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# The Multiple Roles That Youth Development Program Leaders Adopt With Youth

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## **Abstract**

The roles that program leaders establish in their relationships with youth structure how leaders are able to foster youth development. This article examines the complex roles program leaders create in youth programs and investigates how they balanced multiple roles to most effectively respond to the youth they serve. Analyses of qualitative data from 12 high quality programs for high school-aged youth suggest that program leaders take on different roles. In some cases, youth experienced their program leader as a trusted friend, caring parent figure, or influential mentor. In other instances they described him or her as having the knowledge and authority of a teacher or boss. Analyses further suggest that moving across multiple roles appeared to make the program leaders more effective.

## **Keywords**

youth development, youth programs, program leaders, youth, multiple roles

The nature of the role a professional constructs with the people he or she serves influences that professional's effectiveness. In their interactions with young people, youth development program leaders assume diverse and

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complex social roles. They may adopt the role of friend (Young, 1999), parent (Hirsch, 2005), mentor (Rhodes, 2004), or teacher (Halpern, 2005). These different types of roles position program leaders to serve distinct functions from offering guidance and emotional support to providing authority and expertise. It is important to understand the different roles youth professionals adopt and how these roles function.

This article examines the various roles program leaders<sup>1</sup> create in youth development programs and investigates how they balance multiple roles to most effectively respond to given youth in particular instances. The research studied program leaders in 12 high quality programs for high school-aged youth. Given limited prior research, qualitative methods of discovery research were employed to gain preliminary understanding of the topic from the point of view of the people involved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The theoretical approach of the study draws from social role theory that posits that nearly all roles involve reciprocal relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Newman & Newman, 2007). Thus each role is typically functionally connected to a related role, such as parent to the role of daughter or son and teacher to the role of student. The roles that leaders establish in their relationships with youth structure how leaders are able to support youth and foster their development. Developmental role theory suggests that different types of role partners may help youth develop in different ways; each also helps youth learn because they have to enact the demands of different positions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Newman & Newman, 2007).

Program leaders often position themselves in more than one role; they have a portfolio of role relationships with youth. Zeldin, Larson, Camino, and O'Conner (2005) suggest that the ability to balance the different roles they create is the most important skill in the art of sustaining relationships with youth. Yet because they involve adopting different postures, practitioners' role relationships with the youth they serve are often challenging to negotiate (Seligson & MacPhee, 2004; Walker & Larson, 2006).

Youth development programs are a unique arena where youth and adults come together to form role relationships on different terms than typically occur in others settings and institutions. In youth programs, there is often less hierarchy and more room for negotiation of status among youth and adults. Youth programs serve as "intermediate spaces" that bridge the worlds of adults and youth (Noam & Tillinger, 2004). Youth programs have been characterized as providing a "bridging function" (Rhodes, 2004) or serving as a "border zone" (Heath, 1994) that links youth and mainstream culture. In fact, it's been suggested that these contexts often serve as a transition to professional worlds and adult life (Larson & Walker, 2006). This border zone may

allow program leaders to have role portfolios that are distinct from those of other adults in youth's lives and that bridge peer-like and hierarchical relationships. It is important to understand how program leaders negotiate, balance, and blend multiple role relationships.

This qualitative study examined the nature of the roles of program leaders with the youth in 12 programs. First, it identifies the range of roles and the character and function of these different dimensions of the program leader role. For each role, literature on that type of role is described, analysis of how that role relationship was enacted in the programs studied is presented, and the distinct character and function of the given role is discussed. It then looks at how program leaders balanced multiple roles to most effectively respond to the youth they serve.

## **Method**

### *Data Collection*

This study followed 12 high quality programs for high school-aged youth over a 2- to 9-month period of participation in 2003-2005. The 12 programs included arts and leadership programs, ranging from visual, media, and performance arts to programs focused on leadership development and community change. Seven were urban and 5 were in small cities or rural areas; 6 were in community-based organizations, 4 were in schools, and 2 were in faith-based organizations (Larson, Pearce, Sullivan, & Jarrett, 2007). In three of the programs youth were paid for their participation and in two others some youth had paid positions. The programs were selected through a process similar to that used by McLaughlin, Irby, and Langman (1994) for selecting high quality programs. A program was first identified by its strong reputation and recommendations by local youth development experts and practitioners, and then program staff were interviewed and the program was observed to verify that youth were engaged, features of effective programs were evident, and the program leaders had been in their position for at least 2 years.

