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Youth Leadership Through Adventure: Alums' Perspectives on the Experience of Leadership

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YOUTH LEADERSHIP THROUGH ADVENTURE: ALUMS' PERSPECTIVES ON
THE EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

YOUTH LEADERSHIP THROUGH ADVENTURE: ALUMS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE
EXPERIENCE OF LEADERSHIP

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In this study, I examined the perspectives that emerging adult alums of a program called Youth
Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA) have of their adolescent experiences of being a leader.
Eight YLTA alums engaged in semi-structured interviews focusing on the research questions:
What are the lived experiences of leadership in emerging adult alums of YLTA? What factors of
their adolescent involvement were most influential in their emerging adult lives? As a youth
development program, YLTA is supported by Adapt and the North Country Health Consortium
(NCHC), two nonprofit organizations devoted to improving health conditions and habits of
individuals residing in the north country of New Hampshire. YLTA is implemented in middle
and high schools in this region. In this dissertation, I describe the components of and evidence
base for YLTA. I point to literature that highlights the importance of researching youth
development programs and adolescent and emerging adult experiences of leadership. Through
both a developmental perspective and the relational leadership model I offer a theoretical
framework through which to conceptualize and discuss the findings. I outline the method of
recruitment and procedure for the qualitative approach to data collection including an
explanation of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), and the analysis and interpretation
of results. Five clusters of themes surfaced through the analysis. The themes suggest that (a)
alums are committed to the program for various reasons, (b) alums gained a sense of self through
program participation, (c) YLTA supported multiple aspects of alums' development, (d) the

YLTA culture and community were significant factors in alums' experiences, and (e) three other aspects of YLTA programming (conferences, its emphasis on reflection, and its timing) were highly influential in alums' experiences. I discuss the implications of these findings for the YLTA program, limitations of the study, and potential areas for future research. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: youth leadership through adventure, adolescent leadership, relational leadership model, emerging adulthood, interpretive phenomenological analysis, program evaluation

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To my extremely patient and loving partner, Chris Lipfert, thank you for being with me on this journey every step of the way. Having you by my side has afforded me the strength and connection that I needed to get through this program. I am not sure that I would have been able to do it without your care, sense of humor, and constant reminders that breaks and time in nature are important and that life doesn't have to be too serious. I would also like to thank all of my

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I explored the experience of leadership in eight alums of a program being implemented in middle and high schools in the north country of New Hampshire, Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA). This phenomenological study identifies alums' perspectives of their life experiences and the experience of leadership post-adolescent YLTA participation. While minimal research currently exists regarding the influence of leadership experiences during adolescence on post-adolescent years, several studies have pointed to the important impact of leadership experiences in high school on leadership outcomes during college (Komives & Johnson, 2009). The current study aims to provide depth of understanding regarding the perspectives of leadership experiences of emerging adult YLTA alums. For the purpose of this study, the label *emerging adults* has been used to refer to individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. I use emerging adult instead of *young adult* because the term has been deemed the most appropriate for individuals of this age range who live in Westernized cultures (Arnett, 2000). Utilizing both a developmental perspective and the relational leadership model (RLM) as frameworks for conceptualizing the phenomenon of leadership, the project considered and highlighted themes of YLTA alums' emerging adult experiences.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Leadership Through Adventure

Adolescent Drug and Alcohol Prevention Tools, better known as *Adapt*, has been providing nonprofit services in collaboration with local organizations and agencies in New Hampshire's Grafton and Coos counties for over 20 years (Adapt NH, n.d.-a). The organization's primary goal is to offer healthy alternatives to substance use to the youth, aged 5 to 21, in the north country of New Hampshire. For the past 12 years, Adapt, has worked in partnership with the North Country Health Consortium (NCHC), a network created in the late 90s with the intention of improving the health conditions of northern New Hampshire through the facilitation of collaboration between health and human service providers in the area. From the beginning of their work together, Adapt and the NCHC have supported a unique program: Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA; Adapt NH, n.d.-b; NCHC, n.d.-a, 2014b).

YLTA is a student-led, adult-guided extracurricular program targeted at youth, aged 12 to 17. It maintains the primary goals of decreasing substance use among adolescents in the communities involved through prevention and awareness initiatives and improving the climate of participating schools (NCHC, n.d.-b, 2014b). Secondary goals of the program include fostering youth leadership in participating students and reducing the amount of stress and anxiety experienced by all students in participating schools (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). The program aims to accomplish such goals by empowering youth, offering fun alternative routes to "getting a high" from substances, creating a sense of belonging for participants, challenging the dominant norms of these north country communities, and teaching and fostering positive development, leadership, advocacy, and organizational skills, often through experiential outdoor and adventure activities (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; NCHC, n.d.-b; New

Hampshire Public Broadcasting Service [PBS], 2019). YLTA's mission statement highlights this intention: "to empower youth to lead and promote the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, reduce substance misuse, stress, and anxiety, and improve the overall school climate" (Adapt NH, 2020).

