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Jeffrey N. Jones¹ and Nancy L. Deutsch²

Abstract

Staff–youth relationships are a key strength of after-school settings, though more research is needed to understand the actual processes whereby these interpersonal connections lead to beneficial outcomes. This qualitative study focuses on the relational strategies that staff employ within an urban youth organization, and the ways in which those strategies contribute to a positive developmental climate. Researchers observed staff–youth interactions for a year and conducted a series of interviews with 17 youth between the ages of 12 and 18. We found three specific relational strategies that staff used to develop relationships with youth. These were minimizing relational distance, active inclusion, and attention to proximal relational ties. These strategies contribute to an overall supportive culture, suggesting a relational pedagogy in this after-school setting. The staff–youth relationships serve as the foundation for both youth engagement in programs and the promotion of positive developmental outcomes.

¹Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo

²University of Virginia, Charlottesville

Corresponding Author:

Jeffrey N. Jones, Western Michigan University, 1903 W. Michigan Ave.,
2440 Sangren Hall, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008

Email: jeff.jones@wmich.edu

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Anecdotal as well as empirical evidence suggest that youth organizations can provide caring environments that promote youth development (Hirsch, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000). These community-level interventions often take a strengths-based approach in line with the emerging positive youth development movement (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005; National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth, 2009) and are frequently locally constructed to target specific youth needs (Dubois, Doolittle, Yates, Silverthorn, & Tebes, 2006). There is increasing interest in the broader developmental potential of after-school settings (Hirsch, 2005; Larson, 2000; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). Whereas previous work has focused on youth outcomes, researchers are increasingly concerned with the processes that contribute to outcomes (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). In recent years, a literature has evolved concerning the importance of social capital for youth in low-resource communities, citing after-school programs as places where social capital may be gained (Bottrell, 2009; Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005). One potential source of social capital is nonfamilial adults, and research indicates that relationships between youth and caring adults are paramount to the success of after-school programs (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Rhodes, 2004). This qualitative study focuses on the specific relational strategies employed by staff and explores the mechanism by which these strategies contribute to a supportive culture for youth. We draw from youth and staff perceptions of interpersonal relationships in an urban Boys & Girls Club. Our research confirms previous findings and extends the discussion on adult–youth relationships in after-school settings to consider the specific means by which staff can draw on these relations to promote engagement in developmental activities and programs.

In 2002, the National Research Council (NRC) reported that youth organizations provide social assets for youth that can promote healthy development. Indeed, researchers have documented a variety of youth outcomes associated with participation in youth organizations including higher self-esteem, increased motivation, and academic achievement (Larson, 2000; Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005). Expanding on research documenting specific outcomes, researchers are increasingly studying after-school programs in terms of the broader developmental needs of youth. Positive youth development (PYD) refers to efforts aimed at helping youth achieve their potential, viewing youth as having competencies to be developed rather than risk factors to be prevented

(Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2005; National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth, 2009). Outcomes associated with positive youth development range from specific domains, such as academic achievement and avoidance of risk-taking behaviors (i.e., gang activity or pregnancy), to more conceptual domains which have been termed the “5 Cs” of PYD: character, connection, confidence, competence, and caring (Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2005). Researchers have found that interactions that occur in nontraditional and out-of-school settings can support important prosocial skills (Noam & Tillinger, 2004) and contribution, which is theorized as an outcome when other PYD constructs are present (Lerner, Lerner, et al., 2005). The NRC report (2002) proposes several recommendations to advance the potential of after-school settings and suggests that youth organizations need to promote the development of both personal and social assets. Yet the report also concludes that we know little about the processes that occur within organizations which contribute to youth outcomes.

Staff–Youth Relationships

A promising area of research on after-school settings is adult–youth relationships. This literature is informed by research on teacher–student relationships and mentoring. Spencer (2006) describes the mentoring dynamic as a relational process. Staff in after-school organizations contribute to the essential features of these settings by creating appropriate structure in a safe environment and by promoting a sense of belonging, feelings of personal efficacy, and positive social norms (Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004). A sense of belonging is critical in healthy development. This is facilitated by supportive relationships (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Rhodes, 2004), which some have suggested are often less available in the life experiences of disadvantaged youth (Bottrell, 2009; Hamilton et al., 2006). Mentoring relationships influence not only academic achievement but also psychosocial development (Larson, 2000).

Prior work has demonstrated that relationships with staff are key to youths’ attachments to after-school programs as home-places (Deutsch & Hirsch, 2002; Hirsch, 2005). The club-as-home model, in which youth develop an emotional attachment to an organization driven primarily by psychosocial aspects of the place, points to how relationships can contribute to an overarching socioemotional experience for youth. According to this model, aspects of the program such as feeling cared about and having close relationships with adult staff are important components of the overall environments of after-school settings that may keep youth involved as they age. These relationships may then serve as

important sources of social capital for youth (Bottrell, 2009; Brunie, 2009; Lin, 2001).