A representative sample of 5 to 12 (mean = 9.5) youth in each program and their 18 primary program leaders were interviewed and observed over a several-month cycle of program activity. The primary data source for this investigation was the 659 interviews conducted with 113 youth (Table 1). Secondary data sources included 111 interviews with the 18 primary program leaders, 14 interviews with 7 secondary program leaders, and 167 program observations. Interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the research period were longer and conducted in person; briefer phone interviews

**Table 1.** Programs and Youth in the Research

Program	Program description	Number of youth in program	Number of youth in study	Number of youth interviews
Clarkston FFA	School-based FFA chapter in a rural town; provides leadership development through agricultural education	77	11	74
Art First	Community-based nonprofit; provides high quality art education to Chicago's underserved youth	16	12	76
Youth Action	Community-based youth activist program in Chicago; youth develop action campaigns to address problems that affect their lives	20	10	62
Les Miserables	School-based musical production in a rural town	110	10	73
Youth Builders	Faith-based program in a rural city; provides safe alternative activities to youth during the summer	20	5	13
Faith in Motion	Faith-based dance troupe in a mid-sized city	25	9	53
Prairie County 4-H	Community-based chapter of 4-H Federation; provides leadership opportunities across the rural county	15	8	58
Media Masters	School-based media arts program in Chicago; instructors from a community-based organization provide a 10-week training	22	8	35
The Studio	Community-based career development program in Chicago; provides training in multimedia arts	22	10	44
Harambee	School-based summer program in Chicago; targets community building and leadership	37	10	52
El Concilio	Community-based youth council in Chicago; involves youth in community leadership and service	21	10	56
SisterHood	Community-based all-female youth group in Chicago; focuses on identity and leadership development	10	10	63

were conducted at regular intervals in between (every 2 weeks in most programs). As the larger study's objective was to observe the occurrence of developmental processes, the interview protocols sought ongoing accounts of the program experience and developmental areas. In interviews with both the youth and their program leaders, we asked specifically about the relationships between youth and program leaders and the role/s that program leaders played with the youth.<sup>2</sup> The majority of data for this study come from these questions although in a few instances interviewees used the language of roles in response to other interview questions.

*Youth.* Youth were selected to be representative of active program participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and years in the program. The sample included 62 females and 51 males (average age = 16.2). The sample of 113 youth included approximately equal numbers of African American ( $N = 37$ ), European American ( $N = 36$ ), and Latino ( $N = 32$ ) youth. Some of these participants were new to the program, but many had been involved in it (or other offerings sponsored by the same parent organization) prior to our study (for a median of 1.8 years; range 0 to 6 years).

*Program leaders.* The 18 primary program leaders included 11 women and 7 men (ages 22-55). Eight of these leaders were European American, 7 were African American, 1 was Latino, 1 was Arab American, and 1 was East Indian. They had been in their current positions for 2 to 19 years (median 4 years) and some had worked with youth for much longer. One exception was Janet<sup>3</sup> who joined the program midstudy to replace a SisterHood leader who had left. Working with youth was their primary, full-time responsibility in seven cases, supplemented the leaders' regular jobs in six cases, and was one aspect of a full-time position that included other administrative responsibilities in five cases.

## Data Analysis

To analyze the roles adopted by the program leaders, I employed procedures of grounded theory and related analytic techniques designed to identify underlying themes in narrative data and find meaningful theoretical categories that capture these themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, because the objective was to understand how the youth experienced their program leaders, all the youth interview data were read to identify passages that bore on the program leaders' roles and relationships with youth. A preliminary review identified five types of roles (friend, parent, mentor, teacher, and boss). To evaluate the fidelity of these categories, an independent rater utilized my coding system to analyze a randomly selected