All youth who participate in YLTA must agree to commit to a substance free lifestyle, have leadership responsibilities, and engage meaningfully with their local school group (NCHC, 2014b; O'Brien, 2014). While leadership is a focus of every YLTA participant, a few students per high school YLTA group are also given the opportunity to become student facilitators (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). Student facilitators assume positional leadership roles for their school groups and work closely with other student facilitators from all participating schools in the area at regional group meetings to plan and, ultimately facilitate regional YLTA programming initiatives, such as the middle and high school conferences.

To date, YLTA is being implemented in 31 schools (11 high schools and 20 middle schools) in central and northern NH; Adapt CEO, Sean O'Brien, has plans to further disseminate the program (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). The accomplishments of YLTA were featured in NH PBS's *Roads to Recovery: Youth Leadership Through Adventure* (2019) video. In this documentary O'Brien stated that over 100 youth were actively participating in YLTA.

Origins of YLTA Philosophies

While YLTA does not purport itself to be an adventure therapy program, which incorporate the "prescriptive use of adventure experiences provided by mental health professionals" (Gass et al., 2020, p. 1), many of YLTA's guiding principles and philosophies align with those of the field. The origins of adventure therapy date back to the 1800s with the

onset of the "Camping Movement," which developed in attempts to provide structure for wealthy American adolescents during their summer vacations (White, 2011). The founders of these camps aimed to influence the behaviors of and build character in participating youth. These camps and the Manhattan State Hospital's employment of "tent treatment" for psychiatric patients with tuberculosis in 1901, which allowed patients time spent outdoors and proved to be highly beneficial for both their physical and mental health, sparked the development of schools, programs, and organizations intended for youth development through outdoor and adventure-based activities around the world (White, 2011) and appear to have inspired YLTA as well.

Of the most influential of these organizations on future American programs were the Boy Scouts of America and Outward Bound. Notably on Outward Bound, which was based primarily on the philosophies of the former, White (2011) wrote, "Although never explicitly stated as 'therapy' by Kurt Hahn [founder], Outward Bound appears to have been developed to be an 'antidote' to the 'social disease' of modern youth" (p. 43). White also highlighted that Hahn saw the value in providing service to others in getting adolescents involved in programming as it gave youth a sense of feeling needed. Outward Bound is credited with opening the public's eye to the concept that challenging adventures produce personal growth. From the Outward Bound movement developed Project Adventure, which oriented more toward getting "at-risk students" with fewer financial resources involved in therapeutic adventure programming (White, 2011). The connections between the foundations of the aforementioned programs and the guiding philosophies of YLTA are clear. Beyond these foundations, YLTA incorporates experiential education principles that are often incorporated into adventure therapy programs such as Kolb's

(1984) experiential learning cycle and the principle of challenge by choice (S. O'Brien, personal communication, December 24, 2021).

Components of YLTA

While YLTA facilitation is unique to each school group—there are only a few required activities and many optional ones—most successful school groups participate in and/or hold the majority of the possible activities involved in YLTA programming (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). YLTA has 10 general programming components. Following participation in each component, students are expected to take what they have learned, reflect upon its importance, and bring their newly gained perspectives and knowledge back, with positive intentions, into their own communities (Adapt NH, n.d.-b). Each component of YLTA programming is described in more detail below.

Required Activities

School Group Meetings. Weekly to bi-weekly meetings take place outside of normal school hours at the involved schools to provide time for students to work on the projects they plan to facilitate throughout the school year (O'Brien, 2014). These meetings typically last 30 to 60 minutes and are student-led and adult-guided. School group meetings also include support time for students to check in about their lives; YLTA adult advisors invite participants to talk openly about their feelings and concerns in the safe and accepting environment created by the group.

Service-Learning Projects. Participating YLTA school groups are expected to conduct at least one community-service project a school year (O'Brien, 2014). Service-learning projects are intended to provide education to YLTA students through experience, meaningful connection to one's community, personal responsibility, and civic engagement, while also requiring critical

thinking. YLTA school groups in the past have conducted service-learning projects like providing meals for local senior citizens, running a food drive to provide to local food pantries, volunteering to help at Special Olympic events, and providing painting, landscaping, and other beautification projects in and around town facilities (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014).