Urban youth programs are also social learning environments; adults can facilitate learning by providing opportunities to overcome challenges at an appropriate developmental level (Larson & Walker, 2006). The literature on social capital suggests that interpersonal interactions are one factor which can lead to positive individual and group outcomes (Brunie, 2009). Lin (2001) describes social capital as the use of connections and relationships to achieve goals; this interpersonal engagement opens access to new resources. Stack (1996) considers capital as an interconnected web of “commitments and obligations” (p. xv) between individuals. Social capital, constructed and maintained through adult–youth relationships, can promote youth resilience (Bottrell, 2009). Youth organizations stand at a unique developmental crossroads in the ecological framework of youth; they are able to support and bridge relationships across the settings in youths’ lives (Noam & Fiore, 2004). Thus, successful after-school programs may have a relational culture that supports youth through multiple processes. The role of adult staff in after-school settings is complex and the research literature will benefit from more empirical descriptions of what positive involvement means in terms of youth experience (Hilfinger Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2005).

Relational Strategies and Youth Participation

The relational view of adolescent development focuses on the engagement between individuals. This framework can be useful in creating environments that encourage youth by supporting positive interactions that build on internal motivations and interests (Noddings, 2005). Relational psychology posits that learning takes place only through the interactions between people; learning is realized indirectly through active dialogue. The relational experience is then transferred to engagement with the “text” or the material to be learned (Bingham, 2004). In schools, of course, this text is the curriculum. However, in after-school settings, in the absence of the curricular demands of the schools (Pace, 2003), the text is positive youth development more broadly; many youth organizations focus on supporting youth competencies across domains from academics to prosocial behaviors to risk aversion. The relational ties that emerge through patterns of interactions between club members and staff contribute to developmental change; they form “developmental stepping stones” (p. 50) on which youths’ later experiences build (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

The relational model has implications for the potential of the after-school space as a social learning environment. This builds from a constructivist perspective, one that views staff and youth as partners, or co-constructors, of learning experiences (Jones & Perkins, 2006). Interpersonal relationships are critical in development, as youth construct new knowledge in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). This is facilitated through caring relationships with adult mentors in proximal interactions (Goldstein, 1999). Supportive relationships promote learning and push youth to participate in new activities (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

Aitken, Fraser, and Price (2007) talk about negotiations in informal learning environments, which involve trust and the sharing of power and authority. Indeed adult–youth relationships are not perceived by youth as uniformly supportive across settings. Youth contrast their relational experiences in the various spheres of their lives. They report higher levels of relational trust with Boys & Girls Club staff compared with teachers in the school setting, articulate increased feelings of community when they feel respected, and describe a sense of connection in the after-school setting (Deutsch & Jones, 2008). A sense of social trust makes youth feel agentic and valued. This is essential in building social and relational capital for minority youth, who are “more likely to present as disconnected, if not disengaged” (Kelly, 2009, p. 528) from youth serving settings.

Pedagogy refers to a theoretical perspective of instruction and interaction. The relational approach that we document in this article reflects a conscious effort to establish deep connections with the youth and to transfer this engagement to the “text” of positive youth development. Participation in after-school programs can be facilitated by positive staff–youth relationships (Jarrett et al., 2005; Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2005) and can promote personal, behavioral, and academic competencies (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Ferrari, 2003; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007). It is also important to note that cultural and contextual factors influence the decision to participate in after-school programs (Perkins et al., 2007). Participation then must be considered as a process as well as an outcome within the relational space of the after-school setting.

This qualitative study extends our understanding of the processes that operate within after-school settings. We focus on the importance of the staff–youth relationship in the youths’ sense of place. We were guided by several questions aimed at understanding the strengths of adult–youth relationships in after-school settings: (a) what specific strategies do staff employ that are relational in nature, (b) what about these relationships support the social learning environment, and (c) how do staff use their relationships and engagement

with youth to promote constructs and activities related to positive youth development?

Through observations and interviews, we find that staff engage in specific relational strategies to build their relationships with youth. Youth report experiencing these relational strategies as supportive. Staff develop a capital through the relationships that they exchange for meaningful participation in programs aimed at promoting positive youth outcomes. These interactional processes thereby contribute to a relational pedagogy, or a supportive culture, in this after-school setting specifically based on adult–youth relationships. These findings have implications for after-school programs and for social policies designed to promote healthy adult–youth relationships in the community.

Method

Youth organizations provide a social context within which youth engage in learning experiences through patterns of interpersonal relationships. Way (2005) observes that meaningful research is a process of engagement, more than a struggle for objectivity. We chose qualitative methods to study relationships from the perspective of the youth and staff members in an after-school program. These research strategies are well suited for community-based research and can inform more ecologically sensitive data collection (Stein & Mankowski, 2004; Stewart, 2000) as well as allowing for in-depth examination of interpersonal processes in context.

