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## Maximizing Youth Leadership in Out-of-School Time Programs: Six Best Practices from Youth Driven Spaces

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## Maximizing Youth Leadership in Out-of-School Time Programs: Six Best Practices from Youth Driven Spaces

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to provide strategies for youth-serving organizations to maximize opportunities for youth to develop leadership skills within the out-of-school time program context. The sample includes 5 youth-serving agencies who participated in the Youth Driven Spaces initiative led by a Midwest program. Data for this project included observations of youth–adult meetings, field notes from youths’ reflections on key model activities, and interviews with adult staff to identify common challenges and supportive solutions. We identified 6 emergent themes for supporting youth leadership: (a) engage youth in meetings, (b) create opportunities for youth to learn how to be leaders, (c) recognize resistance to youth voice, (d) encourage youth and adults to share constructive feedback, (e) navigate youth–adult boundaries, and (f) practice intentional strategies to retain youth and to onboard new youth and staff. Results provide concrete strategies for practitioners and researchers to empower youth with the skills and resources they need to be effective leaders.*

Key words: youth leadership, out-of-school time programs, youth–adult partnership, youth development, youth voice, youth-driven practice



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### Maximizing Youth Leadership in Programs

Youth–adult partnership (Y-AP) is an increasingly common way of engaging participants in youth development programming (Akiva et al., 2014)—one that has benefits not only for youth but also for youth development organizations and their communities (e.g., Ramey, Lawford, & Vachon, 2017). With the benefits come challenges, many of which center around the ability of adult staff to share power even as they support young people to develop leadership skills (e.g., Roach et al., 2013). Some researchers (e.g., Nalani et al., 2021) have suggested that organizations may need third-party support to help them develop meaningful Y-AP. However, such support is often unavailable due to resource limitations, such as cost, distance, and knowledge about the nuances of this work.

As community-engaged researchers, we studied a program that provided such support during a year of partnership with selected youth-serving organizations in Michigan. We observed what Y-AP coaches taught partner agencies' youth and adults, how the organizations implemented the teaching, and how youth and adults described their efforts. Based on these observations, this article summarizes six principles for successful Y-AP, with specific best practices for each. Knowing that most youth-serving organizations do not have similar opportunities to engage in intensive training and coaching on Y-AP, we hope they can use these principles and best practices to develop their capacity for meaningful youth engagement and leadership development.

### Literature Review

A commonly adopted definition of youth–adult partnership entails “multiple youth and multiple adults, deliberating and acting in a collective or democratic fashion, over a sustained period time, through shared work on issues of concern to both parties” (Zeldin et al., 2013, p. 393). Criteria for successful Y-AP include authentic decision making, natural mentorship, reciprocity, and community connectedness (Zeldin et al., 2013).

The benefits of Y-APs for youth including fostering young people's self-worth, agency, self-efficacy, and empathy (Akiva et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2005; Zeldin et al., 2013) and their skills in critical thinking, communication, leadership, collaboration, and civic engagement (Checkoway, 2011; Larson et al., 2005; Ramey, Lawford, & Vachon, 2017). Y-APs also have been shown to have positive effects on youth-serving organizations, their programming, and their staff (Ramey, 2013). Increasing youth voice and leadership development can help programs recruit and retain participants (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016) and engage young people more fully in programming (Ramey, 2013; Ramey, Rose-Krasnor, & Lawford, 2017). Furthermore, communities benefit when young people unite to effect social change (Checkoway et al., 2003).

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Barriers to meaningful youth involvement begin with deficit-oriented stereotypes of youth as victims, troublemakers, or problems to be solved (Checkoway, 2011; Langhout & Thomas, 2010; Royce, 2009). Even when trying to share power, both adults and teens can revert to old roles (Checkoway et al., 2003; Roach et al., 2013). Many organizations that encourage youth voice limit the kinds of decisions youth can make; for example, youth are more commonly involved in decisions about program activities, rather than organizational staffing (Akiva et al., 2014; Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016). Adults may want to engage youth in leadership but not have the necessary skills and knowledge (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Libby et al., 2005)—as the skills required of adult allies in Y-AP are not the same as those generally required of youth workers (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015). Some staff may feel stressed about the responsibility of adopting Y-AP (Ramey, 2013). They may struggle to find the balance between sharing power and being responsible for program delivery (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016; Mitra, 2008; Roach et al., 2013) or be confused about when to offer guidance and when to step back to let youth lead—and possibly fail (Camino, 2005; Nalani et al., 2021).

