# Dilemmas of Practice: Challenges to Program Quality Encountered by Youth Program Leaders

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**Abstract** To create and sustain high quality youth development programs it is important to understand the challenging situations and dilemmas that emerge in program leaders' daily work with youth. In this research the experiences of leaders in 12 programs were followed over a 2–9 month period, which led to the identification of 250 dilemma situations. Qualitative analyses identified 5 categories and 12 subcategories of dilemmas that reflected distinct types of considerations (e.g., youth's personalities, relationships with the community). The analyses also found that the experienced leaders in the study typically responded to these dilemmas in ways that were youth-centered and that balanced multiple considerations. It is argued that researchers need to go beyond identifying features of high quality programs, and more fully examine how effective leaders create and sustain high quality in response to the challenging situations of practice.

**Keywords** Adolescence · Youth practice · Program quality · Youth development · Practitioner dilemmas · Youth work

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## Introduction

Lynn, the leader of a youth development program, faced a dilemma in how to support Jackie, a member with a history of violent behavior. Jackie often dominated group discussions with lurid accounts of fights she had been in. For example, she described getting beat up and stalked in her community, and showed her stitches from being thrown against a wall by another girl. Lynn was concerned about the effect of these stories on the group, yet saw the program as the one place in Jackie's life where she has positive relationships. Indeed, in a research interview, Jackie described the program as helping her learn to "think before she acts" and "lead my life positively". But Lynn struggled with how to maintain a constructive environment in group meetings, while providing conditions for Jackie's development.

Leaders of youth development programs face challenging situations like Lynn's in their work with young people, situations that require addressing multiple, often competing considerations. The research literature on youth programs suggests that to facilitate Jackie's development Lynn should be responsive to her individual needs and support her experience of empowerment and belonging (Eccles and Gootman 2002; McLaughlin 2000). But this literature also says that safety is a fundamental concern, and Jackie had had fist fights with two group members in the past. It further indicates that leaders should provide appropriate structure, but what does that mean in this context? In other dilemma situations, youth practitioners may be pulled between relating to youth as a friend versus an authority figure (Walker and Larson 2006), struggling to address issues of race, class, and prejudice (Imam 1999), and torn

by requirements from a funding source that conflict with youth's developmental needs (Jeffs and Banks 1999). These situations represent challenges to the ongoing life and mission of a program. How a leader responds can be a turning point in the program's effectiveness in facilitating youth development.

To foster high quality youth programs, we argue, it is important to gain knowledge of these dilemmas of practice. Schwandt (2003) writes that, across applied professions, practice is "carried out on a rough ground of paradox and contingency, ambiguity and fragmentation" (p. 361). Practitioners navigate complex demands, warrants, and other considerations, which can come into conflict. Research in education, health professions, and business suggests that the expertise of practitioners is defined, less by their knowledge of general abstract principles, than by their skills in appraising and responding to the diverse challenges and problems they face in their work (Dall'Alba and Sandberg 2006; Sternberg et al. 2000; Weiss et al. 2005).

This article examines the variety and complexity of the dilemmas of practice encountered by program leaders in their daily interactions with youth. We focus on community and school-based arts and leadership programs for high-school-aged youth. Our first and primary objective was to survey the range of dilemma situations that leaders encountered and to identify the types of underlying issues and considerations they entailed. Our second objective was to identify patterns in how experienced leaders responded to these dilemmas. Given limited prior research, we employed methods of discovery research, with the goal of obtaining preliminary understanding of the topic in context from the point of view of the people involved (NIMH Consortium of Editors on Development and Psychopathology 1999).

Background: What Makes for Program Quality?

The current literature conceptualizes the quality of youth programs in terms of features of programs that are thought to provide favorable conditions for young people's development. Most of the features identified by researchers concern youth's experience of the program environment: Do youth experience supportive relationships, opportunities for skill building, active encouragement, etc. (Eccles and Gootman 2002; Smith and Hohmann 2005; Yohalem and Wilson-Ahlstrom 2007).

Identification of these positive features serves important functions, however, its gets us only so far. These features help define what we want youth to experience. But they provide limited information on how to actually achieve this on the "rough ground" of practice, when daily events, pragmatic realities, and the widely varied personalities of

youth enter into the picture. How do you achieve these features in Lynn's situation, for example, when providing support for Jackie was at odds with providing favorable developmental experiences for other youth? How do you achieve them while simultaneously addressing economic, institutional, and ethical considerations? The situations of daily practice can bring these different warrants and demands into tension.

Examination of the dilemmas of practice provides a window for understanding the challenges to achieving program quality in the daily life of programs. By analyzing the types of problems, situations, and dilemmas that practitioners encounter, we can better understand how to create and sustain quality (Ericsson et al. 2006). Research in other fields suggests the thick complexity that practice can present. The situations practitioners face are often "ill-structured," embedded in nuanced contexts, require subjective appraisals, and require reconciling diverse eclectic considerations (Billett 2001; Ross et al. 2006).