Site and Sample

The Midtown Boys & Girls Club is a boisterous and active space located in a community recreation building. It is situated on the grounds of a public middle school in a lower-income neighborhood of a small mid-Atlantic city. The club operates on a drop-in model, wherein youth can come and go with or without participation in any of the club's more formal programs. Because of its low annual membership fee, it is a de facto public space available to youth from across the city, although primarily used by youth in the local neighborhood. Many members attend the middle school right next door, though others attend local elementary and high schools and take district buses that bring them to the club. At designated times, the club has access to the gym facilities of the school as well as the adjacent and expansive playing fields. There are designated areas for the various functions of the club, including a snack area, an education room with computer access, a teen room, an open great room with game tables, and several smaller rooms for programs and

meetings. Though these spaces have defined purposes, these shift with the daily needs and activities at the club. The after-school club has both organized programs and activities, including psychosocial programs, tutoring, and community service groups, and more informal, unstructured time. Youth interact with fellow club members, staff, and volunteers in a typical day.

The larger ethnographic sample included all of the youth and staff that participated at the club over the course of one year. This sample was inclusive of the 12 staff and 250 to 300 registered club members (there were approximately four staff and 50 to 70 youth present on a typical day). We worked with staff to identify club members aged 12 to 18 that attended regularly or that had been involved with the club for an extended period of time to purposefully select our interview sample. We were particularly interested in the perceptions of those individuals that were actively engaged in the setting and had invested in the setting with their time. Based on these criteria, the first author approached 26 youth, 23 (86%) of whom agreed to participate in the study. Seventeen (74%) returned consent forms and comprised the interview sample. These 17 youth were approximately balanced in regard to gender and age group (12-14 vs. 15-18). The majority were African American (all individuals mentioned are African American unless otherwise noted). Two youth report other ethnicities (White, mixed ethnicity). Of the 12 staff members at Midtown during the study, approximately half were male, seven were African American, five were White, and many came from similar economic backgrounds as the club members, some even from their neighborhood. Thus, Midtown was a more culturally congruent setting than the youths' schools. It is well documented that the teaching population is primarily White, female, and middle class (Banks et al., 2005). The literature on teacher-student relationships has documented that this can create contradictions, resistance, and a cultural space between teachers and their students (Merryfield, 2000; Ogbu, 1992). As documented below, this contrasts with the environment at Midtown, wherein staff used culture, along with other factors, to reduce the relational distance between themselves and the youth.

Data-Collection Strategies

Researchers took the role of participant-observer (see Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994), recording observations through in-depth field notes. The participant-observer approach yields a contextualized view of individuals' everyday interpretations of their experiences (Miller, 1997). Observation as a research strategy is ideally suited to the study of the ongoing and reciprocal nature of interaction in social settings; observations gather data

that are independent of youth and staff perceptions of their relationships. The first author was engaged in the research site three to four afternoons per week, typically for two to four hr per visit, over the course of one year. The second author visited and recorded field notes for girls-only programs and other special events. Levels of participation of course can vary within the participant–observer approach. We played an active role in the research setting. Like the staff that we observed, we minimized relational distance when appropriate by wearing casual clothes, using colloquial language, and in general approximating what Mandell (1988) refers to as the least-adult role in interaction and data collection. Staff perceptions were captured through field notes of informal discussions that took place during observations throughout the study period.

After spending five months developing relationships and trust with youth and staff the first author conducted a semistructured interview with each of the 17 sample youth and follow up interviews with 11 of the sample youth. Interviews can aid in the discovery of meanings that people assign to interactions (Seidman, Tseng, & Weisner, 2006). The interviews included a series of questions building on earlier research (i.e., identity exploration and development) as well as questions probing themes that emerged from observations at Midtown (e.g., staff–youth relationships, relational differences across settings).¹ The median length of interviews with youth participants was 29 min, and interviews ranged from 19 to 50 min. There was typically two months between the first and second interview.

Analysis

The research process was iterative. Emerging themes of study originated in on-site observations. These were developed in the context of existing theory and literature and through critical discourse in meetings between the first and second authors. The first semistructured interviews included a series of questions building on these themes. As these themes were identified, we fashioned follow-up interview questions to capture youth responses to these phenomena and recorded in detail all staff–youth interactions in observations. The field notes were analyzed as a source of data and additionally were used to contextualize the patterns identified through the analysis of interview data. This is a potent approach that can yield a deep understanding of social processes in context (De Groot, 2002). The triangulation of data was possible in analysis with data from multiple sources; observations, interviews, and documents from the organization. NVivo, a computer software program, was used as an analytic tool in the research process. This facilitated the examination of open (preexisting) and focused (emergent) codes that were applied to these qualitative data sources (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Results and Discussion

Overall, youth in our study describe rich relationships with the staff. Indeed, several name staff as the most influential figures in their lives. For example, Jay, a 17-year-old male, reports, “The single [most influential] person—probably Mr. R. [a director] because he was a good part of my life. Anytime I get in trouble I would come to see him or he’d talk to me or he was just a good person to be around.” The supportive nature of youths’ relationships with staff is consistently invoked as a major contributor to the overall culture of the after-school program:

He made it so fun, and he did so much stuff with us. He tried to be our dad, our big brother; he tried to be our everything. And I think that’s maybe because he showed us that he cared. (Kanaya, 15-year-old, female)

You know sometimes when you walk in here, people will look after you and stuff. I think that’s an important thing . . . But I’m saying that they don’t just look after you sometimes, they actually care about you. (Helen, 12-year-old, female)

This is not to suggest that the relationships and interactions we observed were uniformly or universally positive. Indeed, the youth that we interviewed share varying relational experiences in the club setting:

It’s just like some of the staff, I know that they can be playful and some can be mean, and some can be boring and sit around a desk all day. (Michael, 12-year-old, male)

Yet the majority of youths’ descriptions of their relationships with staff were positive. These relationships appear to be paramount to youths’ affirmative experiences in this setting. Below, we unpack the strategies that staff use to build relationships with youth and consider how these relationships support engagement in programs and positive youth development.