To overcome these challenges, both youth and adults need intentional support in creating and maintaining new boundaries, setting new goals, and reflecting on processes (MacNeil, 2006; Wong et al., 2010). Empowering youth does not mean that adults should cede all power or that youth must do all important tasks (Camino, 2005). To strike the right balance of Y-AP, both groups need training, along with time and support to implement what they learn (Collura et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2015). Prior training for adults may be particularly important (Nalani et al., 2021). Time for reflection is key (Camino 2005; Nalani et al., 2021; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2020), though it is hard to come by in many youth development programs (Zeldin et al., 2005). One solution is to integrate reflection into meetings (Camino, 2005).

Dozens of strategies for successful Y-AP have been identified (see Checkoway, 2011, for a brief review). Strategies range from individual-level practices such as maintaining strong relationships (e.g., Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014) to group-level practices such as developing shared language and norms (e.g., Mitra, 2008) and to organization-level transformations involving institutionalization of youth roles (e.g., Zeldin et al., 2005). One fairly consistent finding is that Y-AP is more likely to be successful when the organization creates a culture of youth empowerment (e.g., Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016; Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Brion-Meisels et al., 2020; Nalani et al., 2021; Roach et al., 2013). Some researchers have suggested that organizations may need external third-party support to help them develop their capacity for Y-AP (Camino, 2005; Nalani et al., 2021; Zeldin et al., 2008).

## The Youth Driven Spaces Initiative

This study focuses on third-party support provided by the Neutral Zone, a southeast Michigan community-based youth-serving organization that provides Y-AP training and coaching to other programs for high-school-age youth. The Neutral Zone's Youth Driven Spaces model conceptualizes how youth and adults can partner to foster youth voice. The model has three core pillars: *supporting intrinsic motivation*, *meeting developmental needs*, and *building youth–adult partnerships*.

In summer 2018, Neutral Zone began a three-year project to disseminate its Youth Driven Spaces model to other youth-serving agencies in Southeast Michigan, working with six agencies for the first year. Interested agencies submitted an application to the Neutral Zone and were selected through a competitive process. The selected agencies demonstrated that increasing youth voice and engagement was important to the organization's success, their administrators were committed to supporting authentic youth roles, and they had staff and youth willing and able to participate. Six agencies were selected, but one agency was unable to continue after the initial training.

The remaining five agencies participated in the year-long initiative, which involved (a) the Youth Leadership Institute, a two-day overnight training retreat for youth and adult participants from five agencies led by experienced Neutral Zone staff and youth coaches; (b) monthly leadership coaching for each partner agency; and (c) the final Youth Leadership Summit, which gathered all participating youth and adults to reflect on changes and identify new goals. Partner agencies decided whether to engage adults only or both youth and adults in the monthly coaching sessions.

## Methods

As university-based, community-engaged researchers, we studied the complete process of how the first cohort participated in the initiative and examined how the Neutral Zone supported these five partner agencies in promoting youth leadership. Following a developmental evaluation framework (Patton, 2010), we aimed both to provide timely feedback to help the Neutral Zone and participating agencies make full use of the coaching and training efforts and to identify best practices for fostering youth leadership. Our research sample includes 49 youth participants and nine adult staff from five agencies, as well as three Neutral Zone coaches (see Table 1).

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**Table 1. Agency Characteristics, Youth Demographics, and Study Participants**

Agency	Focus	Agency mission	Youth demographics	Adult interview participants	Adult meeting or observation participants	Youth meeting or observation participants	Coach
A	Community organizing	Enables youth to become fully engaged participants in the world, equipped with the character and capacity to negotiate their environment and change it for the better	Ages 16-17; predominantly African American	1	2	9	Coach A
B	Education	Honors Arab American heritage through community building and service; empowers youth to become leaders and get involved in their community	Ages 14-17; majority "other" race/ethnicity or White	1	1	9	Coach A
C	Community organizing	Advocates for change in education and public safety; aims to project the voices of residents in the diverse community	Ages 16-17; predominantly Hispanic	1	2	7	Coach B
D	Suicide prevention	Promotes mental health and aims to prevent youth suicides through outreach, advocacy, and education	Ages 14-17; majority White	1	2	13	Coach A
E	Youth development	Combines project-based learning, character development, career exposure, and mentorship to help high school students graduate and receive college scholarships	Ages 16-17; all African American	1	2	11	Coach C

## ***Procedures***

We used qualitative methods to study partner sites' implementation of the Youth Driven Spaces model.