Some of the dilemmas encountered by youth practitioners are described in existing youth development literature. An edited book by Banks (1999) provides illuminating analysis of ethical dilemmas encountered by youth workers. Several researchers have described situations in which program leaders struggle with whether and how to help youth when their work on program projects stalls or gets off track (Zeldin and Camino 1999). Others have reported situations in which leaders struggle with how to motivate youth (Halpern 2005) and difficulties that can occur in youth-adult collaborations (Camino 2005).

Our goal in this investigation was to understand the range of dilemmas that youth practitioners face as a step toward better understanding how to create and sustain program quality in daily practice. We first inventory the array of dilemma situations encountered by a sample of program leaders. What is the gamut of situations that leaders encountered? What types of considerations did these entail? Second, we examine how the experienced leaders in the sample responded to these dilemmas. What general strategies characterized their responses?

Methods

The Data Set

The data for this investigation came from a qualitative longitudinal study of 12 diverse youth development programs for high-school-aged teens. The 12 programs included arts, media arts, leadership, and service programs. Seven were urban and 5 were in small cites or rural areas; 6 were in community-based organizations, 4 in schools, and 2 in faith-based organizations (see: Larson et al. 2007).

Programs were selected that had a reputation for high quality and had experienced program leaders. Following procedures and criteria employed by McLaughlin et al. (1994), we first obtained nominations of high quality programs from local youth development professionals. We then met with program leaders and observed a program session. We selected programs in which the leaders had held their position for at least 2 years and features of effective programs were evident (youth had meaningful roles and were highly engaged in program activities; relationships among youth and staff were supportive; the staff described youth development as a priority).

These programs were studied over a 2–9 month natural period of participation (e.g., a session or semester), with ongoing data obtained from the leaders, youth, and participant observations. Over the study period for each program, we conducted regular interviews with the 1–2 adult leaders who were most directly involved in running it. These included 11 women and 7 men (ages 22–55). Their years of experience leading the program averaged 7 years (range 2–30 years); 14 had a college degree and 6 had masters degrees in education, social work, or related human service fields. Nine were European American; 6 African American; 1 Latino/a; 1 Arab American, and 1 East Indian. Interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of the research period were longer and conducted in-person; briefer phone interviews were conducted at regular intervals in between. We also conducted one-time interviews with 8 other adults who had leadership roles in the programs. The total number of leader interviews was 125.

The interviews with leaders followed open-ended protocols aimed at getting their descriptions of ongoing activities, events, and circumstances in the programs. We began each interview by asking the leader to recount what had happened recently, followed by probes about the youth's experiences, motivation, group processes, and work on program activities. Leaders were told in the first interview that we were interested in obtaining their accounts of any "challenging situations and decisions" they experienced; and they provided reports on these kinds of situations across the different parts of the interviews. In each interview, leaders were also asked, "What challenges or dilemmas have come up for you lately?" (20% of the dilemmas we identified came in response to this question). Whenever leaders reported a dilemma or challenging situation, we asked whether and how they responded to it.

In each program, we also interviewed a sample of 5–12 youth following the schedule used with the adult leaders. These youth were selected by the program leaders, who were instructed to choose a diverse sample that was representative of active program participants in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and years of experience. A total of 113 youth were interviewed on 661 occasions. These youth included approximately equal numbers of African American ($N = 37$), European American ($N = 36$), and Latino/a ($N = 32$) youth. The open-ended interview protocols aimed at getting youths' accounts of events and experiences in the program.

In addition, 167 site observations were conducted by a member of our staff. Observers were trained in procedures of participant observation (Jorgensen 1989). Their instruction were to obtain a general understanding of the program and its activities, as well as to record salient program events and interactions between leaders and youth during the observations. Observers took field notes during observations, if possible, or immediately afterwards.

Identification of Practitioner Dilemmas

Analyses were carried out on 250 practitioner dilemma situations identified from this data set. These situations were identified through a process that began with one author, then the other, reading through the transcripts of the leader interviews and looking for descriptions of challenging situations. Once a preliminary list of dilemmas from a program was determined from the leader interviews, we looked for other information about those dilemmas in all data sources (including later interviews of the same leader, interviews with other leaders in the program, the site observations, and the youth interviews). During this process a small number of additional dilemmas were identified from the observational data ($N = 12$). The operational definition for dilemmas that we employed specified inclusion of:

> Challenges, dilemmas, situations and incidents that the leaders faced.… any situation that requires deliberation by leaders, or where different leaders might have responded in different ways. Some may involve long term struggles; others brief situations.

Our written instructions also stated that: "A goal is to try to capture the heterogeneous range of types of challenges and dilemmas that practitioners encounter in daily practice with youth".

The 250 dilemmas included between 3 and 46 dilemmas per program (median = 20). The number of dilemmas identified for each program was strongly related to the number of leader interviews in the program; it was not clearly related to the type of program, its organizational structure, number of members, or the leaders' years of experience in youth work. For 128 dilemmas, data were obtained from more than one source (e.g., from a second leader, an observation, or youth). A subsequent analysis of these cases indicated that these different sources provided concordant information about the dilemma situations. In many instances the second source provided additional

information (youth data most often provided information on the outcome of the situation), but accounts did not conflict on the substance of the situation.

