that with those expectations?" One youth explained the effect of this process:

> This [organization] kind of made me believe in myself, like I could really be somebody because, you know, at first I'm just like, "I don't want to do this, I just want to be bad" and stuff like that. And they told me, like, "You've got so much potential," and they gave me an opportunity to do really big things. . . . And then that just motivated me. (Danielle)

The confluence of challenge and opportunity was closely linked to youth's developing sense of power as activists.

A second struggle around challenge came from trying to balance challenge with egalitarian relationships and youth's sense of autonomy. Several youth expressed frustration with adults' being "always on them" and not allowing them to do what they wanted to do. However, for other youth, this presence was seen as a positive. As one young person stated, more freedom would not necessarily have been a good thing; it could allow one to "do the wrong stuff on the wrong track" (Aleisha). Adults had to push youth to continue forward in their community efforts, which youth were not always happy about—indeed, were often resentful of—but then reported feeling good about and having learned from. As one youth described, "sometimes I didn't want to do [the community project] anymore, but the adults pushed me forward. So then we were proud of what we'd done" (Maggie). Adults were identified as helping

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push youth to connect their work to something bigger—community change—which made the difference for those lacking motivation. Another young person (Danielle) described how being pushed to get involved in public work, even when she felt forced into it, stimulated her interest in public activism and helped her identify the issues that most concerned her. For the majority of these youth, working for community change and specifically identifying and holding oneself accountable as the agent of that change was new and challenging. Through positive challenge, adults played a crucial role in promoting this aspect of youth's activist development.

Egalitarian relationships: Youth–adult collaboration in support of meaningful youth voice. Unlike many settings in which youth interact with adults, Effective Citizens sought to create democratic, egalitarian, nonhierarchical relationships between youth and adult participants. The meanings of this structure for youth and adults were varied and complex. For young people, the egalitarian nature of relationships at Effective Citizens was most often described as being "equal," working "hand in hand" with adults (Sarina), being treated "as like an adult" (Ellis), and not seeing adults as "higher" than youth (Danielle), which heightened youth's senses of responsibility and motivation. Youth reported that adults treated them as intelligent people with valuable things to say. Many expressed surprise that adults at Effective Citizens "actually listen" (Kristin) to what young people have to say and "take youth seriously" (Fallon). Observation data show that adults consistently elicit youth voice, using multiple strategies, from small group work to large group discussion to creative arts projects and individual writing. Although listening to young people may not seem so revolutionary, the youth at Effective Citizens reported that it is something that they rarely, if ever, experience in other contexts. The youth described teachers in their previous school experiences, for example, as giving off "energy that they don't want to talk to youth" (Dawn).

As such, adults at Effective Citizens did not just listen to young people; they also took the crucial step of accepting youth ideas and creating space for young people to act on them. One of the adult co-directors described an incident in which several youth had concerns about a staff member whom they believed was exhibiting racist behaviors. The co-director called a meeting for the youth and the adult to discuss the issues. Such "real conversation and directness," the co-director stated, supported collaborative relationships between youth and adults. She maintained it is essential to create "an environment where, like, 'Oh, I'm really going to listen to what [this youth] is saying and take her concerns very seriously.'" Observations supported these claims; adults encouraged youth's voicing their opinions and acting on public issues ranging from local economic development plans to the war with Iraq.

Youth further described the egalitarian nature of relationships as stemming from a youth-centered environment. Part of eliciting and accepting youth voice, they said, means relying on youth to "make everything they want" (Lorraine), from developing group ground rules to determining public action projects. This climate

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is different from that of traditional school settings, they explained, which seems teacher centered: "[Effective Citizens] is more about the youth. I just think that [at school] . . . it seemed the teachers were always treated differently. Like you had to have such respect for them and not for each other" (Fallon). At Effective Citizens, adults give youth a "very broad space to work with" (Sarina), and youth reported that though there are rules, they are always "flexible, negotiable" (Paige), and open to discussion by the group of young people and adults together.

Adults also emphasized collaboration, which they defined as "co-creation" between youth and adults on decision making and project work, as well as adult support of youth involvement and responsibility. The adult co-directors pointed to this area as one "of emphasis and intentionality." The organization created formal, structural features to support co-creation, including a Youth–Adult Council, which was composed of eight youth and one adult in charge of making policy decisions and recommendations for the organization; and community-wide meetings, weekly events where all youth and adults came together for relationship building, discussion, decision making, and project work. Adults also worked to ensure that collaboration occurred in less formal ways, such as in the day-to-day interactions between youth and adults.

