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FINAL PAPER

When I meet someone new, one of the questions that is bound to come up in that first conversation is “What do you do?” This is a basic question and people usually expect a straightforward answer. Something short and simple like, “I’m a lawyer” or, if they are making any guesses based on my clothing, maybe something more like “Oh, I work at a library.” Right now, this is not an easy question for me to answer. My job title – “Friend” – is both cryptic and humorous, and if I choose to share it I invariably face the follow up questions “What did you say?” and a return to the first question: “So, what do you do?” The quick answer is that I am a mentor. I can elaborate that a bit further with the thirty-second elevator pitch: “I am a professional mentor with an organization called Friends of the Children – Boston. Beginning in their first grade year, we provide young people, whom we call Achievers, with a mentor, or Friend, who will spend four hours each week with them until they graduate from high school. I work with eight boys ages 7-9 in many aspects of their lives. I help them with homework, take them to museums, parks and shows, visit them in class, and work to support their families.” Depending on how interesting this story seems to my new acquaintance, I may be drawn into a pretty long discussion about just what, exactly, I really do and how I do it.

Why does this question take so long to answer? For one thing, there is no simple title for my profession. Words like “lawyer” and “librarian” carry enough meaning and cultural weight that they need few qualifiers to be understood. But the closest word for what I do – mentor – is both inadequate (I do more than mentoring) and false (I am not, as most people assume when I say mentor, a volunteer). I self-identify with the profession of “Youth Worker,” which I take loosely to mean any person who professionally facilitates the development of young people outside of a school setting. Unfortunately, this term does not often carry the messages I intend. Indeed, the profession itself is evolving in so many directions that it can defy definition. Since there is not yet a clear category for me to inhabit, I and my

colleagues find ourselves in the interesting and frustrating role of defining our own profession. In addition to creating endless fodder for party conversations, this situation creates many other spaces for reflection, growth, and communication. In this paper I will take up the question of what I do and how I do it in further detail, placing my work in the context of Youth Work as a profession.

THE WHAT

I can start with my own job description. With the exception of the few basic tasks I am expected to complete - turn in paperwork in a timely fashion, maintain regular communication with caregivers and other stakeholders, etc - my job description does not read like a typical list of responsibilities. The bulk of it is focused on traits that I am expected to possess and to model for the young men in my charge. I must be well organized, self motivated, creative, reliable and responsible. I must be a good listener, communicator, and tutor. In short, I must be a good leader.

All Youth Workers are leaders. We place ourselves in that position by choosing to focus on the development of others and by offering our own knowledge, experience, and wisdom as sounding boards for young people who are testing these qualities within themselves. This does not mean that all Youth Workers lead in the same way. Since I work with such young children and because I interact with them in many contexts over a lengthy period of time, my leadership role may be charged with more of a power differential than it might if I worked with older youth or spent less time with my youth. I am capable of, for example, picking up and carrying off many of my Achievers. In a few cases where safety was of particular concern, I have been glad to be able to do this. I also interact with teachers, caregivers, siblings, DSS workers, counselors, and just about anyone else in my Achievers' lives. This gives me greater access to and therefore greater power over the lives of my Achievers. The simple fact that I can communicate, in person, a message (say, a report about some bad in-school behavior) from a child's teacher to that child's mother gives me power that a Youth Worker who only sees the child in an after-school program would not have. I

believe that it is important for Youth Workers to recognize and acknowledge the power dynamics of their relationships with young people.

Regardless of what style or approach a leader uses, that leader must successfully navigate the power dynamics of the relationship in order to be effective. Young people are especially well attuned to issues of fairness and honesty. A leader who uses her power unfairly or insincerely will not earn the respect she needs to be an effective Youth Worker. Youth Workers must display integrity, consistency, fairness, and intelligence in their actions, or they will be seen as annoyances, not as leaders. Young people have very little power in our adult-dominated society, and they tend not to listen to those adults who are contributing to their oppression. An effective leader will both acknowledge these power dynamics and will create opportunities for disparities to be transcended, corrected, or traversed.