Analyses of Dilemmas and Leader Responses

Analysis of the dilemmas was aimed at assessing the variety of challenging situations the leaders experienced, with a focus on the issues and considerations these entailed. We 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. Our objective was to represent the dilemmas from the perspective of program leaders; at the same time, following guidelines for qualitative analysis (Cf. Strauss and Corbin 1998), the formation of categories was also informed by the relevant developmental literature.

The analyses involved a multi-stage process. In the first stage we formulated preliminary "starter" coding categories for repeated types of situations (e.g., how to motivate youth, disciplinary issues; Miles and Huberman 1994). A central observation at this stage was that the considerations in the dilemmas were related to differing psychological and ecological systems (Lerner 2002). These included the different types of people involved in the dilemma (e.g., program members, leaders, administrators, parents), the different activity systems and institutional systems involved (program activities, the program culture, the sponsoring organization, institutions external to the program), and the interactions and tensions between people or systems (youth–youth, youth–leader, youth–activity, youth–external systems).

In the next stage of analysis, we formulated final categories of dilemmas based on the systems and types of considerations represented in the 250 dilemmas. This process followed procedures for theoretical comparison and ordering (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and involved iterative steps of: (a) comparing individual dilemmas and clusters of dilemmas (e.g., those in the starter categories) to create groupings based on similarities in the considerations they entailed, and (b) writing successively refined conceptual/operational definitions for the emerging categories that captured these similarities (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Five final overarching categories of dilemmas and 12 subcategories emerged from this process (Table 1). Many dilemmas were coded into more than one overarching category because there were multiple central considerations in the situation (73 dilemmas had one secondary code; 3 had two secondary codes). To evaluate the fidelity of these categories, a member of our staff independently coded 50 randomly selected dilemmas, and her rate of agreement was satisfactory at the level of categories

**Table 1** Categories and subcategories of program leader dilemmas

*I. Supporting youth's participation in program activities*

a. Guiding, structuring, and directing youth's work

b. Creating and sustaining youth's motivation

*II. Cultivating program norms and enforcing rules*

a. Addressing youth's violations of rules and expectations

b. Cultivating group norms

c. Maintaining consistency and professionalism in leaders' interactions with youth

*III. Responding to youth's personalities and relationships*

a. Dealing with youth's personalities, personal problems, and unique limits or needs

b. Dealing with problematic youth–youth relationships and group dynamics

*IV. Reconciling the organizational system and youth development*

a. Adapting to top–down policies, directives, and bureaucratic requirements

b. Dealing with limited time and resources

c. Accommodating different leadership styles and philosophies among front-line staff

*V. Interfacing with external worlds*

a. Addressing tensions between the program and youth's outside lives

b. Mediating youth's relationships with community members and institutions

($\kappa = .84$) and subcategories ($\kappa = .82$). The frequency of dilemmas from different categories did not differ notably as a function of leaders' experience or type of programs, with a few predictable exceptions. Dilemmas involving violations of rules (IIa) appeared to be more frequent in programs that served youth in at-risk populations. Dilemmas involving the organizational system (IV) were most frequent in two programs that involved larger and more complex bureaucracies; and those involving relationships with community members and institutions (Vb) were most common in three urban youth activism programs.

The last stage of analysis involved final assessment of the dilemmas in each category and subcategory for the purpose of description. We evaluated the considerations represented in each, drawing on the youth development literature when pertinent to interpret patterns within categories. We also chose representative examples to illustrate the nature of the situations in each subcategory for the text below (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). In describing these situations, we made small non-substantive changes to maintain the anonymity of the program and leaders. Space limits required that these descriptions be presented in condensed form and thus they do not present the full complexity of each situation.

Analysis of leaders' responses to the dilemmas was aimed as identifying the common features of responses across situations. We began with concepts suggested by the

literatures on practitioner expertise in youthwork and other fields of practice (e.g., McLaughlin 2000; Sternberg et al. 2000). We then employed a similar analytic process to that used for the dilemmas, involving iterative steps of drafting operational definitions, coding data, and revising the operational definitions. This process led to identification of two features that characterized the majority of leaders' responses (youth-centered and balancing multiple considerations). A final stage of analysis involved assessing the variety of responses within these two categories.

It should be noted that, although these leaders were selected for being experienced practitioners in programs regarded as high quality, we had no independent benchmark to identify them as "experts" and we had no comparison sample of novices. The analysis of their responses should be seen as a preliminary step to understanding youth worker expertise. Limits of the sample, design, and analytic techniques should be kept in mind. The methods used were not those of hypothesis testing but rather those of exploration and preliminary theory development.

## Types of Dilemmas and the Considerations They Entailed

### Supporting Youth's Participation in Program Activities

The first category of dilemmas involved supporting youth's engagement in program activities. Like most programs for this age group, these each had a central activity (an art, leadership, or service project); and youth are thought to learn initiative, develop social skills, gain civic values, etc., through their experiences in these activities (Eccles and Gootman 2002). Leaders faced a frequent challenge, however, in ensuring that the right experiences occurred.