### *Observations of Two Cohort-Wide Events*

Three researchers attended the opening Youth Leadership Institute and the closing Leadership Summit. Both events aimed to immerse participating youth and adults into the network of partner agencies, provide hands-on demonstrations of how to enhance youth voice in various aspects of programming, provide separate training sessions for youth and for adults, and give agency groups time to plan for improvement. With the consent of the participants, we observed large- and small-group activities and collected statements shared by youth and adults. We followed up with youth by asking clarifying questions in small-group discussions and during lunch. Having collected youth perspectives in this manner, we decided not to interview youth individually to avoid redundancy.

### *Meeting Observations*

At each partner site, we observed two meetings, one at the beginning of the initiative and one towards the end. We worked with agency staff to select meetings that would require conversation and collaboration among youth members and between youth and adults. The meetings, which took place in person, were recorded by agency staff so we could observe the videos and look for practices that contributed to or hindered implementation of the Youth Driven Spaces model. We used the Youth-Adult Partnership Rubric (Wu et al., 2014) to track whether meetings exhibited four key elements of Y-AP: authentic decision-making, natural mentorship, reciprocity, and community connectedness (Zeldin et al., 2013). Rather than applying rubric scores to evaluate agencies' implementation, we used the tool to guide our observations and to collect anecdotal evidence. After each video observation, researchers met to define the notable characteristics of the meeting and to identify best practices and challenges to implementation.

### *Adult Staff Interviews*

One researcher conducted semi-structured interviews by phone at the end of the project year with one staff member from each of the five partner sites. The interviews covered both processes and outcomes: how and to what extent the Youth Driven Spaces model was implemented at the agencies and what changes resulted for youth, staff, and the organization. Notes were transcribed and shared with the participants to ensure accuracy.

### ***Analysis***

Our analysis was based on an iterative and reflexive team approach (Olesen et al., 1994) and followed the thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, a team of three researchers went through the following five phases: *familiarizing yourself with the data*, *generating initial codes*, *searching for themes*, *reviewing themes*, and *defining and naming themes* to analyze the data. As community-engaged researchers, we prioritized the pragmatic needs of our community partners to inform program practice. We synthesized the data to identify emergent lessons in promoting youth leadership. During this process, we analyzed the meeting observations to identify common challenges in youth-adult interactions and developed aggregate scenarios to describe these challenges. In addition, we analyzed field notes on the training sessions and two cohort-wide events and transcripts of the adult staff interviews to identify practical solutions to the common challenges. Finally, we held iterative team discussions to refine the six strategies to promote youth leadership that emerged from the data.

### **Identifying Best Practices for Developing Youth Leaders**

Our observations and interviews revealed six common practices related to developing youth leaders:

1. Engage youth in meetings.
2. Create opportunities for youth to learn how to be leaders.
3. Recognize resistance to youth voice.
4. Encourage youth and adults to share constructive feedback.
5. Navigate youth-adult boundaries.
6. Practice intentional strategies to retain youth and to onboard new youth and staff.

For each of these practices, we present a scenario illustrating less-than-optimal practices, derived from observations and interviews. We then present best practices for fostering youth leadership, all of which are aligned with existing research. Most best practices were suggested by Neutral Zone coaches in training sessions; some emerged from meeting observations or interviews.

### ***Engage Youth in Meetings***

Effectively engaging youth in meetings is an important but challenging practice for many programs (Zeldin et al., 2008).