Youth and adults pointed to the open, reciprocal nature of their relationships with each other. The organization placed a high value on adults' being open with young people; it designated sharing as a central aspect of the adult coach role. One adult coach saw this culture as one that promoted "a willingness to change with them . . . and I know it changes my relationship with them instantly" (Nicole). A second adult coach described how she built an equal connection with a youth through working to "fully understand her as a person" (Samantha) and opening herself in the same way. Observations included multiple examples of adults' sharing with young people, whether about family histories and traditions, personal feelings and worries about the public projects, the influence of the youth on adults' lives, or admissions of their own "failures." Youth appreciated that coaches shared themselves in this way and allowed youth to know them as people. In addition to sharing who they were, adults made themselves open to feedback from youth, in formal evaluations and informal day-to-day interactions. Youth enjoyed providing this feedback and seeing adults change as a result. Indeed, youth noticed and often reacted negatively when adults were not open to change. As one youth explained, "if the coach doesn't want to put themselves out there, share . . . and be real with who they are . . . , the youth aren't going to reply back" (Fallon).

Youth spoke of the ways in which the development of egalitarian relationships between themselves and adults heightened their senses of power, responsibility, and motivation. Yet creating an organization characterized by egalitarian relationships that supported meaningful youth voice is a complex task. Research in the organization showed that although there was much talk, especially from youth, of "being equal," in reality, youth and adults have distinctive roles that they play within the

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CBYO. Youth described their role as coming up with ideas for, planning, and implementing public action projects. As described by youth, adults should play the role of guide in this process: eliciting their ideas, holding standards and accountability, creating opportunities for youth leadership and responsibility, sharing experience and contacts, and helping them plan and think through details. As one youth summarized, "[their job] is to keep us focused, guide us to the right path, so we don't fail" (Vera). Some youth resented it when adults pushed their role as guide too far, becoming authoritarian and telling youth what to do. This kind of adult coach "hindered" (Hector) youth in their work and made them feel "less free."

Although not explicitly defined in the organization, these youth and adult roles came to be accepted by young people as the way things were supposed to be. Youth expressed frustration when adults moved into youth's sphere of responsibility. For example, in the fall of 2002, adults began to make decisions about the public issues that the organization would work on. The youth rebelled, refusing to do work on projects that they had not selected. During one observation, a youth explained, "I avoid working [on this project] as much as possible. . . . They're always dragging us into projects. We're the lackeys. They make commitments and then we have to do all the work" (Katherine). By the end of fall, adults understood that youth cannot be motivated to work on projects in which they feel as though they have no voice or choice. As a result, much of January and February was spent eliciting youth ideas and facilitating decision-making processes to choose future work.

The roles of youth and adults in CBYOs that are striving to be egalitarian are continually negotiated. The roles that youth felt comfortable and interested in at Effective Citizens changed as their skills and knowledge grew from experience. Youth became critical of the existing relationships between themselves and adults as they spent more time in the organization. For instance, although new youth might think that being asked for their opinions about the day's activity is novel, experienced youth might be more concerned about their input about organizational policies and practices.

> All of the new people, I think they are empowered and impassioned by the fact that they can initiate changes in [Effective Citizens]. . . . But it's all relative. For me, this didn't, like the model this year of how it's been in terms of youth–adult decision making is relative to other models that have worked better for me. (Sara)

Throughout this research, adults had to constantly monitor their roles to enable youth to take on new responsibilities and continue to participate in meaningful ways. Adults were not only the greatest support of youth autonomy within the organization but also the greatest constraint. Although adults did expend much effort to support and accept youth voice and create open, respectful, reciprocal relationships, they remained the final determinant regarding the extent of youth's influence. One youth explained this phenomenon when asked whether she believed that she is able to have

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a say in the organization: "Insomuch as it is logical to coaches. If it's illogical to coaches, then frequently it's not something that happens. So my say ends with the coaches" (Maggie). Although much was up for negotiation between youth and adults, in the end, it was most often the adults who had the final say. The level of youth–adult collaboration was in large part determined by how willing and able adults were to open up space for youth.

Although adults played a strong role in determining the extent of youth influence in the organization, youth pointed to what became a third tension—namely, that young people had to be willing to take on responsibility. One youth described how the year started with complaints about the adults but ended with strong youth–adult relationships. He attributed the change to "specific youth that step out to say they're not going to stay in the shadows anymore and not be heard, that they're not going to have the adults make all the decisions" (Ellis). Observation data, however, reveal inconsistent levels of youth's assertion of responsibility. Although many adult coaches pointed to the effort that they expended in trying to get youth to "step up" and take on more responsibility, several youth described a fear and a reluctance to assume responsibility and leadership. They spoke of the challenge of breaking out of conventional patterns of interaction, particularly, the hierarchical youth–adult relationships that characterize most schools and many families. Even when egalitarian relationships were the goal, adults and youth played complex parts in creating and stepping into new roles, spaces, and modes of interaction.