Relational Strategies

Early on in the study, it became apparent that the staff were dedicated to reaching all kids in the club and making the most of their connections with youth:

Some of the kids are very intelligent. I feel all the kids are smart in some way—they might not show it this way, but they’re smart. So you

gotta open up different ideas and different activities that grabs that part of their attention. And then you get their focus, and they'll be able to participate in different events. (Grant, Midtown staff)

As we observed staff like Grant using individual interests and connections to engage youth, we became interested in the specific actions that staff took to build relationships with youth that were then used for the benefit of youth engagement (i.e., involvement in programs and activities) and positive development (i.e., encouraging competencies such as prosocial behavior and social skills). We came to conceptualize this phenomenon as "relational strategies."

Three specific strategies emerged through the analysis of data: minimizing relational distance, active inclusion, and attention to proximal relationships. As staff members make deliberate attempts to form positive, lasting relationships, they find success in downplaying authoritative roles, highlighting mutual interests, and making cultural connections with youth. This strategy, which minimizes the "distance" between the adults and youth, contributes to their ability to make connections with the teens. They make efforts to actively include marginalized youth, reducing peer rejection. Attention to proximal relational ties, such as youths' relationships with other club members and family, in addressing conflicts and problem solving, is also used to build connections and support positive outcomes. Below, we address each of these strategies individually before presenting an example that illustrates how these actions collectively contribute to a relational pedagogy that supports youth engagement and development.

Minimizing Relational Distance

Age and staff-youth relationships. One of the challenges of working with teens is that part of the task of adolescence is the exploration of individual autonomy. In the process of developing increased independence, youth often push the limits of adult authority figures, testing their emerging adulthood within the bounds of their relationships with adults. Thus, the distance between teenagers and the adults who interact with them can seem like an unbridgeable gulf. One of the relational strategies that staff use in this setting is to deliberately minimize age distinctions. Often staff are youthful themselves. This youth organization tends to hire young adults of college age who often share a common background with youth in terms of neighborhood, race, and ethnicity. Indeed, when visitors and community members enter the club, oftentimes they have difficulty delineating staff from youth. We saw staff capitalize on this in their interactions with youth. And youth are quick to note the close proximity

in age. When asked about the influence of club staff, a Midtown club member observes,

Staff, they're just so funny and most of them are college students. They're pretty close to my age anyway so they're fun and they're open. They're like—on the upside, they're like mature teenagers. (C. J., 15-year-old, female)

Other researchers have found that youth perceive staff as “peer-like” adults and that this is a strength of these relationships (Hirsch, 2005). However, this also suggests a danger of this relational strategy: its potential to tip over to disrespect and a lack of authority. For the most part, we found that staff balanced minimizing age differences with retaining adult authority. C. J. highlights this as follows:

At school it's like strict discipline. You have to do exactly what they say no matter what you want to do. At the Club it's like you can just play around with staff and they're more like your peers, but you treat them with more respect because they're not your equals. (C. J., 15-year-old, female)

Culture. Hirsch (2005) calls after-school programs “One-stop shopping for mentoring” (p. 57). He notes that mentoring relationships are strongest when there is a cultural connection between youth and staff. Staff consistently used slang and culturally resonant language in addressing youth.

In an organized program, one of the male teens stood up and grabbed his baseball hat. Craig (staff) said, “Where you going?” The teen replied, “To the bathroom.” Craig joked, “You taking your hat? O.K. I'll see you later, dawg.” There was laughter from the whole group of teens. (Field note excerpt)

This use of teen language and idioms aids in eliminating relational differences of age as well as culture. The staff member, through his use of local teen slang demonstrates his familiarity and comfort with the teens' culture, both blurring the age difference and highlighting the shared culture between them. He makes himself a part of their group through his discourse in the informal and ongoing process of building relationships. After this interaction, Craig got the teens to work on a college preparation program. He took the opportunity to engage the youth in the program, thereby cashing in this social/relational

capital for increased participation in an activity designed to promote positive youth development (in this case, academic goal-setting and college guidance).