Environmental Prevention Projects. Each semester YLTA school groups are required to plan and execute projects that have a positive impact on their local (school and community) environment (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). Environmental prevention projects are often aimed at reducing adolescent substance misuse by attempting to decrease availability of and demand for substances, lower the number of opportunities youth have to use substances, and increase knowledge and awareness of the risks associated with using substances as an adolescent. Other foci of environmental prevention projects include promoting open and accepting attitudes and reducing bullying and other undesirable behavioral problems in schools. YLTA school groups work toward modifying their environments by reviewing and attempting to adapt school policies and running campaigns to raise awareness (i.e., placing mass numbers of stickers and flyers that include fast facts and relevant information around the school and community).

Optional Activities

Summer Leadership Academies. These summer programs offer students who are already involved in their school's YLTA group an opportunity to learn more about what it would take for them to become a student facilitator in the program (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). YLTA students from schools across the region, who have been nominated by their YLTA adult advisors, come together to learn about leadership and develop some of the basic skills needed for increased participation and leadership in the coming school year. Summer leadership academies occur just once a year and consist primarily of an

experiential four-day wilderness trip. On the trip, students are immersed into the adventure-based, open, and accepting culture of YLTA and start to form the bonds that they are expected to carry into their YLTA school groups. Students learn and develop competencies including effective leadership, teamwork, basic wilderness first aid, and outdoor skills (i.e., camping, navigation, cooking, hazard recognition, and survival techniques) throughout the trip (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). Students are also expected to gain a sense of accountability and insight into the responsibility they have to their groups, themselves, and their local communities.

       Regional Group Meetings. One to three members of each YLTA high school group across a district or region become student facilitators (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). At present, student facilitators are responsible for attending weekly, 90-minute regional group meetings that are facilitated by Adapt's CEO, Sean O'Brien. At these meetings, student facilitators receive additional training on effective communication, facilitation, and leadership skills and discuss and provide updates regarding the climate and project productivity of their YLTA school groups, schools, and communities. Much of the planning for annual conferences and other large regional initiatives takes place during these meetings (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). YLTA school groups' participation in these meetings seems to be crucial for YLTA programming success at the school-level (Lin-Wood YLTA School Group, personal communication, May 27, 2020; S. O'Brien, personal communication, June 23, 2020).

       Annual Conferences. Two annual conferences, one for high schoolers and one for middle schoolers, are put on by Adapt staff and student facilitators each August and September, respectively (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). The conferences take place

over two days, typically a weekend, and incorporate various activities including presentations from students and paid speakers, workshops, experiential adventure activities, a talent show, and a closing campfire (O'Brien, 2014). Annual conferences are completely planned, organized, and facilitated by the student facilitators with only guidance from Adapt staff (Adapt NH, n.d.-b). The content of conferences always emphasizes the importance of leading a "chem-free lifestyle" as well as the influence of positive leadership. Conferences prioritize the development of participants' skills in public speaking, relationship building, leadership, self-awareness, and coping (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). Additionally, the conferences initiate planning for the school climate projects that YLTA school groups often intend to complete during each year. YLTA participants, advisors, and school administrators regard these annual conferences as widely inspirational and transformative (Tremblay et al., 2018).

Kids in Prevention Retreats. Overnight trips for young students about to enter middle school (fifth and sixth graders) take place once every two years with the intention of establishing mentorships and increasing students' coping and social skills (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). Kids in Prevention (KIP) retreats are run by student facilitators and middle school YLTA participants looking to step into leadership roles that are from the same school district as participating fifth and sixth graders. Prior to taking on a mentorship role in the KIP retreats, the student facilitators and middle school student leaders are required to complete a six-hour training in topics that will be covered at the retreat. KIP retreats focus on teaching the dangers of substance misuse, encouraging involvement in pro-social activities, and enhancing decision-making and coping skills through experiential- and outdoor-based activities (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). KIP retreats maintain YLTA's intention of preventing substance use through age-appropriate interventions and education. The retreats further work to develop

leadership, interpersonal communication, mediation, public speaking, and conflict resolution skills. Throughout these activities, student facilitators and Adapt staff strive to provide youth with a connection to the YLTA community and to nature.