set of 50 passages from the data, and our rate of agreement was satisfactory (Cohen's Kappa = .83). I then developed a working definition for each role to code interview passages. Sometimes interviewees named a role, and in other instances they described features that embodied a role. The youths' own language and assessments of the roles were used to identify the core characteristics and function associated with each role type. For instance, when youth described a leader as a "friend," they explained that "he can come down to my age and relate," "we joke around, we tell each other stories," or "when things were hard for me, friends that I thought I had, they were never there, but she was." I then analyzed the data from the program leader interviews, which echoed the themes identified in the youth interviews. In fact the descriptions of these roles provided by the leaders did not diverge in any clear way from those provided by the youth. The working definitions were then further refined by a review of the literature discussing each role. These analyses led to the development of a description of each type of role relationships, including a definition from the literature and data to illustrate the character and functions associated with each. These descriptions are presented in the section that follows.

A similar process was used to review and analyze the data to determine which program leaders played multiple roles and how and why they blended and balanced these various roles in different instances and with different youth. Because youth accounts are the best guide for how a program leader is perceived, transcripts from the youth interviews were analyzed to determine the range of roles each leader played. I first used the working definitions to code each passage and determine how many different roles were identified for a given leader. Then I went through the passages to examine how program leaders balanced multiple roles to most effectively respond to the youth they serve. These analyses and case examples are presented in the section on playing multiple roles.

## **Descriptions of Roles Relationships and Functions**

Analyses confirmed that the program leaders took on different roles. Some roles were more personal, where the leader related as a friend, cared as a parent, and offered guidance as a mentor. In other instances the leader acted as a teacher or a boss, roles that necessitated more formal or professional interactions.

### *Friend*

Conditions marking friendship among adolescents include enjoying mutual regard, desiring to spend time together, and having fun (Bukowski,

Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996). But beyond having fun, friendships are an important source of social support, intimacy, a place to explore new identities, and a means for facilitating autonomy from parents (Brown, 1990; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Adolescent friendships are characterized by “mutual reciprocity” (Youniss & Smollar, 1985), a concept that describes relationships in which individuals perceive each other as relative equals, respect each other’s point of view, and are involved in ongoing and open communication. Young people describe their friends as people with whom they have fun, share similar interests, and trust.

Across all the programs we studied, youth described at least one of their program leaders in terms of friendship. The leaders shared enjoyable and egalitarian interactions with the youth they served. As a young woman in SisterHood put it, “Even though her official title is Coordinator, she’s more than a Coordinator. Not just to me, like with everybody. She is like a friend and we could talk to her about anything.” A young man in Clarkston FFA described how he developed a friendship with his FFA advisor over 4 years, “We’ve gotten to be close friends. It’s become more and more personal. It’s not on a student–teacher basis it’s more of an adult–young adult basis. It’s more personal. You get to know them a lot better.” A young man in Youth Action described the fun side of his relationship with the adult organizer this way, “We’re like really kind of like buddies. Like after we’re done with work, we just talk a lot, make a bunch of dumb jokes. You get to have fun.” Many young people described their program leaders as friends; adults whom they regarded as equals, and whose company they enjoyed. This friendly rapport allowed the program leaders to build trust and sustained relationships with the youth.

Yet the youth–adult relationships formed were more nuanced than terms of friendship suggest, reflecting the adult’s obligation to maintain a professional stance. One Media Masters youth referred to the limits between having fun and getting down to business: “You can socialize with them. You can joke with them, but then there’s a period where you have to be serious.” Although youth and their program leaders shared in jokes, activities and interests, their relationships were primarily for and about the youth—their lives, their concerns—as opposed to those of the adults. This is incongruent with friendship in the traditional sense, which suggests greater reciprocity. The youth reported recognizing this distinction, noting that although elements of friendship developed between youth and their program leaders, the relationships did not cross the line into conventional friendship.

## Parent

Parent–adolescent relationships are typically characterized by both emotional closeness and benevolent authority. Research indicates that parent–child relationships remain important social and emotional resources well beyond the childhood years (Collins & Laursen, 2004; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992). Yet unlike the mutuality of friendships, parents remain authority figures for their children. Youniss and Smollar (1985) examined adolescents' perceptions of their relations with their parents and found that parents are perceived as authorities who assert opinions and use standards that they expect their sons and daughters to accept (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Yet while adolescents perceive their parents as authorities, they perceive parental authority as rightful and benevolent (Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Parents remain close to their teens, while maintaining their authority.