The use of narrative contributes to a cultural connection that, along with the other techniques, minimizes relational distance (Gee, 1996). In an organized career preparation program, a young female staff member used personal narrative to share her own experiences and highlight aspects of her background which were common to many of the youth:

I came up from nothing, *nothing*. I lived with relatives because my parents weren't there at all. But I studied my ass off; there was no one to help me, but me. I got good grades and still was in lots of extracurriculars. I could have gone any place I wanted, but I chose here. But you got to learn to deal; I had to deal with being Black in a white school. I studied my ass off in high school and still struggled my first year . . . Now I'm 20 years old and have a good GPA . . . As a Black woman, people don't take me seriously—but I won't have that, I worked my ass off to get here and I've got a plan. Ten years from now, I *will* be retiring. I *will* run my own company. My back-ups have back-ups. (Field note excerpt, italics added)

In the culturally relevant pedagogy literature, methods and materials are considered in light of the textual, social, cultural, and personal lives of youth (Hefflin, 2002). Here, the staff member shared personal experiences of race, gender, and self-empowerment. She used her narrative to try to motivate these teens by minimizing the social distance between them. She then had enthusiastic participation in the goal-setting activity that followed. A 15-year-old female club member comments on the benefit of this personal and cultural connection,

I see where certain staff members have gone from. She's a graduate student at the university and she's one of the few Black graduate students who I look up to. She's just a real role model for me and I see from her what I can become.

Mutual interests. The relational distance between staff and youth is also diminished through dialogue involving areas of mutual interest. This occurs naturally and freely in the highly social atmosphere of the club. Such dialogue not only provides a vehicle to start a conversation but can lead to pro-social outcomes. A promising area for supporting development is through the

structured voluntary activities common in after-school settings; the connections that are forged through play and guided exploration promote intrinsic motivation for youth (Larson, 2000). Staff create these opportunities and play an important role in them through their associations with youth. During the year of this study, a staff member started a popular program with a group of younger girls around a shared enthusiasm for dance. The following describes the process whereby staff engage youth in an activity of mutual interest that includes opportunities for positive developmental experiences that promote competence, confidence, and connection in particular.

The staff member was leading a group of girls (6-16 years old) through a dance routine. There were 12 girls in two lines doing a really complicated routine and as many female college volunteers showing dance moves and offering encouragement. After the girls learned a new sequence of dance steps, the older club members would model new steps and lend a word of support; "That's good, but after the turn, you go like this." The girls were all beaming with the attention from the staff and volunteers. (Field note excerpt)

Researchers have identified these kinds of interactions, with staff modeling youth, and in turn, youth working with other youth as tri-level mentoring (Deutsch, 2007, 2008). In this example, the shared interest in dance provides the context for this process.

Staff also bring areas of personal expertise and experience to the club. When youth show an interest, the staff can use this point of connection to build on these impromptu teachable moments. Here, a club member remarks on this kind of interaction:

Oh, well there's this staff and he sees that I like music and he lets us play music that I like. So he gives me the opportunity, and like he kind of shares the same interest that I like—it makes me want to hang around him more. (Curtis, 15-year-old, male)

One of the staff at the Midtown Boys & Girls Club was a sophomore public health student at a local college. She ran a girls-only psychoeducational program aimed at sharing information about the transition to adolescence and adulthood empowering young girls. Although this is a national Boys & Girls Club program with a set curriculum focused around various issues faced by girls, including health and self-esteem, we observed this staff draw on youth interest and her personal knowledge and interests to raise the level of discussion

in this program. On one afternoon, she organized a review session using a game show format. There were four topic areas: media influence and body image, puberty, sexual myths and sexual truths, and eating disorders.

Team 1 chose “Sexual Myths and Truths” for 500 points. Shaunta asked, “Tell me the only 100% way that a young woman can guarantee that she doesn’t become pregnant. Name two other methods of avoiding pregnancy.” Team 1 got together. Team 2 also huddled together to discuss it, and one of the youth replied, “Abstinence is the only 100% way to be sure not to get pregnant. Condoms and birth control pills are two other ways.” (Field note excerpt)

Every time the girls answered something, right or wrong, Shaunta made sure that she clarified and explained, so that it was not just about answering the question or getting the points but about truly understanding the information. Through the activity, the staff member also talked about her classes in college and how she always does better when there is active involvement instead of just lecturing. It was evident that Shaunta was both knowledgeable and passionate about her profession, and this had a positive impact on the experience of the club members. She built on both her enthusiasm for the subject and her positive relationship with the girls in the group to engage them in this targeted activity aimed at decreasing sexual risk-taking behaviors.

Overall, staff used shared interests and cultural connections to minimize the relational distance between themselves and the teens. They then capitalized on youths’ views of them as “mature teenagers” to engage youth in activities aimed at promoting positive development.

Active Inclusion

Another relational strategy employed by staff in after-school settings is active inclusion. We observed staff purposefully promote positive peer interactions in the club. Prior research has pointed out how access to youths’ friendship networks makes it possible for staff to observe, respond to, and intervene in teens’ peer groups to facilitate positive social interactions (Hirsch, 2005). We saw staff purposely facilitate, enforce, and model positive peer relationships. Such active inclusion occurs in both formal and informal programming.