Embedded in public action: Building relationships through meaningful work. Youth–adult interactions at Effective Citizens were organized around engagement in public action. As one youth described it, the organization was about "youth and adults collaborating to do really meaningful work" (Vera). Meaningful and intense involvement in public endeavors provided the focus that allowed youth–adult relationships to evolve and strengthen. Problems arose, however, when the work was viewed as being more important than the relationships. In particular, accountability pressures on adults challenged the development of the youth's powerful relationships with adults in this CBYO.

Youth and adults at Effective Citizens engaged themselves in public efforts that carried with them real-world challenges and risks. The important point about this interaction to youth was the mutuality of the work:

> We basically try to focus on youth and adults building positive relationships to do something meaningful, like not adults standing at the front of the class saying, "This is what you need to do . . ." It's more as a team. . . . They're right alongside us. If we fail, they fail also. . . . They're not afraid to fail with us. (Sarina)

One young person concluded that this sense of "If we do well, we do well together, we'll all build together" was "one of the fundamental things that are different with

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Effective Citizens and regular high schools" (Asha). Although adults at Effective Citizens were most often in the role of coach or guide, some became "part of the team" (Nicole). One coach decided to place herself before community adults for feedback and critique in the same way that youth were expected to. She had struggled for months to motivate her group but found that joining them in their presentation was a "fabulous coaching model" (Nicole) that spurred her and the young people to a higher level of performance.

Youth overwhelmingly conveyed that engaging with adults in public projects improved their relationships with adults and, thereby, their public activism. Project work allowed youth to spend time with adults outside of usual youth–adult time, space, and role boundaries. Youth and adults often met up in the evening at a coffee shop or at their homes to get a piece of work finished. Doing so allowed them to get to know each other in different ways. Many youth spoke of the value of being able to work one-on-one with adults in collaborative effort. Although one youth pointed out that working so intensely with the same adult could become "tiresome" (Aleisha), most youth thought that the continuity of these relationships helped them become comfortable sharing their opinions and feelings with adults. Furthermore, the intensity of these work-based relationships presented youth the opportunity to know and be known more fully by an adult and to give and receive meaningful feedback.

Collaborative engagement in public work resulted in close, deep relationships between youth and adults and nurtured youth activism. Experiences from this CBYO, however, raise important questions about the impact of the standards by which organizational directors and funders judge youth and adults in CBYOs. When success for adult staff was measured by whether particular tasks got done and not by whether youth learned and were engaged in the process, relationships between youth and adults suffered. For instance, youth noted a difference between the 1st year of this study, when they and adults were focused on the same youth-chosen projects, and the 2nd year, in which adults had made outside commitments to complete assignments. One youth related, "I don't think that the [adults] really had time to connect with us [this year]. They were too into, like, 'Oh my God, this work, this work, this work'" (Danielle). Observation showed that being held to an outside standard, such as getting a piece of work completed by a given deadline, negatively affected the egalitarian nature of youth–adult relationships. As adults became more concerned with the job, they had less time and flexibility to create opportunities for youth voice and participation.

Discussion

The age segregation "typical of the modern experience of youth," writes Etienne Wenger (1998), is "doubly costly" (p. 275). Limiting interactions between youth and adults deprives adults of the energy, passion, and creativity that young people can

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bring to reinvigorate public life while denying youth access to the accountability and learning that can come from time spent with experienced adults. Creating authentic youth–adult relationships that facilitate the development of powerful youth activists means establishing new types of intergenerational interactions. By using quantitative and qualitative methods, we were able to identify the significant role that adults play in urban youth's activism at Effective Citizens. The youth in this study pointed to the powerful transformation that came from trusting, supportive, egalitarian, work-embedded relationships with adults. The youth also conveyed the challenges—cultural, societal, and organizational—inherent in breaking out of conventional hierarchical patterns of youth–adult interaction.

These findings confirm and extend previous research on youth–adult relationships. Zeldin et al. (2005) identify several strategies used by adults in building *youth–adult partnerships*. Among these are support of youth voice, attending to the emotional needs of young people, and building reciprocal partnerships. The current study underlies the importance of these features of youth–adult relationships, exploring their contributions to youth activism. Multiple justifications are made for youth–adult partnerships, ranging from youth development to youth rights to strengthening community and civil society (Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Youth activism cuts across these categories, facilitating youth development through campaigns in which youth assert their rights and work for stronger, more just communities. As such, the current study suggests that when oriented around youth activism, new types of youth–adult interactions simultaneously benefit youth and their communities.