In most of the programs studied, the program leaders were described by the youth as parental figures. For example, we observed many members of the cast and crew of *Les Miserables* referring to the director as “Mom.” A student actor in *Les Miserables* characterized the support offered by the director this way: “It’s literally almost like a second mother. I can come and sob to her, or I can tell her, ‘Hey I got in an A in Spanish.’ Definitely a mother figure with her.” A youth in *Faith in Motion* described her program leader this way, “Susan is like my second mother. I would be adopted by her if my parents would put me up for adoption.” The kind of intimacy and communication typically provided by parents was a hallmark of these relationships.

In addition to the closeness reflective of parent–child relations, the relationships adult leaders created with youth also evoked the authority and disciplinary roles of parents. For example, a young man in Clarkston FFA described how the adult advisors intervened when he was caught misbehaving:

I got in trouble one day for doing something on the computer I wasn’t supposed to be doing. And they came to me that next morning and talked to me about it and told me how they felt about it and why I shouldn’t do it again and just basically were almost parental.

According to a youth in *Youth Builders*, “He’s on me about everything, I tell you. Sometimes he thinks he’s my dad.” When admonishing youth for poor behavior or grades, for example, these program leaders took on authoritative roles that are more emblematic of parents. By building parental-like relations



with the youth, the program leaders cultivated an emotional closeness that afforded them the ability to discipline when needed.

While the youth sometimes described their program leaders as a “second mom” or a “father figure,” they also recognized a distinction between the program leader’s role and that of a parent. Both the intimacy and the authority that youth reported experiencing with the program leaders were not as strong as what the youth experienced with their own parents. For example, when asked to describe the kind of role that her program leader plays, a young woman in Prairie County 4-H replied,

It’s not really a parent because they don’t boss you around and tell you to be home in the middle of this . . . it’s more that they have their set of control, I guess, pushing in the right direction that we should be going in; that they’re there.

The program leaders possessed influence that was grounded in intimacy and authority, but it was perceived as distinct from that of parents.

### *Mentor*

A mentor is an older, more experienced person who provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of an unrelated, younger protégé (Rhodes, 2002). Although parents have authority in terms of legal and normative power and control, mentors’ influence rests more solely on wisdom and experience. So while the parent role is more about authority and being directive, the mentor role is more about influence freely taken. Mentoring relationships are still strongly affective in nature, but they are more instrumental. Hirsh and Wong (2005) examined research relevant to mentoring within after-school programs and identified emotional support, guidance or teaching, and sponsorship and advocacy as three mentoring behaviors of adult staff. Furthermore, as Rhodes points out (2002), a mentor–protégé relationship is not necessarily mutually empathic; mentors are there to listen, support, and offer advice to the protégés. Equal reciprocity is less likely to characterize relations between adolescents and unrelated adults than relations between adolescents and friends (Darling, Hamilton, & Niego, 1994). In sum, mentoring relationships are characterized by their combination of influence and asymmetry.

Young people in all 12 programs likened their program leaders to a mentor, an older sibling, or a role model. Youth described these adults as a valued additional resource—an adult whom they could confide in or seek

advice from. Of the program leaders, a young man in Harambee said, "They'll like help you out since they are older than you and give you tips on what not to do or how you should do certain things when you are in certain places." And a young man from The Studio described the program leader this way: "She knows all the right things to say, all the time. No matter where you are or what situation you're in, she will help you out. She is the greatest big sister I've had in a while." Youth described their program leaders as people they looked up to and as valuable resources they could rely on for wise counsel and support.

While youth drew parallels between these adults and other adult figures in their lives, they often said that these program leaders were in fact more effective; they could tell them *more* than they'd tell their sibling and they were *more* available than their school counselor. "He's like an older brother you could say. Like a real cool older brother though, because, I trust him with shit that I don't even trust my brother with." The youth reported valuing their program leader's presence—their availability, their nonjudgmentalness, and their ability to listen. Many described trusting the program leaders and seeking their advice about matters beyond the program, from parents and romantic partners to college and careers. As a young woman in Art First put it,

Through the bad times, like when I came to consult her about family and stuff, she would try to give me all these methods that I should try . . . . She is always there for you. I mean she is there for everybody. You could always consult her, any problem or any task; she always has some idea that you could work with or do.