Sometimes staff use this strategy to bring new club members into existing groups. At announcements one winter afternoon, a staff member brought a young male to the front of the group saying, “This is Brennan, he’s new. Everybody say hi. Naw, you need to show respect, that wasn’t nearly loud

enough.” During a meeting of an all-boys discussion group, that will be discussed in-depth later, the staff leader balanced inclusion with respecting the autonomy of the current group members.

A male club member came over to the table and asked what was going on. The staff member described the program and asked, “What, do you want to join?” The youth shrugged his shoulders and said, “Maybe, sure.” Grant said, “I’ll check with the guys and get back with you.” He started to walk away, but Grant stopped him, “You can watch for today, right guys?” Just like that, the new guy was included. (Field note excerpt)

In this case, the staff gave the youth the ultimate power to include or exclude the youth but modeled positive behavior by inviting him to join and indicating that he could stay for the meeting. This youth joined the group and they ultimately created posters highlighting positive themes that they had been discussing. Both staff and youth report more positive interactions in youth-led activities (Jones & Perkins, 2006). Peer acceptance is of course critically important for adolescents. Giving power to youth to lead the acceptance of new members within expected and modeled bounds can minimize peer rejection while increasing youth leadership. Active inclusion then strengthens relational ties on two levels: staff–youth and youth–youth.

The examples above are ones where staff made deliberate attempts to include marginalized youth. Active inclusion is also achieved when staff shares authority by assigning leadership roles for youth. This builds the relational ties between teens and adults by pulling the youth into the circle of adult authority and responsibility. An example of this could be seen when Midtown’s new club director arrived. He wasted no time in bringing youth into leadership positions in the club. When introducing himself to the teens at the club, he said,

... That’s why I know that you are my leaders. These kids will look to you more than me, so you need to be there with me. We need you, you all make a difference, and the younger kids look up to you more than you know ... (Field note excerpt)

The director emphasized the importance of teens’ relationships with younger club members in an attempt to build their feelings of responsibility within the club. By highlighting and supporting these older-youth/younger-youth relationships, staff are giving adolescents a valued role in the club, which may help promote positive social norms and development (see Deutsch, 2005).

Attention to Proximal Relational Ties and Social Networks

The organizational structure of the club allows staff unique opportunities to use relationships to bridge developmental contexts and provide youth with practical and emotional support that goes beyond their experiences in the club. In this club, staff often know youths' families and teachers, allowing them to draw on and address youths' experiences and relationships across social contexts. Tyler, a popular staff member, shares how staff can provide emotional support to youth,

Sometimes one of our kids will have a death in their family, and they don't want to talk to their mother or father about it, and they will talk to a staff member. Once they talk to us, they feel a whole lot better. Anything that goes on at home—they'll come to us. It's like a second home, and we're like their second parents. (Field note excerpt)

We conceptualize staff's abilities to use relationships to bridge developmental contexts as careful attention to proximal relational ties and suggest that this constitutes a relational strategy in this setting. This takes place subtly and often, as staff have access to peer groups and family members. Staff draw on these resources in providing support and resolving conflicts. They take the time to work through disagreements with peers. Staff not only inform parents and families of events at the club but also take steps to involve parents in the conflict resolution process. Tyler talks about involving both peers and family in conflict resolution,

Generally, the fights would start from something that wasn't meant to happen, but did by accident. But once the kids sit down and talk about and see it's just about this foolishness right here, they understand and apologize to each other, and go on their way. But some starts over simple foolishness and elevates. But we take care of that in a quick and quiet manner. Keep our kids safe, keep the parents informed of what's going on—let them know that this is the positive place for kids. (Field note excerpt)

Here is another example that we recorded through observations started as a playground scuffle:

A volunteer out on the field pulled two boys apart that were pushing each other. He had the two take a "time-out" on the bleachers, though

R. C. ducked behind a dumpster and tried to sneak out of the situation. When Tyler, the staff member, found that R. C. had been fighting, he said, "We're gonna have to suspend you from the club, this isn't the first time." Shortly thereafter, R. C.'s mom showed up at the front, and Tyler called, "Ma'am can I talk to you for a moment." He conversed with her and the volunteer while R. C. went inside to get his book bag. The mother was upset, until the staff member explained how the situation unfolded between the two friends. (Field note excerpt)

In this instance, both peers and family were involved in resolving the immediate conflict. The staff worked with the parent in assessing an appropriate consequence and formulating a plan to work with the youth to modify his behavior, allowing further participation at the club. The staff's access to parents and friends allows for this drawing of strengths from multiple, proximal relationships in the youths' lives. As many teens have been attending these programs since they were little, staff are often familiar with youths' families and friends. In fact, many youth have siblings and cousins within the same club. This allows for more relational approaches to problem solving. This is a unique source of potential strength for after-school programs, wherein the adults often have more direct and immediate access to family members and friends than do adults in other settings, such as school. This strategy exemplifies after-school programs' capability to bridge relationships between settings of youths' lives (Noam & Fiore, 2004).

Although the preceding examples serve to illustrate how relational strategies lead to participation and processes that support beneficial outcomes, often specific outcomes cannot be mapped directly onto specific strategies. We suggest that the relational strategies in the aggregate contribute to a culture that engages youth in activities and interactional processes which in turn support positive youth development and its associated outcomes.