This last sentence describes, at a basic level, what I do -- and it is what I believe lies at the core of all Youth Work. I am a leader. To me, this means that I enter into relationships with young people, and with the communities and people close to them, in order to examine the power dynamics of our relationships with those around us and to successfully navigate them. Leadership is not about wielding power; it is about navigating the web of power dynamics that exists between people and about helping others do the same. I have intentionally made this definition of leadership extremely broad; hopefully its meaning will become more clear as I enter a discussion of *how* I do what I do. For now, I can offer a quick example. A teacher is in the business of teaching. The teacher's goals (as defined by the state) might be very narrowly interpreted as the communication of mathematics knowledge to one or more children. As a Youth Worker, I may find myself teaching mathematics to a child. I have the luxury of teaching math in a context that does not conclude with a state sponsored exam, so in the act of teaching I would also be seeking to help that child see how not knowing math robs them of power in our society, and that the process of mastering math is part of a larger process of claiming power for oneself, and that as their mentor I can help the child navigate the process of claiming that power. Strictly speaking, I do not particularly care whether or not they remember their multiplication tables. When I am done with my job, I am hoping that my Achievers will be

testing themselves and the people around them so they can decide for themselves what success looks like and how important those multiplication tables might be.

THE HOW

Leadership begins with relationships, and relationships are sustained by communication. Youth workers may lead small or large groups, but communication must begin at the individual level because groups are composed of unique individuals with unique needs. I spend the bulk of my professional time in one-on-one sessions with individual Achievers. In order for these sessions to be successful, we must establish good communication with one another. Communication requires a whole host of practical skills, many of which can be learned and practiced as techniques. These include elements of good listening, like an attentive posture, open body language, reflection, restating, and verbal cues, and elements of good speaking like eye contact, thinking before responding, and effective word choice. These skills can only be practiced after a foundation of trust has been established, and in many ways these skills serve to preserve and deepen that trust. With young people, especially, communication is predicated on the right answers, in word and deed, to the question “will this adult listen to me?” One uses the skills listed above to show, during conversation, that one is hearing, but to really listen to another person is to consider their words and act upon them. With my Achievers, this may mean that I must make good on promises, that I must remember expressed hopes, or that I should try to restructure activities that at first created negative responses. I also need to pay attention to all the communication that is happening without words. Many of my Achievers do not yet themselves understand their feelings or are not capable of clearly expressing them, so it becomes my job to help them learn to communicate emotions and needs in healthy ways. In order to communicate at this level, I must constantly show that I am willing to listen to my Achievers, and that I am doing my best to listen to them all the time, even when they are not talking.

Communication cannot only flow in one direction. In order for me to communicate successfully with my Achievers, they must also communicate successfully with me. As I learn how to listen to them, they are

also learning how to speak to me, how to listen to me, and how to listen to themselves and others. These abilities are not taught as lessons; they are instead consequences of the nature of our relationship. In order for us to interact with one another within the context of our relationship, we must develop the trust and skills needed to communicate. We could do almost any activity, from reading homework to rock climbing, and still work intentionally on our communication and relationship skills. This is because the main focus of our time together is the communication itself -- not the messages or curriculum being conveyed.

Communication is not just an action; it is a learning process. All parties engaged in successful communication must continually respond and adapt to changes in themselves and in others. For Youth Workers, this perspective on communication may turn conventional wisdom a bit upside down. In order to communicate, the Youth Worker must learn and change. Communication is the foundation of leadership and of teaching, so in order for these other things to happen learning and change must first be embraced. From one perspective, this means that teachers cannot teach if they are not also learning! Indeed, I cannot expect my Achievers to learn and develop themselves if they are not watching and helping me to do the same. As an adult, this can be an uncomfortable space to inhabit. I want to be confident and sure of myself and of my accomplishments. Certainly, when pressed by questions from people less than half my age I want to believe that I am full of wise and true answers. As a Youth Worker dedicated to development, however, I cannot rest on past achievements and memorized answers but must instead seek out growth and adaptive wisdom for myself and for my Achievers.

This is a process that Youth Workers should undergo constantly. We must recognize that we need to change, want to change, and learn how best to change. We must grow professionally through new skills and behaviors, and work within ourselves and with colleagues to ensure that positive changes become permanent. Change is development, and in order for us to guide young people through their own development we must ourselves be in a state of development. I said earlier that leadership can be thought of as a power struggle -- one whose goal is to successfully leverage one's own power so that other people may increase their own and that of the group. Youth Workers are trying to lead young people through

positive changes and development. If I try to use my power to force development upon an Achiever (“you will finish your homework or we will not get to play outside at all today”), the likely result of that scenario is that the Achiever will waste his power fighting me instead of on his own development. When I open a space for an Achiever to use his power to make decisions about his own development, then and only then can he grow (“I can help you with your homework if you want, but I know we want to explore the woods today also; what do you think?”).