In sum, as trusted and respected adults, the program leaders influenced the youth they served by offering wise judgment and emotional support.

### *Teacher*

Teachers are perhaps the most common nonparental adults in the lives of youth, spending a considerable amount of time in almost daily contact with youth. However, research has indicated that teachers are not generally perceived as very personally important by adolescents, and these relationships tend to be less affectively charged than relationships with other adults (Clark-Lempers, Lempers, & Ho, 1991; Galbo, 1986, 1989; Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992). Unlike the more affective roles of parents and mentors, a teacher's role is more instrumental with the purpose being to facilitate

learning in students (Darling, Hamilton, & Shaver, 2003). Although some teachers are able to successfully transform traditional teacher–student relationships (Bernstein-Yamashiro, 2004), most teachers maintain professional boundaries, and most students perceived teachers as providing more instructional than emotional support.

Youth in most of the programs described their program leaders as teachers, and this role was implicit in the day-to-day activities and objectives of all the programs. Whether teaching acting, activism, or studio engineering, the program leaders had an intentional learning objective. For example, a young actor described how the director taught him technical singing skills:

Her advice on singing and how to do it—some mechanical things about how you sing—have really helped me. The first time I sang that [line] it was horrible but after some coaching, she tells you to put your hand on your stomach and then press in as hard as you can. The first time you do it you just kind of go, “Eh?” But she says, “No, press,” and then she likes shoves her hand in your gut and you’re like, “Ah!” So that helped me.

At The Studio, Niesha possessed the engineering expertise that the youth sought to obtain. According to observation notes, she would instruct the youth in the equipment and offer guidance like, “It’s peaking on the master fader” or “Tell her to do the first verse and if we need to split up her verse we can do that.” She would also quiz the youth on what needed to be done and lecture them on the ethics of music pirating. When asked to describe Niesha’s role, one young man offered, “Making sure that she teaches us the responsibilities from the program and what we have to do, and she’s been doing a great job of it. She’s been living up to her role as teacher.” Like teachers, the program leaders possessed authority in terms of knowledge and expertise and they offered instrumental support to enhance learning.

Nevertheless, a number of youth reported that the teacher dimension of their relationships was distinct from traditional teacher–student relations in that their relationships encompassed a more affective nature. For example, a young woman in Prairie County 4-H made this distinction when describing Lisa as a teacher: “Not a mean teacher, a very nice teacher. A favorite class teacher.” A young woman from Art First compared Rebecca to her teachers at school, “Rebecca is kind of like a teacher a little bit, but she’s a lot more, I guess you could say maternal than the teachers at school. But that’s because you know her better and everything like that.” In general, many of the youth recognized a teacher aspect to the program leader role but felt that it was less

formal and more intimate than a traditional teacher role. The program leaders we studied taught important skills and ideas, yet the role they played seemed to transcend traditional teacher–student relations.

## **Boss**

A boss is someone who supervises others. In this model, the employee is expected to perform productive work and is paid for doing so, whereas the boss is expected to teach knowledge and skills that will enable the young person to become progressively more productive and ultimately qualified (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). Furthermore, a boss provides critical oversight and management. Distinct from the other roles, boss–employee relations are more regulated or official, and there is the additional layer of accountability linked to situations when an employee is being paid. A boss provides direction, supervision, and accountability.

In most cases where youth were paid for their participation in the program, they identified their program leader as a boss who assumed a different sort of authority in terms of power and offered instrumental support to enhance performance. According to a young woman at Harambee,

He’s sort of like a supervisor. They give us a specific job, and we have to do it. If we get stuck, he would help us with something but really he’s just like a supervisor. He makes sure that we’re doing the right [thing], that we’re staying focused, and that we’re on time.

Even in one nonemployment program, El Concilio, a youth identified the program leader as a boss: “He’s like the boss of everything, where he tells us something and we have to have it done by a certain date.” When adopting a boss-like stance, the program leaders had to hold youth accountable to expectations, whether it was attendance, deadlines, or job performance.