Toward a Relational Pedagogy: The Example of Grant's Group

Formal programs in after-school settings provide a context for engaging youth in activities that support positive and prosocial interactions. In this section, we use an example from an all-boys' psychoeducational program, led by Grant, to illustrate how staff use several strategies in concert. The program we observed was the local implementation of a national Boys and Girls Club program that attempts to foster responsibility and positive behavior in young adolescent males.² At Midtown, this program is particularly intended for those that are

behaviorally at risk. Grant shared how he uses the program to engage the club members:

Basically, these are all the guys that won't listen. They leave all the time and cause trouble. I brought them all in here—put them all in the same room. I'm pretty lenient with them, as long as they get done what they need to get done. (Field note excerpt)

“What they need to get done” is a curriculum developed to promote positive choices among early adolescent boys. Observations showed a conscious effort on Grant's part to employ relational strategies to engage the boys in the group, thereby encouraging positive development through both the program curriculum and group interactions. Grant uses multiple strategies in concert to create a setting in which his relationship with the boys serves as the backbone for this group.

To set the stage, it was a dreary January afternoon. Grant was already in the reading room with his group. Six male club members (all 12-13 years old) were scattered around the room on chairs and beanbags. As the guys settled in, Grant explained their purpose to the first author, who was observing the group:

It's all about these guys working together. Every time we meet, we have an activity like this poster, and then we do this program. It's a series of cards that they read with problems to work through. And they write about it in these journals. (Field note excerpt)

From the start, Grant took steps to minimize relational differences. He did this by acting a bit adolescent himself, joining the group as they all picked ad hoc nicknames for the afternoon,

Grant said, “Abe, you can be—who's that old guy in the Karate Kid?” Derrick answered, “Miyagee?” Grant said, “Yeah Mr. Miyakee.” Derrick named Marcus, “Skull-master,” as he has a shaved head. Derrick got dubbed, “Fore-less,” as Grant said, “You ain't got to forehead—look at that.” J. T. was named “Hideous.” (Field note excerpt)

This interaction not only made Grant seem closer to the youth in terms of age and culture but also worked to actively include all youth. Grant ensured that all the teens were included and given mock nicknames. By going about it in this way, the teasing becomes inclusionary rather than exclusionary.

One could imagine that the development of ad hoc nicknames could become hurtful for rejected teens. Yet Grant's involvement maintains a level of friendly banter that puts everyone in the "line of fire," so to speak, in a non-threatening way.

Following this, Grant took part in the type of horseplay that often occurs in adolescent circles. He threw a pencil to each of the guys. J. T. said, "Don't throw that at me." Grant said, "You can't make that whining sound—I mean it." He made a funny sound and a gesture; at this the whole group broke out in laughter. He then passed out Ho-Ho's, a contraband snack for the group. Grant even allowed a bit of roughhousing;

J. T. said, "It's my birthday today." Marcus and Derrick started giving him his birthday blows, trying to punch him 12 times. When they got a little rough, Grant said, "Hey not in the back, just in the arm or the leg." (Field note excerpt)

Grant employed youthful mannerisms (throwing pencils, roughhousing), and emulated the idioms of the teens' speech (silly nicknames, mimicking whining) to minimize relational differences and to make a closer cultural connection with the youth. However, he also monitored their behavior, reining them back in when they began to cross the line of what would be considered by most youth-serving organizations as acceptable behavior.

Through these interactions, Grant was bonding with the youth in a careful and orchestrated way. However, when teasing became too personal or horseplay too rough, he stepped in to redirect the group. At one point Marcus, the group's president (an elected position), told another boy to shut up. Grant intervened, saying, "Hey you're president, what do you need to do?" Marcus said, "Apologize." Turning to Derrick smiling he said, "I apologize Derrick." Grant's established relationship and rapport with the group allowed him to enforce his authority when needed without risking the adolescents' disengagement from the group. He was the "mature teenager" who still demanded their respect.

Later in the meeting, Grant showed how close attention to proximal relational ties can facilitate youth engagement in organized club activities and programs.

Grant asked, "Are you all going to be here Friday? We're gonna have a special treat—pizza." All of them were going to be there, but Derrick. He said, "I don't know, my mom has this thing Fridays." Marcus told him, "Just switch days, you can come Friday instead of Thursday."

Grant asked, "Is your brother here? I'll talk to him." When he located the brother, Grant asked, "Are you gonna be here Friday? Yeah? Could you bring your brother for something special?" Jay agreed and the two of them left. (Field note excerpt)

Grant relies on his own ties to the other members of Derrick's family, drawing on the broader social network to achieve a goal. Here, Grant draws on the social capital present at the club via the presence of multiple family members as well as the capital he has built through his relationship with Derrick and his family. This involvement of proximal relational ties in problem solving allowed for Derrick's continued participation in this developmental program.