The cooperative nature of communication lies at the very heart of Youth Work. As I shift my focus away from what I may be trying to say or teach, and place it instead on how well I am communicating and how well *we* are communicating, I am forced to structure everything I do in order to respond to the continuous changes happening in my Achievers, in myself, and in our relationships. Youth Work is not about adults carrying out their own agendas; it is about adults and young people learning to communicate together and create changes together.

The atmosphere that people need in order to do these things must be intentionally cultivated. Youth Workers and youth need to create their own communities together that create structures and guidelines for good communication and positive growth. In the limited time and space of an out-of-school-time program, special measures must be taken to facilitate the natural growth of this community. Ice breakers and team building activities can teach communication skills and forge relationship bonds between program participants that can dramatically improve achievement in other outcome areas. For example, at Friends-Boston we created our own special wave (like a secret handshake) that we can use as a greeting or as an attention getter at group events. This wave serves as an important piece of our shared culture – it identifies members of our community and contains a message that the community created together (the wave means hello, I like you and care about you, and peace). In order to create this piece of culture, we thought intentionally as a staff about what our greeting should be and how we might implement it, then brought it to our Achievers at a group event where its use began to evolve as our community started to use it. By making the message of this kind of lesson (how to greet someone properly) secondary to the communication of that message (how will we learn greetings together as a community) we created not curriculum but culture.

Through this team building approach, we opened doors for several other positive outcomes that go beyond the basic skill of greeting and delve into deeper and more relationship-based outcomes like confidence and resilience.

Even though I keep placing “curriculum” in a position of secondary importance, I still consider it to be a vital component of Youth Work. Relationship building, communication, leadership, and team building all seek to create a cooperative, dynamic, growing community. Within that atmosphere, all kinds of new skills and knowledge can be mastered and learned. The trick is to maintain that atmosphere and focus while also infusing the program with age-appropriate and content-rich activities. Friends of the Children has enormous flexibility when it comes to activity planning. Each Friend is individually responsible for making the final decisions about day-to-day activities. Our time out of school can be filled with anything that falls within our budget and that addresses our goals. Our goals are tailored to each Achiever; and the entire staff may play a role in formulating desired outcomes for any one Achiever. As Achievers grow to understand this goal setting process, they take on a more active role in setting their own outcomes as well.

This process begins with a goal or outcome, not with a piece of curriculum. Goal setting starts with an honest assessment of an Achiever’s strengths and obstacles, and from there we try to find ways to improve on existing strengths to make obstacles more navigable. It is easiest to explain this process with an example. One of my Achievers, ES, rarely turns in his homework. I know that homework is important, but I saw this as a symptom of a deeper problem, and after working with ES for a few months it became clear that his obstacle was a lack of confidence in reading. He would get frustrated very quickly when reading, and had trouble focusing on the directions to his homework assignments. Even when assignments contained words that he knew how to read, his lack of confidence would cause him to avoid trying in the first place. I decided that a good long term goal would be to boost his confidence in this area. In order to create activities out of this goal, it must be restated in a way that is concrete, measurable, and realistic. It could be stated like this: in the next six months, ES will increase by at least one reading level as assessed by his teachers, and he will show excitement and active participation in a reading-based activity at least 3 out of five

times. Stated this way, our choices for activities remain very open. The goal is not “ES will turn in his homework every day,” nor is it “ES will complete the *Phonics for Success* curriculum and score at least 80% on its final exam.” We are not locked into a set of lessons but need only find ways to infuse all kinds of different activities with reading.

With ES, I have taken him to restaurants where we have read menus; we have played reading games with signs and posters as we ride in the car; we have written and illustrated stories together; we have played video games and focused on reading the instructions and menus. We have also sat down and read some books together. We do this to keep activities interesting and ES engaged, but also to emphasize that reading is a skill that pervades all aspects of life. Building on his strengths, I can bring reading to drawing or to puzzle solving, which are things that ES already has confidence in doing. In this way, we can work on increasing both his reading skills and his *confidence* in reading, which will ultimately take him much farther than my phonics tips ever will.