Dilemmas in the first of 2 subcategory concerned *guiding, structuring, and directing youth's work* (Ia in Table 1). Research indicates that young people can flounder when left in a situation of unsupervised discovery learning (Hamilton and Hamilton 2004; Mayer 2004). The issue in these dilemmas was how to keep youth's work on track—or get it back on track. When members of a leadership program planned an inter-neighborhood Youth Expo, for example, the youth took responsibility for planning the event—which the leader saw as important to their learning. But the youth became frustrated after their first attempts to find a venue for the Expo were unsuccessful. The leader reported:

> South Side Tech told them "no"; they wanted $800 bucks to use their place. They [the youth] jump: "We can't promote anything if we don't have a place." There's certain times that they get so hit with the

negative part—"They told us no"—that they forget there's 50 other places they can ask.

He debated how to help the youth approach other venues in a way consistent with youth retaining responsibility. In other dilemmas, leaders faced situations in which youth missed deadlines, were not doing what needed to be done, overstepped their authority, or set out in directions at odds with what the leader thought they should do.

Leaders were often concerned to provide guidance and oversight without undercutting youth's experience of ownership of the work. The leader supervising youth's creation of a video said: "I think it's so important they have a sense of ownership and that that be valid, not just a token sense… and yet, I do want them to do a quality piece". This leader was effective in scaffolding a youth-driven production process, but in the week before the public viewing he weighed whether he should do final editing to polish the video so that it would really impress parents, funders, and the youth themselves.

The second subcategory included dilemmas concerned *creating and sustaining youth's motivation* in the activity (Ib). Leaders developed ideas for activities or projects that would help youth learn, but youth were often not captivated, especially when the activities were foreign to them. The leader of a program in a poor neighborhood had decided to focus activities on inequities in access to city services, because that topic would help youth learn about power and city government. But then he struggled with: "How do you grab them? how do you turn them on? how do you push them to the next level?" Across most programs, there were occasions when youth's investment and motivation lagged and leaders became concerned with how to re-energize them. In a theater production, youth started out highly motivated, but the leader reported reduced enthusiasm as they got into the "real grinding work". In several cases leaders persuaded youth to take on new leadership responsibilities, but youth were not invested and did so in a half-hearted way. Other dilemmas in this subcategory involved youth's shyness, lack of confidence, or negative emotions that interfered with engagement. In some instances leaders were concerned how to remotivate youth after negative experiences, such as losing a competition or having their public murals vandalized.

Across many dilemmas in this category, an underlying tension for leaders was trying to facilitate youth's learning yet wanting the initiative for this learning to come from them. Skilled youth practitioners have professional knowledge of the types of experiences that facilitate youth development, yet the dominant paradigm in the field posits that learning depends on these experiences being at least partly initiated, led, and owned by youth (McLaughlin 2000). So leaders repeatedly encountered situations where

they struggled with how to support youth's work without undermining them, and how to engender youth's motivation in an activity that involved hard work, unfamiliar tasks, and setbacks.

Cultivating Norms and Enforcing Rules

Shared norms, expectations, and limits on acceptable behavior are essential to the positive functioning of groups. They provide a predictable, secure order for youth, which is seen to be a precondition for development to occur (Eccles and Gootman 2002). The second category of dilemmas involved situations that tested or put this normative order into question.

The first of 3 subcategories involved *addressing youth's violations of rules and expectations*, situations when leaders had to decide whether and how to respond (IIa). Sometimes there was a clear cut transgression, and the response required little deliberation, for example, when youth missed more program sessions than were permitted. Many of these situations, however, were in a grey area as to whether a transgression had occurred and what type of response was warranted. This happened when a youth took responsibility for an important task but then was inconsistent in carrying it out, and when a young woman did not receive a reimbursement check by a promised date and was verbally abusive toward a staff member. Research in schools finds that judgments about when something is a disciplinary issue vary substantially between adults (Macrae and Quintrall 2001). It also shows that disciplinary responses can have negative side effects (Emmer et al. 2003); and these leaders were concerned that treating something as a disciplinary issue might have chilling effect on the group or cause youth to quit.

The second subcategory of dilemmas dealt with *cultivating group norms* (IIb). In a program composed of youth from one ethnic group, they routinely used a derogatory ethnic epithet in reference to each other. But a new program leader felt it was wrong for them to casually "bandy about" this word, long used by bigots as an instrument of hurt and oppression. The youth, however, had been told that the program was "their space" and argued their generation was reclaiming the word. In other situations leaders considered whether and how they should respond to youth's cursing and veiled homophobic innuendos, and whether a youth who was unsure and evasive about her faith should be allowed to join a religious group.