Through these activities, the staff member made a conscious, yet subtle effort to minimize relational differences. He made a strong cultural connection with these adolescents, who were generally seen as "difficult" by club staff, by using their informal, conversational vernacular, engaging in juvenile behaviors, and allowing (even instigating) some minor roughhousing. Through this, he also ensured that these possibly exclusionary behaviors remained inclusive of all the teens in the group. He let slip, if temporarily, his authoritative role, while still modeling prosocial behaviors. He took advantage of peer and family proximity, paying attention to relational ties to increase participation. So what was the result? Grant took the time to develop a connection. This took patience and effort. At an appropriate time though, he transferred the informal exchange to the developmental text, or program.

Grant handed out a worksheet that was titled, "Values and Behavior Game." There was a hypothetical scenario that the group had to solve with the card that they drew from a deck. The situation involved a boy who had the choice of borrowing 20 dollars from his family, who probably wouldn't miss it, to lend to a boy who was trying to get his mother a sweater for her birthday. He was mowing lawns and could return the money shortly. Grant read the scenario out loud. Derrick drew a card that said 'Dependability' and another that said 'Patience.' He said, "For dependability, I would probably give him the money, but maybe with patience, I would wait to see if he got the money." Grant said, "You just said you was gonna give him the money." Derrick replied, "I probably would." Marcus pulled "Generosity" and "Courage." He said, "I don't know about that, but I would help him borrow the money to get his mom the sweater." (Field note excerpt)

Afterward, they had a discussion to process the lesson on how values influence behavior. Grant had them write what they learned in their journals, which he then signed. Grant “cashed in” the social capital he had gained by his careful cultivation of relationships to engage the boys in this activity. This program is designed to promote prosocial development among boys, and Grant’s relational work ensures that the boys get the full “dosage” of the program by keeping them engaged in the curriculum as well as involving them in prosocial interactions.

Prior work has shown that adult staff are often key to the success of formal programs (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Hirsch, 2005; Rhodes, 2004). Staff’s ability to draw on relational strategies to nurture their relationships with youth may help them create positive relational climates in which such psychoeducational programs can succeed. This is especially notable in the context of a program such as Grant’s group, which is aimed at young males who have a history of behavioral infractions or difficulties. Grant’s ability to draw on relational strategies to create a climate that engages these youth could serve as a model for other adults working with teens, whose participation in such programs can be difficult to sustain.

Discussion

We did not embark on this project intending to explore relational strategies. Through the research process however, these strategies appeared repeatedly and became a convincing theme. Relational strategies refer to instances when an adult invests time in building a relationship with a youth and then uses that bond for promoting engagement in activities and support for the development of competencies through program participation and role modeling. The strategies refer to the specific actions staff take to build relationships, and the relationships then serve as the foundation for youth engagement and development.

We suggest that the relational strategies we observed contribute to a relational pedagogy in this after-school setting; the collective efforts of staff contribute to a culture of relation that engages youth and may promote resilience and positive outcomes. At the Midtown Club we observed a relational pedagogy which represents the purposeful cultivation of connections with youth for a twofold benefit: (a) the transference of that engagement to specific programs aimed at promoting positive development and youth competencies and (b) involvement in interactions that model and promote prosocial behavior and provide supportive social capital. Relational strategies may

therefore transfer to youth outcomes through two mechanisms—First, through increased engagement of youth in the setting. In other words, because of the positive relational climate, youth are open to “soaking up” the lessons and messages imparted by various club programs; Second, through a process of social learning, whereby youth learn to enact prosocial behavior, which is modeled by the adult staff and older youth (Bandura, 1977). Indeed, the relational nature of the strategies we observed is well aligned with the goals of positive youth development. PYD constructs such as connection, caring, and character (Lerner, Almerigi, et al., 2005; Lerner, Lerner, et al., 2005) emphasize youths’ interpersonal competencies. Thus, a relational pedagogy appears well suited to promoting such outcomes.

Further research is needed to test our hypotheses and examine whether and how relational strategies lead to positive developmental outcomes for youth. Yet our results suggest that the cumulative effect of the adult–youth relationships built in these settings is a community space that youth experience as caring and supportive. The interview data reveal high levels of perceived care, an instrumental variable in youth experience (Noddings, 2005). The supportive relationships enable after-school school settings to move beyond safe spaces, to become developmental spaces that may promote prosocial norms and the developmental needs of youth.

The black box in the NRC/IOM report (2002) describes an unknown where youth go in and “good things” happen. Our findings suggest that one of those “good things” is the relational space between adult staff and youth. Specifically, the strategies employed by staff both model positive relational interactions and facilitate the development of adult–youth relationships that promote and support adolescent development. Such strategies may be informative to practitioners seeking to create communities in which relationships between teens and adults play a key role.

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1. Please contact first author for full interview protocol.
2. For more information about Boys & Girls Clubs national programs and curricula, see www.bgca.org/whatwedo/Pages/WhatWeDo.aspx

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Bios

Jeffrey N. Jones is assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo. His research focuses on school and community-based interventions that promote academic and civic engagement.

Nancy L. Deutsch is assistant professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education, Charlottesville. Her research focuses on the socioecological contexts of adolescent development, particularly on issues of identity, gender, race, and class.