This goal-based approach works well for me in my one-on-one relationships, but even in group settings it is vital. Groups may share a common set of goals for all participants, but individuals within that group may have different learning styles, different interests, and different strengths. By building in multiple subject areas and multiple teaching styles, everyone in the group is more likely to resonate with at least a part of the activity. Also, as young people learn math, art, science, literacy, and other subjects at the same time, they are more likely to make crucial connections between these fields that will help inform their future academic growth. Youth Workers are focused on the area of development outside of schools. We may (and should) form partnerships with school, but we do not need to mimic their methods. Standardized testing and evaluation require schools to focus on curricula, because their primary goals are based on students’ performance on curriculum-based exams. Youth Workers are free to set loftier and more complex goals that can free up programming and allow for a wider, more interdisciplinary variety of activities.

Given so many choices, Youth Workers do well to draw upon best practices within the field to better focus activities and help young people develop a balanced and rich set of competencies. Any caring adult

has very high hopes for children to be competent and even excellent in many ways – at math, at reading, at singing, at sports, at cooking, at being respectful, at knowing the rules, at playing an instrument, and at so many other things. As Youth Workers, we are constantly reminding each other and ourselves that there are limits to what we can do. We set manageable goals and try not to teach everything that we feel needs to be taught. Still, we hope to address the long list of things that a person could know by focusing on a few areas that we can impact positively.

I alluded to this earlier in the example of ES. Rather than taking on completely the rather large task of teaching ES all the skills he will need to integrate in order to become a fluent reader, my goal is to help him find confidence in reading so that he can begin to make the choices and effort he will need to make in order to learn on his own. On a larger level, this approach starts from a realization that it is impossible to teach each young person all of the skills they will need to lead successful lives. Youth Workers should be focused instead on helping young people to find the confidence, perspective, and critical thinking skills that they will need in order to understand what success means for them as an individual and to pursue their own visions with tenacity and resilience.

A few basic skills lie at the foundation of this quest – cultural competency, social skills, flexibility, and frustration tolerance. This list is short enough to present a truly manageable set of goals for most Youth Work organizations, and I believe that these goals can produce far-reaching positive outcomes throughout any persons' life. In any activity we do, some combination of these goals must be included in the planning. Flexibility and frustration tolerance are needed for just about everything people do. Being able to change and adapt to new circumstances, and to maintain composure and persistence in the face of adversity are very difficult skills to master. We have to be flexible in order to handle the rapid fire pace of a school day's changing periods or a work day's changing task list. We need frustration tolerance to meet the many times in a day that reality differs from our expectations or needs – everything from getting caught in the rain to getting an F on a test to losing a loved one. Cultural competency and social skills allow people to bring their flexibility to a wide variety of social contexts and to successfully interact with people from many backgrounds. These foundational skills are not simple – most adults are still in the process of learning

them. It is important for Youth Workers to be transparent and honest about their own learning processes, so that young people have positive examples of how to learn in addition to being taught what to learn.

The growth that I expect from my Achievers is significant. Over the course of their years with our program, we want them to develop into incredible young adults. As an individual Youth Worker, I often feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of overseeing the development of my eight Achievers. So it is that I am constantly reminding myself that I am not an individual Youth Worker and that there is no such thing as an individual Youth Worker. We exist in networks; we are resource brokers in contact with webs of caring adults, community organizations, caregivers and parents, schools, businesses, and other Youth Workers. I do not need to teach my Achievers everything (nor can I). But I can connect them to people who can teach them things or who can connect them to others. I can show them how they can connect themselves to this network, and how they can find new networks if they need.

I also work to involve, cooperate with, and possibly train or influence some of the people who are close to each Achiever. Friends-Boston works with families to provide needed resources - we can connect parents to language classes or to housing assistance, we can train parents in homework assistance or collaborative problem solving. We also interact with teachers, school administrators, tutors, and case workers who are in direct contact with our Achievers. I only see each one of my young people for four hours every week; the rest of their time is spent with a whole network of other adults. As much as possible, we adults must collaborate together to gather resources, knowledge, caring, and support around our children. I rely on this network of adults to learn more about the world my Achievers live in and how they are progressing through it. I work cooperatively with this network to help shape their experience of the world in as positive a way as we can manage.

This brings me back to the role of a Youth Worker as a leader, navigating the web of power dynamics that exists between people and helping young people do the same. Networks of power conspire to oppress groups of people - the colored, the female, the queer, the poor, the young. I want my young people to

understand these systems and to become connected to their own networks of power. I want them to be able to see their position within systems of oppression and privilege, and to have the skills they will need to change their positions for the better.

This is what I do: I take kids to the museum, I help them with their homework. In the process, I challenge my Achievers and their communities to learn more about themselves and others, to examine their relationships, and to constantly grow and climb with active and critical minds towards new heights.