The third subcategory included situations in which leaders experienced challenges to *maintaining consistency and professionalism in their interactions with youth* (IIc). Some of these cases involved leaders' concerns that they treat youth fairly, for example, when offering roles or special opportunities to individual youth. Others concerned

when leaders should relate to youth in a professional versus a personal way. In one instance a leader deliberated on how to respond when youth asked her about her personal life. Should she share information with youth about her own teenage experiences as a vehicle for mentoring them? A repeated consideration across many dilemmas was when to position oneself as an "adult"—to maintain privacy, demand respect, be an authority figure—and when to relate to youth in a more peer-like way that allowed the leader to communicate and provide personal guidance (Walker and Larson 2006).

Research on classroom management serves as a useful reference point for this category of dilemmas. It describes a paradox teachers face between imposing social control and encouraging students' voluntary engagement in learning (Pace and Hemmings 2007). Youth workers often see their position as differing from that of teachers, involving a more democratic stance in which they relate to youth in more peer-like ways. Yet Jeffs and Banks (1999) argue that, although youth workers have greater freedom in how they respond, they cannot elude the role of authority figure. Indeed a core issue in many of these dilemmas was a tension between cultivating a democratic ethos and being the "adult" who serves as the guardian and guarantor of that ethos.

Responding to Youth's Personalities and Relationships

Youth bring personal dispositions, problems, and interpersonal issues into the program, and these were often considerations in the dilemmas leaders encountered. They became factors in program activities, contributed to unfolding events, and sometimes became the central focus of a leader's attention. The first subcategory in this set involved *dealing with youth's personalities, personal problems, and unique limits or needs* (IIIa). The dilemma involving Jackie and her violent stories (described at the start of the article) was in this group. In other instances, youth's outside crises, psychiatric problems, and behavioral limitations created a challenging situation. In two programs, leaders reported that a young woman confided to them that she might be pregnant, and that she had no one besides the leader to turn to for help. In other situations, leaders had to decide whether and how to help youth who were depressed, abusing drugs, or had a close friend killed in a car crash right before a major performance.

The second subcategory involved *dealing with problematic youth–youth relationships and group dynamics* (IIIb). In some cases, hostility between members led youth to ask for special accommodations or interfered with program activities. In one case, a leader reported that a group of youth had sent her a carefully reasoned petition asking her to exclude a member from an overnight trip because of

his behavior on a prior trip. In another case, a cast member in a play told the director she would not kiss another actor, as required by her part, because he was gay. In other cases, members were acting in ways that impacted group functioning, for example, when a rebellious youth incited others to join in negative comments and off task behavior, and when youth's temper, flirting, or immaturity disturbed others. Additional repeated patterns involved fallout from romantic relationships, and tensions when tightly knit groups were unfriendly to new program members.

This category of dilemmas challenged leaders' capacity to be responsive to youth. Most youth workers report that they entered the field because they want to form positive relationships with young people and make a difference in their lives (Yohalem and Pittman 2006). Yet there were pragmatic and professional limitations on what they could achieve.

Reconciling the Organizational System with Youth Development

Programs for youth are typically embedded within a larger organization, such as a community agency or school, and what happens at the organizational level can influence what happens with the youth. Behind the scenes administrators and staff make decisions, set policies, develop relationships, and attempt to sustain the organization. The fourth category of dilemmas involved situations in which policies, priorities, and personnel dynamics at the organizational level were in tension with what the frontline program leaders saw as best for youth.

The first subcategory included situations in which *top–down policies, directives, logistics, or bureaucratic requirements* affected service delivery to youth (IVa). Youth workers often report discrepancies between their view of their work and that of their employers (Walker 2003), and these situations often pitted a higher-level decision against the leader's direct experience with the youth. For example, the director of an urban youth agency decided that the theme for a radio show that youth were doing would be the youth's role models, a topic she felt would impress the agency's stakeholders. But many of the youth insisted that they did not have any personal role models and balked at preparing stories for the show, leaving frontline staff in a difficult situation.

In many of these cases, the higher-level directive or policy was well-intentioned, but reflected a different perspective on youth development, or was aimed at organizational goals like addressing funding requirements. The program leaders in a media arts program, for example, experienced repeated conflicts between their commitment to fostering youth's critical thinking and their funder's model for program delivery, which was more formulaic.

The second subcategory included situations in which *limited time and resources* kept leaders from running programs in ways they felt optimal (IVb). Many youth programs function on a shoe-string budget, and frontline program leaders often have a wide range of responsibilities (Yohalem and Pittman 2006). Dilemmas in this group involved the challenges of juggling multiple agency responsibilities beyond program delivery (such as case management, administrative tasks, and fundraising events), having to adapt a program model to serve more youth, and figuring out whether and how to tell youth that the leader's position may be cut.

The third subcategory concerned *accommodating different leadership styles and philosophies among front line staff* (IVc). For example, a leader debated how to respond when he found his co-leader doing a task for which they had assigned responsibility to youth. The director of a dance production struggled with what to do when (despite her entreaties) an assistant she had hired focused all his attention on the lead dancers, which violated her philosophy that every student mattered equally. These dilemmas required program leaders to reconcile the perspective of a colleague with their own view of the best interests of the youth.