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### *Meeting Scenario*

*Zoe, the adult advisor, begins a meeting on ways youth can get involved in a community issue by presenting background in a lecture format. Youth participants are clearly disengaged, having side conversations with friends, or scrolling through their phones.*

In other meetings, adult staff tried to include youth but struggled to allow youth leadership. For instance, an Organization A meeting involved a youth member in reading the agenda, establishing norms, and presenting information. However, during the youth member's presentation, the adult repeatedly interrupted to provide additional information. The ineffectiveness of this approach, as well as the lack of opportunities for dialogue, was evident in the fact that the other youth were staring into space or checking their phones.

### *Best Practices*

During the initial training institute, Neutral Zone coaches recommended several practices adults can use to better engage youth in meetings.

**Involve youth in meeting preparation and facilitation.** Coaches suggested that youth be involved in drafting meeting agendas, designing activities and formats, and selecting discussion topics. Youth can also facilitate meeting segments to gain experience in public speaking and time management. For instance, in a planning meeting at Organization C, two youth leaders prepared and facilitated a discussion about events during Hispanic Heritage Month; the adult staff served primarily as timekeeper and interjected only when necessary. All other youth contributed to the conversation; notably, phone use was minimal. Another effective way to engage youth, employed in all meetings we observed, was to implement a brief reflection time at the end of the meeting. Summarizing the discussion, considering future activities, and processing how the meeting went helped youth feel their time was wisely spent.

**Arrange the space in an inclusive way.** Some organizations arranged meeting spaces in ways that enabled all participants to be fully integrated and have their voices heard. For example, Organization C set up tables in a large square at which everyone had a spot. By contrast, Organization B struggled with its room layout and high turnout, so that some youth members had to sit off to the side. Those young people participated less fully in meeting activities than their peers.

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**No-adult-talk time.** At the Youth Leadership Institute, youth and adults from the same organization were placed in small groups. These groups were encouraged to implement a 20-minute period in which adults would stay silent and allow youth to control the discussion. Intentionally silencing the adults was effective in motivating the young people to contribute their ideas.

**Utilize technology.** Youth and adults can utilize social media platforms to share reminders or articles and videos to be discussed in meetings. One interviewee said that their youth used social media messaging to develop personal relationships outside the organization. Youth members of Organization C used a group chat to stay connected.

### ***Create Opportunities for Youth to Learn How to Be Leaders***

Another important practice for developing youth leadership is to create opportunities for youth to learn and practice new skills.

#### *Leadership Development Scenario*

*Kyla has been involved in her program since the beginning of the year. She has developed ideas for activities and wants to be involved in a leadership role next year, but she is not sure how. She notices that the same three youth facilitate every meeting, and she's not convinced she can get a leadership opportunity.*

During the trainings we observed, youth participants said they did not have opportunities to practice leadership skills at school. One said, "School isn't about life skills. It's all about the grade." Youth explicitly voiced a need for growth with adult guidance, for example, "When we get into these leadership positions, we really don't know the basics; we were never taught how to communicate, how to work in a team like this."

#### *Best Practices*

The desire of our youth study participants for leadership development aligns with existing literature demonstrating the importance of gradually enhancing young people's leadership capacity through tailored skill development (e.g., Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016; Larson et al., 2005).

**Teach the basics of youth leadership.** Some youth stated in training sessions that they were originally reluctant to pursue leadership opportunities because they didn't know or understand leadership skills. For the five partner sites, the Youth Leadership Institute constituted basic

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leadership training for teams of youth and adult staff. Armed with this support and ongoing coaching, young people in all five organizations planned and led programmatic, advocacy, or fundraising events.

**Diversify leadership and decision-making opportunities.** Coaches encouraged adults to provide leadership opportunities beyond planning meetings. Youth can be involved in many aspects of operations, including tasks traditionally reserved for adults. In Organization C, for example, youth were largely involved in creating and sketching a mural to be painted in a public space. Youth and adults in Organization B split into committees to coordinate several youth-led projects, including constructing a stage in the program space and coordinating fundraisers with local businesses. Youth in Organization A got involved with creative activities such as designing physical space, posters, and websites.

**Clearly designate and rotate roles.** The Youth Driven Spaces approach encourages adult staff to make sure every participant chooses a specific role or function in the group, from setting meeting agendas and running social media accounts to fundraising. Coaches suggested rotating roles so that youth gain a variety of different—and complementary—leadership skills. “When every young person has a role, all can feel meaningfully involved,” one youth participant said. During the summit, youth said they wanted to “break the routine” of their current program by changing meeting structure, alternating youth facilitators, and incorporating new icebreakers.