The youth interviewed seemed able to reconcile this added dimension and understand why it was necessary. One Art First youth described the new power dynamic this way:

It’s kind of like, “I’m your boss,” but kind of joking about it, like, “So now remember now, I’m now your boss” [in sweet, mock condescending voice] kind of like, reminding you that if she tells you something about being late, or something, she’s really mean it, whereas if she’s a teacher, then she can take it a couple times. Now that she’s your employer and she’s paying you, she has a little bit more power.

A Youth Action intern reflected on how being a boss didn't diminish how she felt about the adult leader: "I consider him to be a friend even though he's considered to be my boss during the summer." When program leaders assumed an additional supervisory role, this dimension of their relationships tended to be downplayed by the youth.

## **Playing Multiple Roles**

Analysis revealed that across the 12 programs studied, program leaders adopted multiple roles in their relationships with the youth in their programs. In some cases, a young person likened their program leader to a trusted friend, caring parent figure, or influential mentor. In other instances they described him or her as having the knowledge and authority of a teacher or boss. Although the program leaders embodied elements of these archetypal roles, the relationships they cultivated with the youth they serve appeared to be more nuanced than these standard labels suggest. In this section, I describe the range of roles program leaders played and discuss how they balanced these multiple roles to effectively respond to the youth they served.

### *Range of roles*

Youth accounts were used to determine the range of roles each program leader played. A leader was identified as playing a given role if the youth specifically used that role to describe that leader (Table 2). Sometimes in programs with more than one leader, the youth referred to the leaders collectively in which case that role was attribute to both leaders. However, to be coded as playing a given role in Table 2, a program leader was referred to as such directly by at least one youth or collectively by more than one youth.

All 18 of the program leaders in our study played multiple roles in their relationships with the youth in their programs. As Table 2 illustrates, all were described as mentors, most were described as friends (83%), parents (78%), and teachers (67%), and about one third were described as bosses (28%). All five roles were attributed to four of the leaders, and just two roles were attributed to three of the leaders.

In a few programs, the coleaders had somewhat different role portfolios that combined in ways that appeared to facilitate their work. Tanya, The Studio's employment specialist, developed more focused adult relationships with youth, while her counterpart, Neisha, took up the full range of roles in her interactions with the youth. The Clarkston FFA coleaders were often described collectively and both were identified as playing the same four

**Table 2.** Roles the youth describe their program leader as playing

Program	Program leaders	Friend	Parent	Mentor	Teacher	Boss
Clarkston FFA	Mr. Baker	X	X	X	X	
	Mr. Jensen	X	X	X	X	
Art First	Rebecca	X	X	X	X	X
Youth Action	Jason	X	X	X	X	X
Les Miserables	Ann	X	X	X	X	
Youth Builders	Charles		X	X		
	Karen	X	X	X		
Faith in Motion	Susan	X	X	X		
Prairie County 4-H	Lisa	X	X	X	X	
Media Masters	Janna	X		X	X	
	Gary	X		X	X	
The Studio	Neisha	X	X	X	X	X
	Tanya		X	X	X	
Harambee	Mike	X		X	X	X
El Concilio	Pablo	X	X	X	X	X
SisterHood	Linda	X	X	X		
	Kim	X		X		
	Janet		X	X		

types of roles. We observed, however, that they did not always adopt the same role in a given situation. Mr. Jensen described how they intentionally took on different but complimentary roles:

One person has to be the bad guy and try to get some things out, and then the other person has to help smooth things over. It's kind of like parents. You know, one person has to initiate the discipline and sometimes the other parent tries to say, "Hey, you know, you're still a good kid."

By bringing together and moving across different role types, the coleaders were able to jointly serve more functions.