Underlying many of these dilemmas were tensions between effective program delivery to youth and the exigencies of adult organizations. In many cases frontline staff were trying to address loyalties to multiple goals. They recognized, for example, that sustained funding was important for the program (and their salaries). Dilemmas in this category also stemmed from differences in philosophy within the field, such as between top–down quality management versus client-centered approaches (Cf. Schwandt 2003). Leaders' challenge in these situations was how to weigh their conception of youth development with competing needs of the organization, and whether and how to buffer youth from the top–down demands, constraints, and the occasional irrationality of organizational systems.

Interfacing with External Worlds

Bronfenbrenner (1979) theorized that conditions for development are optimal when there is "value consensus" and communication between the different contexts in a young person's life. Accumulating evidence supports this proposition, and it is believed that youth programs are most effective when there is synergy between the program, youth, and life arenas outside the program (Eccles and Gootman 2002). The final category of dilemmas involved tensions with worlds external to the program, including youth's outside lives and adult worlds in the community.

The first subcategory involved *tensions between the program and youth's outside lives*, most often family, but also peers, youth's jobs, and their other organized activities (Va). A number of dilemmas entailed parents' concerns about the program. For example one youth's parents, who were immigrants, wanted her to quit a leadership program because they had seen through the windows that youth "have too much fun" and concluded that the program was a negative influence on her. In other situations, family issues impacted a young person's program participation, or had ripple effects on the group that were a concern to the leader. The poverty of youth's families was a repeated factor faced by some leaders: youth could not afford transportation, or dropped out to take jobs or care for siblings. In one case, a youth's parents used the ticket money she had collected for the group's fund raising campaign to pay family bills. Across these situations, leaders described deliberating about how to talk with youth about their families, and whether and how to communicate with youth's parents.

The dilemmas involving tensions with non-family arenas of youth's lives mostly dealt with these arenas competing for youth's time. Leaders described repeated occasions when demands of youth's jobs, schoolwork, and other organized activities interfered with attendance or made recruitment and retention challenging.

The second subcategory involved *mediating youth's relationships with community members and institutions* (Vb). Many programs aim to provide youth with experiences in these real-world adult settings, yet these contexts have distinct ways of doing things that are foreign and sometimes aversive to youth (Heath and Smyth 2000; Larson and Walker 2006). In many of these dilemmas the issue was youth's unfamiliarity with how these worlds worked. In one program a leader had prepared a young man for a job interview with practice tests and mock interviews, but she was concerned that his hair (which she described as "a wannabe Afro pulled back in a pony tail") would alienate the employer. In other situations, leaders described challenges in preparing youth to be effective in meetings with community leaders and program funders. In a number of cases, the issue was how to deal with the aftermath when youth acted in a way that was not consonant with norms for a setting. This happened, for example, when youth in a civic activism program met with a city alderman. Some youth decided she had acted in a racist way and shouted insults at her. In some cases, leaders described the situation as not being solely about getting youth to learn and conform, but also about the adults' unwillingness or inability to adapt to the youth (Cf. Camino 2005). Many of the dilemmas in this final subcategory presented leaders with challenges in addressing gaps between youth's experience and how things are done in adult "real-world" settings.

## The Ecology of Considerations

These 5 categories and 12 subcategories should be seen as a starting framework, not a final or comprehensive way of grouping youth worker dilemmas. It is possible that other researchers, or research with different kinds of programs, would identify other categories. These analyses, nonetheless, demonstrate how the dilemmas encountered in youth practice are diverse and complex. They involve considerations from disparate psychological and ecological systems: individual personalities, group processes, organizational systems, and worlds outside the program. To address one dilemma, a leader needs to understand the psychology of an angry youth, in another how people in community institutions function, and in another how to redirect youth's work without undermining their ownership. In many situations, leaders faced considerations from multiple systems. The dilemmas presented complex puzzles in which the priorities, values, and dynamics from different arenas needed to be taken into account.

## Leaders' Responses to Dilemmas

How did these experienced leaders respond to these dilemmas? Each situation was unique, of course, and leaders responded with strategies tailored to the distinct circumstances. Our analysis, nevertheless, identified two general features that characterized a majority of leaders' responses: they were youth-centered and balanced multiple considerations.

### Youth-Centered

In addressing the dilemmas, leaders typically gave youth and their developmental needs focal importance. In McLaughlin's (2000) terms, they were "youth-centered". First, their responses often involved engaging with the youth. Leaders sought information and discussed the situation with individual youth or the group. In dealing with Jackie (the young woman who shared violent stories in meetings), Lynn reported that her response included regular one-on-one conversations to "check in" with her, often before program sessions. In response to the incident in which angry program members shouted insults at a city alderman, the program leader held a debriefing session with all youth to let them voice their differing perspectives on what happened.