**Step back (and let youth fail).** The youth development literature emphasizes that adult staff need to know when to step in to support youth leadership and when to step back and allow youth to lead—and sometimes to fail (e.g., Larson et al., 2015; Roach et al., 2013). One adult at the summit shared, “I’ve felt challenged emotionally, like for example if I give them ownership and they let me down.” In response, coaches highlighted the importance of providing a safe environment for youth to try things out. These experiences enable both youth and adults to reflect, open a dialogue, and learn from mistakes.

### ***Recognize Resistance to Incorporating Youth Voice***

Even with the best intentions to promote youth leadership, adults and even teens can sometimes revert to adult leader and youth follower roles (Roach et al., 2013).

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### *Adult Resistance Scenario*

*In a meeting, adult staff Kimi mentions in passing that Kelly is no longer with the organization. One youth member asks why Kelly quit on such short notice, and others chime in. They want to know whether the organization will start hiring soon. Kimi tells them that they don't need to worry; the director will make a decision that's best for the youth and the program. She moves on to the next topic.*

In interviews, some adult staff said they felt challenged to encourage youth voice. As one staff member at the summit said, "Sometimes it takes twice as long to allow youth to lead." Other adults recognized that they must overcome their own biases and consider youth as partners. One said that it is important for adults to "relinquish power" in order to give youth opportunities to lead and grow.

### *Best practices*

To address their own resistance and learn to collaborate in meaningful ways with youth, adult staff need consistent training and practice (Collura et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020).

**Acknowledge youth–adult power dynamics.** Youth generally have less life experience than adults, but they do have unique lived experiences and perspectives. To empower youth to be leaders, adults should consider youth perspectives to be as important as those of adults; they should not disregard youth input due to ageism or, more specifically, adultism. For starters, adults can stop using language that reinforces power imbalances, like "In the real world . . ." or "you'll understand when you're older." During the summit, adult staff acknowledged that they needed to relinquish some power in order to give youth opportunities to lead and grow.

**Recognize youths' contributions.** Coaches suggested that staff stay alert for signs of active youth engagement and provide appropriate encouragement when, for example, a participant speaks during a meeting or completes a major project.

**Practice active listening.** Coaches emphasized that, when youth share opinions, concerns, or personal experiences, adults must listen attentively and then validate and address their concerns. Adults should follow up with what young people say by making changes, providing guidance, and, as appropriate, revisiting the conversation later to ask how things are going or tell them what changes have been implemented.

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**Value voices from *all* youth.** An important topic in the initial training was how adults can encourage *all* youth to participate in group discussion. One strategy is to integrate multiple modes of participation, so that, for example, participants who are not comfortable speaking in a large group can contribute in writing or in a think-pair-share, in which participants pair up to share their insights on the topic at hand and then report to the whole group.

### ***Encourage Youth and Adults to Share Constructive Feedback***

Creating opportunities for youth to provide feedback on their program and to solicit feedback from adults was another practice coaches emphasized.

#### *Feedback Scenario*

*Lamine, a youth participant, has a broad idea for a new program and a desire to lead it, but isn't sure how to implement her idea. She turns to adult staff Roy for help to make her idea more specific, find out how to involve youth in planning, and investigate the feasibility of her idea given the organization's scope and resources. Roy likes her idea but isn't sure what to tell Lamine.*

Some youth in the final summit expressed interest in adult feedback. One said, "We want feedback from adults, and we want them to validate our good ideas." Another asserted, "Feedback should be direct, not sugar-coated."

#### *Best practices*

Coaches recommended mutual reflective practices aligned with research that highlights the importance of authentic encouragement and positive feedback (e.g., Lerner et al., 2014; Royce, 2009).

**Encourage youth reflection.** In interviews, some adults said that they intentionally gave youth opportunities to provide feedback on group activities, keeping the feedback mechanism simple to respect participants' limited time. One adult staff recommended, "Bullet points and asking for confirmation are best, like asking them to send back a thumbs-up emoji; it's about informal text language."

**Practice reciprocal feedback.** Mutual feedback between youth and adults enables both groups to discuss the strengths and challenges of the program or relationships. During the summit, youth expressed that they want to both receive feedback from and provide feedback to adults.