The division of role functions between coleaders was illustrated in a program in which the program leaders changed midway through the study. At the start of the year, SisterHood was a tight-knit group run by two young coleaders, Linda and Kim, who had a high threshold for the youths' antics and informal behavior within the group. The youth had to adjust when

Kim—whom the youth saw as a friend—was replaced midyear by Janet, whom the youth described as more maternal. Janet positioned herself as more of a community elder, and she was less tolerant of their cursing, for example. One young woman described how “a lot of the members in the group didn’t appreciate her just coming in and trying to change things.” However, she told how Linda—who played both a friendly and a maternal role for the youth—“recognized how a lot of us were taken back by how [Janet] entered the group.” She went on to describe how Linda was able to diffuse these tensions by reaching out to listen to the girls’ concerns. She appeared to do this without undercutting Janet’s position. In the flow of daily life and across different occasions individual program leaders adopted multiple roles that allowed them to create or restore conditions for positive youth development.

### *Function of Multiple Roles*

Analysis suggested that playing multiple roles allowed the program leaders to effectively respond to the needs of a given youth or the group in a particular instance. In some instances the youth needed the influence of a wise mentor; in other cases youth needed the benevolent authority of a parent figure. In this section I use several cases to illustrate how moving across multiple roles seemed to make the program leaders more effective.

This interplay was illustrated in The Studio where the primary program leader, Neisha, was effective at striking a balance between friend and parent figure. The Studio targets high-risk urban youth, many of whom have dropped out of high school and are focused on immediate concerns of money, work, and survival. Program leaders assist these youth in securing jobs, taking the GED, applying for school, and avoiding negative influences. Neisha earned the trust and respect of the youth she worked with, but she also provided these young people a necessary degree of authority and accountability when they weren’t doing what was in their own best interest. One young woman described Neisha this way: “Either she’s buddy-buddy with you, or the next minute she’s like your mom. It’s like she switches on you, but it’s like for a good thing; she makes sure it’s a good cause.” Another male youth reiterated of Neisha,

She could be a mother, she could be a friend, but no matter what she’s just there. So one day she’ll be your friend and everything, but then one day she’ll just start acting like a mother and flip out on you if you’re doing something wrong. So, it’s like everything that a person really needs.

She was able to move from being perceived as a casual friend, who shares jokes and music interests with the youth, to a stern mother who nags them to take the GED or calls them on drug use depending on the circumstances and the needs of the youth at hand. Observation suggests that because she was effective at building trusted rapport, Neisha was able to shift to hold youth accountable when needed.

Another case illustrates how a foundation of personal connection allowed the program leader to provide instructional support. Gary, one of the leaders for Media Masters, shared many interests and hobbies with the participating youth. His friendly demeanor and mutual regard helped differentiate the program, which was housed within the school's computer lab, from the regular school day and dynamics. Before the program start time, Gary was often found hanging out with the youth talking about the latest video game or animation film. This rapport facilitated his ability to effectively play an instrumental role in helping youth master the computer programs and technology that were the basis for the program. When it was time to get down to business, Gary was able to establish his authority, provide instruction, and redirect off-task behavior. A youth described how Gary's affable manner helped him keep the program on track and be a more effective leader: "He does it in a cool way, where you don't have to even keep [youth] in line because they respect you already." This same youth went on to explain that trusting relationships between youth and instructors helped the program run more smoothly: "Not just leadership is needed, but a certain kind of trust where you won't just take them as an instructor, but as a friend too. And therefore everybody's working better." As this quote illustrates, building a connection of friendship with youth allowed the program leaders the latitude to have authority as a teacher in ways that did not alienate the youth.

Data for these and other leaders suggest that playing multiple roles served the function of meeting the diverse needs of the youth. For nearly all leaders there was a personal peer-like dimension to their relationships, where program leaders grew close and offered emotional support to youth. Another layer of their work constituted a professional dimension where program leaders played the adult and provided vital structure, standards, and knowledge. Most of the primary program leaders we studied were able to bridge the role of friend and parent or teacher in an effort to best support the youth in differing situations.

A few of the secondary program leaders, however, failed to build personal trust, which risked violating youths' sense of fairness, turning them off, and crossing over into murky professional terrain. For example, at Harambee there were several new, inexperienced interns who changed roles in ways that were disconcerting to the youth. Youth expressed disgruntlement at how a male intern "switches up and wants to be their friend one minute and the next he is



reprimanding them.” Youth described that it was hard to know how to take him because he was never the same. It is a delicate and dynamic balance of personal feelings and comfort zones with professional obligations and objectives.