Building new types of relationships demands ongoing attention to the challenges that arise along the way. As Zeldin et al. (2005) note, adults need to work intentionally. While making space for youth, adults have to create balance in their own roles and continually check their sense and use of power. As this study demonstrates, such intentionality comes not only from adults but also from the organizational features and structures that support and constrain adult staff. At Effective Citizens, building supportive relationships characterized by care, trust, honest feedback, and challenge is a central component of the organizational theory of change. Moreover, the organization maintains that to engage in meaningful public action, youth and adults need to build supportive relationships as well as egalitarian interactions that support youth voice and action. Adults in this CBYO are provided organizational assistance—explicit expectations, space, time, mentoring, and feedback—around developing these kinds of relationships with young people.

Camino (2005) writes that the most *solid* partnerships form when youth and adults work together on something larger than themselves. In our study, we found that through meaningful and often-intense public work, youth–adult relationships are given the focus that allow them to strengthen and evolve. More important, however, public action projects at Effective Citizens not only offer focus for relationship development but also provide context for youth's development as activists. What

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youth and adults engage in together is critical. That is, building close, trusting, egalitarian relationships in any setting might not necessarily influence youth's sense of themselves as public actors; doing it while engaging together in public work, however, does affect youth activism outcomes.

Paolo Freire has written of the need to transform relationships between students and teachers, maintaining that powerful education requires a different kind of relationship and authority, one in which the teacher (adult) is able to provide directivity and freedom at the same time (Gadotti, 1994). To support powerful youth activism in CBYOs, organizations need to assist adults and youth as they step outside traditional roles to develop nonhierarchical supportive relationships. Adults play critical roles for youth as advisers, role models, capacity builders, and fund-raisers, thereby brokering relationships with broader publics, providing guidance to young people, and lending credibility to youth efforts (Tolman & Pittman, 2001). This study demonstrates that through establishing new ways of working and being together—and by providing directivity and freedom—adults can facilitate the development of public efficacy and activist identities among urban youth.

Appendix: Youth–Adult Relationships and Youth Activism–Related Youth Questionnaire Scales

Youth–Adult Relationships

Closeness With and Trust in Effective Citizens Adults

I can talk to the adults here about things that are bothering me.
Adults at Effective Citizens always keep their promises.
Kids and adults know each other very well at Effective Citizens.
I feel comfortable working on projects with adults at Effective Citizens.
Adults at Effective Citizens really care about me.
Adults at Effective Citizens always try to be fair.
I feel safe and comfortable with the adults at Effective Citizens.
Fall: $\alpha = .71$. Spring: $\alpha = .89$.

Adult Support of Meaningful Youth Voice

Youth have a big part in deciding on the rules here.
Youth here get to plan all kinds of events and activities.
Adults and youth plan things together here.
Kids can get rules changed if they seem unfair at Effective Citizens.
I help to decide what goes on here.
Everyone at Effective Citizens has a chance to have his or her voice heard.
Youth can start up projects on their own here.
Adults here give my ideas and contributions as much attention as their own.
Fall: $\alpha = .77$. Spring: $\alpha = .89$

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Mediating Process

Sense of Efficacy—General
How sure are you that things will turn out well . . .
when you are having trouble learning something?
after things have been going wrong?
when you have to make an important decision?
when you have to do something hard for the first time?
when you have to figure something out for yourself?
when someone is counting on you to do something?
when you are trying to learn something new?
when you feel very unhappy?
Fall: α = .83. Spring: α = .81.

Activist Outcomes

Public Efficacy
How sure are you that things will turn out well when . . .
you're working to make life better for some group in the community?
you try to have some influence on political issues in the community?
you're trying to get something changed in the community?
you make a presentation to a community group, to get a project under way?
Fall: α = .73. Spring: α = .77.

Identification With an Activist Role (4-Point Scale)
I can start, carry out, and finish a project that benefits the community.
I am involved in community activities and issues.
I help others.
I take action based on what I believe.
Fall: α = .82. Spring: α = .69.

Note: All items use a 5-point scale unless noted.

Notes

1. *Public efficacy* refers to youth's beliefs about their ability to influence the public world around them. We use an empowerment conception (Perkins & Miller, 2000, as cited in Tolman & Pittman, 2001), defining *public efficacy* as the extent to which young people see themselves as being capable of affecting and influencing their community-based youth organizations and the broader community.

2. Youth were included in the interview sample as long as they continued in the program. Youth interviewed in the spring of 2002 were not interviewed again until the spring of 2003.

3. Because our measure of trust was so highly correlated with support for meaningful youth voice, $r(50) = .83$, $p < .01$, we decided not to include the Youth Voice Scale in subsequent analyses to avoid issues of collinearity.

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