Second, we found that leaders' often responded in ways that turned dilemmas into opportunities for youth's development. They made the situation into "teachable moments," or they used them as a stimulus for group

activities to help youth learn. In the debriefing session following the incident with the alderman, the leader segued from getting youth's perspectives to discussing how to work effectively with community members. He told the youth that "your opinions matter" but, "there'll be people that say things you can't believe came out of their mouth, and how do you interact with them? How do you back up your opinion, represent yourself, and represent what you think?" In another program the leader responded to youth's distress when their murals were vandalized by creating a class on art restoration that included repairing the murals, and youth reported gaining a powerful lesson in resiliency (Larson and Walker 2006). Youth's heightened emotional engagement in these situations appeared to help the leaders help youth draw lessons that they saw applying to other situations in the future.

A third way in which leaders' responses were youth-centered was that they often incorporated youth into the solution. Midway through the year, a leader reported that youth were complaining that sessions "have been dry or a bit depressing". She responded by having her supervisor conduct a focus group with the youth on what could be done to change this. That process helped youth take responsibility for the sessions. A workshop was arranged for youth to learn how to plan and lead the sessions themselves, and when youth took charge of the sessions, they found them to be more engaging. At the end, several youth described facilitating the sessions as a high point of the year. One said, "We kind of matured as a group".

A fourth youth-centered element of some leader responses was advocating for youth. Although leaders most often tried to make youth part of the solution, in some situations they acted as spokespersons for them—to other youth, staff, parents, or community members. In the situation where youth did not like "role models" as the theme for their radio show, the leaders appealed to the agency director to change it (though unsuccessfully). In the case where a youth's parents wanted her to quit the program because youth "were having too much fun," the leader talked to the parents and persuaded them that the program was a valuable experience for her.

Not all responses were youth-centered. Occasionally organizational priorities trumped developmental considerations or leaders acted in the spur of the moment, disregarding youth's concerns. Further, not all of leaders' attempts to resolve dilemmas in youth-centered ways were successful—youth sometimes reported continued disgruntlement. In many cases, however, the responses appeared to turn a problematic situation around. In a number of cases youth reported having gained valuable lessons from observing how the leaders addressed a difficult situation.

Balancing Multiple Considerations

The other feature that characterized a majority of the leaders' responses was that they addressed multiple considerations in the dilemma. In Sternberg's (1998) terms, they involved "balancing": they took into account, integrated, or reconciled divergent concerns.

One of the most frequent types of balancing involved challenging yet supporting youth. Leaders encouraged, prodded, and held youth accountable at the same time they provided support. For example, in the situation where youth wanted the leader to exclude a troublesome member from an overnight trip, the leader challenged the youth, putting the responsibility back onto them: "I understand your point, but you need to have an open dialogue, not attack her". He then provided a supportive opportunity for youth to do this. He used other recent tensions in the program as a rationale to plan a group meeting that would allow people to share concerns in a safe and respectful way.

Another recurrent type of balancing was balancing product and process. Leaders found solutions that helped ensure that youth's work led to high quality products (a video or successful meeting), yet without compromising youth's learning process. In a theater program youth complained that a special needs student made mistakes and laughed at the wrong times in ways that might compromise the production. But the director found assignments that gave the student meaningful roles, and she coached other students how to help the student do these successfully.

Other types of balancing included reconciling: immediate with longer-term concerns, individual and group needs, principle with pragmatics, youth's outside lives with their work in the program, and developmental activities with institutional constraints. Again, not all leader responses involved balancing. In some cases leaders' responses were addressed to a single concern. For example, a leader reported that when her son in the program tried to "pull the Mom Card," she threatened to expel him. In another case, a leader prioritized product over process, when he decided to edit the video students had made without asking them.

The leaders' balancing of multiple considerations often involved taking multiple actions, addressed to the different concerns in the dilemma. In the situation where youth had shouted angrily at the alderman, the leader's response included: calming upset staff, separate conversations with individual youth and the group, calling the alderman, organizing a session on working with community partners, and disciplining several youth whose actions were in clear violation of program rules. Lynn's response to the situation with Jackie also illustrated this multi-part solution. In addition to one-on-one conversations with her, Lynn

reported arranging for Jackie to get counseling to help her deal with personal issues. To address Jackie's impact on the group, Lynn instituted "check-in" time at the beginning of each session to cover each youth's issues (but with time limits so no one dominated the discussion). Lynn also encouraged two older youth who had worked through problems with anger and violence to talk about their experiences.

The two features of leaders' responses—youth-centered and balancing—often co-occurred. Leader's balanced, or rebalanced, a challenging situation to restore positive conditions for youth's development. They found ways to reconcile situational considerations with youth's engagement in learning. In Eccles' (2005) terms, they restored a "fit" between the environment and the developmental needs of youth.

## Conclusions

It is important to understand the quality of youth programs in dynamic terms. Youth encounter a program over time, as a history of interactions, activities, and events. Therefore, their experience of the features of program quality—supportive relationships, opportunities for engagement, appropriate structure, psychological safety, etc.—are not static. They are built up and sustained, in part through the diligence, skill, and sometimes good luck of program leaders in managing the ongoing life of the program. Every program can be expected to have ups and downs. But the actions of staff can make a difference in shaping how rough patches are resolved and whether they have lasting impacts on youth's experiences. Dilemma situations and leaders' responses to them can be turning points—positive or negative—in the trust, safety, support, engagement, and commitment youth feel in relation to the program and its mission.