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Coaches suggested that, when adult staff provide feedback to youth, they ask for feedback about their facilitation techniques or about organizational matters.

**Focus on strengths and emphasize goals.** When providing feedback to youth, coaches said that adults should focus on how youth can improve to become stronger, rather than highlighting weaknesses. Positive feedback can help youth to create and work toward goals. Adults can provide incremental feedback to allow slow growth over time rather than letting youth set unrealistic benchmarks by themselves.

### ***Navigate Youth–Adult Boundaries***

Program staff should anticipate that, as they create opportunities for youth leadership, the boundaries between youth and adults will be tested, redeveloped, and redefined (Collura et al., 2019; Walker & Larson, 2006).

#### *Boundaries Scenario*

*During a meeting, youth divide into groups to plan various components of an upcoming event. Members of one group begin to disagree with one another, which takes them off task for a significant amount of time. Adult staff Marie wants to approach the group to resolve the conflict, but she isn't sure how to go about it.*

A young participant in the leadership institute stated, “Adult allies step on our toes; they offer too much support.” Interviewees said that balancing the personal and the professional was challenging. One stated, “There’s a difference between being a friend and being a mentor; we want to share experiences and be open but also be specific about not being just a friend.”

#### *Best practices*

Research has documented the “daily dilemmas” that adult program staff encounter while navigating relationships and boundaries with youth (Walker & Larson, 2006, p. 111). Coaches suggested ways adults and youth could manage those dilemmas.

**Develop community group norms.** All five partner sites had youth and adults co-create norms to guide their interactions. The discussion itself often helped youth and adults process how to navigate boundaries. Coaches emphasized that, once ground rules are developed, they should not be changed without explicit discussion.

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**Balance personal and professional boundaries.** Adult staff must maintain appropriate boundaries that balance the personal and the professional components of their relationships with youth. Coaches noted that staff must stay professional without becoming authoritarian or paternal, especially in situations involving tension or conflict.

**Share experience with a purpose.** Purposeful sharing can help adults connect with youth. For example, when teaching about dealing with rejection, an adult may share their experience with having their application rejected by a university. One adult noted, "If you're expecting someone to be vulnerable, you have to be expected to share too." Coaches said that the experiences adults share should be ones that not only build connections but also can help the youth navigate their own challenges.

### ***Practice Intentional Strategies to Retain Youth and to Onboard New Youth and Staff***

Youth and adults in our study discussed the importance of addressing retention concerns, such as irregular attendance. Also, they said that new staff and participants were often not informed about the organization's growing culture of youth leadership.

#### *Onboarding Scenario*

*Debby has been hired as a program facilitator with no youth consultation. Debby receives no training on the organization's culture, goals, and processes. She simply observes a few meetings and then begins running meetings on her own, without including youth in planning or facilitation.*

One adult said in the summit that new interns and staff need to learn about the culture of the organization, so they understand that "this is the expectation," that youth are included as leaders.

#### *Best Practices*

Youth attendance in OST programs is often influenced by a combination of social and peer factors, program features and contexts (Gillard & Witt, 2008). Coaches and study participants recommended several intentional strategies for recruitment, onboarding, and retention.

**Develop a "crash course" for new youth and staff.** During the final summit, several youth noted that, when new staff and youth members join their organization, they need support to get

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acclimated to the organization's culture and expectations. One young participant suggested creating a "crash course" for new youth and adults to introduce the organizational culture—especially the culture of youth leadership.

**Incorporate peer accountability.** Several youth said during the final summit that they were more inclined to engage in the program when they had a sense of collective ownership and belonging with their peers. They believed that peer accountability was more important to improve attendance than adult leadership. One participant suggested using apps or social media to encourage attendance and build connections.

**Establish a pipeline of youth mentors.** Organizations can develop a youth leadership pipeline, according to coaches, by engaging senior youth to serve as mentors and intentionally onboard younger youth. For example, Organization C created an alumni council to engage former members in fostering a culture of youth leadership.

## Discussion

### *Limitations*

The five partner agencies involved in this study, with their participating staff and youth, represent a small sample of organizations with an expressed commitment to becoming more youth driven. They are not representative; rather, they serve as examples of what can happen when organizations that want to develop Y-AP receive outside support in the form of training and coaching for both adults and youth.