The more experienced program leaders were able to effectively take up different roles with individual youth in varying situations in an effort to best meet the needs and interests of the youth they served. In examining how the program leaders moved across these various roles, I identified several techniques they employed for navigating these complicated relationships<sup>4</sup> (Walker, 2005). First, as stated, they described the foundational importance of building trust and sustained, caring relationships with youth over time. This gave them the latitude to switch roles, including taking authority when needed in ways that did not alienate youth. Second, they recognized the importance of being aware of and responsive to youths’ needs. They were responsive to youth and context and able to anticipate situations and intercept challenges and setbacks by switching roles accordingly. Third, they emphasized the importance of being clear and consistent with regard to their interactions with youth. In this way, youth understood and trusted the program leaders and did not feel undermined by their switching roles. The findings suggest that by building trust, being responsive, and being consistent, the program leaders were able to successfully balance multiple roles in ways that increased their effectiveness at achieving their intentions.

## Conclusions

The importance of youth–adult relationships to youth work has been established in the literature. This article extends our understanding by examining the complex role relationships program leaders create in youth programs as well as how these roles function, for social role theory suggests that the role relationships that program leaders forge with youth structure how leaders are able to foster youth development in different ways. This article proposes that within the unique context of youth programs, program leaders assume a broad role portfolio that allows them to effectively meet a range of youth development needs.

Program leaders share features of roles such as parents and teachers, yet they are distinct from, and in some respects less confined than, these other adults in youth’s lives. Faced with fewer curricular demands than teachers, for example, program leaders are afforded unique opportunities to engage in informal conversations and enjoyable activities that can give rise to close bonds with youth (Rhodes, 2004). Moreover, because of the voluntarily nature of youth programs, the meaningful relationships forged can be a reason for youth to choose to participate. To be sure, parents, teachers, and employers

play multiple roles in the lives of youth as well. But they are often constrained by the nature of their roles as authorities, evaluators, and supervisors or, in the case of schools and workplaces, by the nature of their more formal, less intimate settings. By standing outside of these roles and constraints, program leaders appear to have an advantage and an opportunity to provide a kind of guidance that other adults are not always trusted to give.

In addition, program leaders were able to effectively respond to the youth they served because they had a broad role portfolio. Their role as friend allowed them to build trust and sustain personal relationships with the youth. In a parent role, they cultivated an emotional closeness that afforded them the ability to set limits and exert authority when needed. As respected adults in the role of mentor, they influenced youth by offering wise judgment and emotional support. As teacher and boss, they possessed authoritative knowledge and expertise, and they offered instrumental support to enhance both learning and performance.

These program leaders embodied elements of archetypal reciprocal roles, yet the role relationships they cultivated with the youth appeared to be more nuanced. Although they possessed authority likened to a parent, teacher, or boss, the youth tended to perceive their role relationship as less hierarchical and more intimate in nature. In the intermediate zone of youth programs, program leaders appeared to be able to transcend traditional reciprocal roles, straddle the adult and youth worlds, and position themselves in a range of ways that allowed them to meet the varied needs of the youth.

There are both methodological and conceptual limitations to this study. First, the scope of this inquiry and its sample size are limited. Furthermore, the program leaders were selected for being in high quality programs and thus are not necessarily representative. My goal was not to describe the typical youth development program leader but rather to develop theoretical understanding about the roles program leaders play. Future research should attend to the roles of program leaders serving younger youth and youth from different cultural and programmatic contexts. Moreover, further inquiry is needed to understand how leaders switch roles, under what circumstances, and how this correlates with meeting the needs of youth. Undoubtedly, other roles and techniques are employed by program leaders and those discussed are not intended as a prescription for practice. Rather, by outlining some of these dimensions and strategies, I hoped to help practitioners become more intentional, both in the relationships they forge with youth and in the strategies they employ to balance their multiple roles in youth's lives.

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## Notes

1. For consistency I refer to these adults as “program leaders,” but other terms like youth worker, advisor, director, lead organizer, and teacher were used in the specific settings.
2. Copies of the interview protocol are available from the author on request.
3. The names of people and programs have been changed to preserve their anonymity.
4. The techniques used are discussed at length elsewhere (Walker, 2005).

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## Bio

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