This exploratory research suggests that to sustain quality leaders need skills, first, to be able to read and appraise situations, including those in diverse psychological and ecological systems. Dilemmas arise that involve different kinds of people (youth, parents, community members) and interpersonal systems (program activities, peer dynamics, institutional systems). Each is associated with distinct types of complex considerations. Skilled practitioners need to be able to diagnose emerging problems and anticipate how the different elements of a situation may unfold (Ross et al. 2006); and they need to be able to make judgments about the critical junctures in this unfolding when their input could make a difference (Quinn 2004).

The expertise of practitioners resides not only in appraising situations of practice, but in their abilities to respond effectively to them (Hoffman and Lintern 2006).

The experienced program leaders we studied responded to the majority of dilemmas in ways that were youth centered and that balanced pragmatic, organizational, and other situational considerations with the developmental needs of youth. This ability to take a pluralistic perspective and address multiple demands and imperatives has been identified as a feature of expertise across fields of practice (Billett 2001; Sternberg et al. 2000). The capacity to cognitively coordinate multiple competing considerations, it should be noted, is something that adults generally do better than adolescents (Byrnes et al. 1999). But we also want to stress that balancing, or rebalancing, a dilemma situation often depended on the leaders' ability to communicate; effective youth work requires relationship skills (Krueger 2005; Young 1999). In sum, we hypothesize that abilities to balance—to weigh and address diverse considerations while keeping youth at the center—are vital practitioner skills for creating and sustaining program quality in the ongoing life of a program.

Implications for Practice, Practitioner Training, and Management of Youth Organizations

Part of what makes these dilemmas hard is not just their complexity but the ambiguity, subjectivity, and dependence on judgment that they can entail. How do you weigh differing accounts from parents and youth about issues at home? What is the right moment to challenge versus support a youth with low self-confidence? If an alderman has acted in a racist way, might youth's shouting at her be an appropriate expression of anger, rather than a disciplinary matter? These are difficult questions and practitioners should not be left on their own to figure them out.

To improve practice and program quality the youth development field would benefit from open discussion and ongoing training on the diverse dilemmas that leaders encounter, and the appropriateness of different types of responses. A large body of research indicates that expertise in a field is developed and maintained through "deliberate practice." Practitioners learn when they have ongoing opportunities to engage with the full range of challenging problems associated with their practice and receive authentic feedback (Ericsson 2006). Discussion of dilemma situations can help program leaders obtain this deliberate practice; it can help them become more aware of underlying nuances, assumptions, values, principles, and options in different situations (Banks 2005; Levin 1994). In education, business, and medical fields, challenging case studies are often used to help trainees understand the real-world complexities of practice. Preliminary evidence indicates that they help sharpen people's critical thinking skills, apply concepts and precedents, and feel more comfortable making decisions (Harrington 1995; Levin 1994).
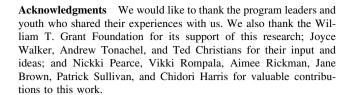
The goal, it is argued, is not to teach youth workers that there is one right solution for every dilemma, but rather to help them develop abilities to see the underlying complexity of situations and expand their repertoire of responses (Cf. Harrington 1995).

Youth serving organizations can contribute by providing conditions for staff to develop and exercise these skills. Research show that many social service organizations develop a passive-defensive organizational culture that emphasizes conformity to rigid established procedures (Glisson and James 2002). This type of overly rule-based culture could easily prevent youth workers from responding to dilemmas in ways that are adapted to the situation. Research finds that other organizations maintain a more constructive culture in which staff feel a sense of collective efficacy, trust, and mutual support that allows them to address issues in more flexible ways (Glisson and James 2002; Ilgen et al. 2005). Our study suggests that youth organizations would benefit from cultivating a constructive culture in which open discussion of dilemmas and how to address them is part of the program culture.

Implications for Research

Researchers can make useful contributions to our knowledge of how to create and sustain quality in response to the challenges of practice. This study is limited by the sample and methods used. We studied a select group of high quality programs, and it is certainly possible that that the dilemmas identified here were not representative of all programs. Additional research can help better identify the diverse range and frequencies of dilemmas occurring in different program contexts and with different groups of youth, including younger youth. Further studies are needed to more fully and critically evaluate the strategies that expert youth workers use in appraising and responding to these situations, and how these are related to youth's experience of program quality. Research should also examine the proactive steps leaders take to avoid dilemma situations and what youth organizations do that facilitates effective problem solving by staff. A long record of research on practitioner expertise in other fields provides rich examples of diverse methods and controlled research designs that can be used (Ericsson et al. 2006). To help improve program quality, researchers need to move beyond an exclusive focus on features that distinguish high quality programs; they should help practitioners understand *how these features can be achieved and sustained* in the challenging situations of daily practice. Youth development researchers have often conceptualized program quality in terms of an algebra of linear variables, yet daily practice often requires a calculus for dealing with complex, competing considerations.

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