We collected youth feedback during the opening and closing cohort-wide events but did not collect data from individual youth. We did not want to overburden young people who were, by their own testimony, already overcommitted. This decision means that we heard only from youth who were comfortable expressing themselves publicly. Their insights corresponded with what previous researchers, Neutral Zone coaches, and some adult staff expressed about youths' needs and desires in Y-AP work. Nevertheless, future work might include interviews with individual youth.

Our meeting observations took place after only one joint training session, a few monthly coaching sessions, and a few months of practice. The five agencies were in the process of discovering how to become Youth Driven Spaces. Many of the best practices outlined by coaches and agency staff were aspirational—practices the adult staff embraced in theory and



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were able to realize in practice some but not all of the time. Nevertheless, we did see groups in some of these organizations implementing practices known to encourage youth leadership, such as establishing group norms, having youth lead meetings with minimal adult interference, and building in time for reflection.

#### ***Implications for the Field***

Youth development programs are uniquely positioned to empower young people to develop leadership skills. Unlike most school systems, which tend to be hierarchical, OST programs can integrate youth into decision making, giving them the vital practice they need to grow as leaders (Lerner et al., 2014; Mitra, 2008; Royce, 2009). One widely adopted strategy for youth leadership development is youth–adult partnership.

The benefits of Y-AP for both youth development programs and participating youth have been well documented (e.g., Akiva et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2005; Ramey, 2013). Equally well established are the barriers, which may begin with adults' attitudinal stances (e.g., Checkoway, 2011; Langhout & Thomas, 2010) and usually—perhaps more importantly—extend to the fact that the adults lack skills and knowledge to foster Y-AP (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Libby et al., 2005). The training and coaching intervention we observed was designed to fill the gap (described by Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015, among others) between what youth workers typically know how to do and the skills required to foster Y-AP. Neutral Zone coaches offered training, advice, and mentorship in a wide range of positive Y-AP practices, which we categorized into six groups:

1. Engage youth in meetings.
2. Create opportunities for youth to learn how to be leaders.
3. Recognize resistance to youth voice.
4. Encourage youth and adults to share constructive feedback.
5. Navigate youth-adult boundaries.
6. Practice intentional strategies to retain youth and to onboard new youth and staff.

These categories and the individual practices within them are consistent with the literature outlining the benefits of Y-AP strategies for youth and for organizations. For example, practices 1, 2, and 4 are ways to develop agency and self-efficacy in program youth, a benefit cited by many researchers (e.g., Akiva et al., 2014; Larson et al., 2005; Zeldin et al., 2013). Practice 6 feeds into a key benefit for youth development programs: improved recruitment and retention (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016). Taken together, all six practices can work together to create a

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*culture* of youth empowerment and engagement, as many researchers recommend (e.g., Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Brion-Meisels et al., 2020; Nalani et al., 2021; Roach et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the six practices address the challenges to Y-AP identified both in the literature and by our respondents, especially around staff members' attitudes toward youth and the tendency of both adults and youth to revert to traditional roles—the common barriers to full partnership (Checkoway, 2011; Langhout & Thomas, 2010; Roach et al., 2013; Royce, 2009). Taken together, these practices can serve as a form of the professional development that program staff need (according to Collura et al., 2019; Gonzalez et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2015; Nalani et al., 2021; and others) to be able to implement Y-AP.

Our contribution, then, is not so much identifying new strategic directions as in presenting practical steps in a schema that is accessible to youth programs and practitioners. By providing both positive and negative examples, the staff and young people of the youth programs we studied showed how best practices can play out “on the ground.” The coaches offered specific, concrete steps adults can take to foster Y-AP—from how to arrange a room to when and how to share their own experiences. The specific results we observed when adults did or did not implement these steps can inform training for staff whose programs (like most) do not have access to intensive coaching in Y-AP. Armed with these practices and a concrete sense of how they can work, youth development staff will be better prepared to foster Y-AP. Ultimately, we hope to equip youth development organizations to embed youth voice into their programming and to deepen youth leadership opportunities in developmentally appropriate ways for young people of all ages and backgrounds.

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