School Climate Projects. School climate projects are typically a fruitful YLTA activity, despite their being optional (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). A school climate project is a semester-long campaign, consisting of an all-day "kick-off" event led by student facilitators, and follow-up advocacy and reporting on findings. When a YLTA school group intends to complete a school climate project, student facilitators must attend three trainings, coordinated by Adapt's CEO, with a specific focus on preparing for the event (O'Brien, 2014). The kick-off event occurs at the beginning of the semester and involves the entire student body and members of the school staff and administration coming together to discuss, in small groups led by YLTA student facilitators, the areas in which the school's climate and substance use could be improved with an eye toward finding new ways to create positive change (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). Following the all-day event, YLTA student facilitators discuss their classmates' comments and concerns during their subsequent school group meetings. Toward the end of the semester, YLTA students produce feedback written as a formal report for their school's administration. The school's administration can then use that feedback to inform their decision-making processes for the next school year.

Chem-Free Events. YLTA school groups are strongly encouraged to plan and facilitate at least one substance-free event throughout the school year (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020). Chem-free events are created as opportunities for students with similar values and commitments to come together and engage in healthy and fun substance-use-alternative activities (Adapt NH, n.d.-b; O'Brien, 2014). Previous chem-free

events have included school dances, open gymnasiums, parties following prom and graduation, and outdoor activities such as snowshoeing and hiking.

Celebration Events. At the end of the school year, and other times whenever appropriate, YLTA school groups are encouraged to hold celebration events to reflect upon and admire their individual and collective accomplishments (O'Brien, 2014). When held, these events are conducted by student facilitators and Adapt staff and, at times, attended by other school staff, school administrators, YLTA family members, and additional community members. These celebrations are intended to be fun and to honor YLTA members' successes.

Established Outcomes of YLTA

Internal Evaluation

Since becoming involved with the program, the North Country Health Consortium (NCHC) has continuously been conducting internal evaluation of YLTA programming and, in the spring of 2015, YLTA was endorsed as a Promising Practice by the New Hampshire Center for Excellence (NCHC, 2014b, 2017). The NCHC's (2014a) *Youth Leadership Through Adventure: Pilot Evaluation Results* provides initial data regarding the outcomes of YLTA programming. The report describes results from pre- and post-event surveys administered to YLTA student participants, which revealed that YLTA-involved youth gain skills and a sense of empowerment regarding their abilities to decrease their own and other's substance use through working to modify relevant policy in their schools, implementing environmental campaigning strategies, and mentoring younger students (NCHC, 2014a).

YLTA Addresses Components of Positive Youth Development. Positive youth development (PYD) is a framework for prevention programming that aims to foster positive behaviors in youth before problems occur (Catalano, 2004). PYD programs emphasize the

influence of environments and social factors on youth development and work toward attaining success in at least one of these 15 constructs: (a) promoting bonding; (b) fostering resilience; (c) promoting social competence; (d) promoting emotional competence; (e) promoting cognitive competence; (f) promoting behavioral competence; (g) promoting moral competence; (h) fostering self-determination; (i) fostering spirituality; (j) fostering self-efficacy; (k) fostering clear and positive identity; (l) fostering belief in the future; (m) providing recognition for positive behavior; (n) providing opportunities for prosocial involvement; and (o) fostering prosocial norms. These constructs have been thought of as objectives for PYD programs; research supports a variety of positive behavior outcomes and effects in the form of problem behavior prevention resulting from PYD initiatives (Catalano et al., 2004). Most notably, evidence suggests that PYD programming is associated with lower levels of alcohol and drug use, smoking, aggressive and violent behaviors, high-risk sexual behaviors, truancy, and misbehavior in school among participating youth.

O'Brien (2014), in his PowerPoint presentation of YLTA components, highlights the prominent PYD constructs in each major YLTA activity. Four of the 15 constructs—promotes bonding, promotes social competence, promotes behavioral competence, and provides opportunities for prosocial involvement—are present in every YLTA activity. The 2014 pilot evaluation provided evidence for these claims. The pre- post-survey study found increases between the 2012–13 and 2013–14 school years in bonding, student resilience, social competence (as seen in leadership and facilitation skills), self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, belief in the future, recognition of positive behaviors, opportunities for prosocial involvement, prosocial norms, and cognitive, behavioral, and moral competencies (NCHC, 2014a). While YLTA was not originally founded as a PYD program, it highly aligns with

the model (S. O'Brien, personal communication, March 11, 2020).

Supplemental Evaluation

After receiving feedback from their application to the Center for Excellence to become a

Promising Practice, Adapt and the NCHC contracted evaluators at the Behavioral Health

Improvement Institute (BHII), formerly known as the Center for Behavioral Health Innovation,

for supplemental evaluation (G. Tremblay, personal communication, May 8, 2020). BHII works

with organizations, systems, and partners in the community to evaluate and ultimately improve

behavioral health practices and outcomes across the state.

BHII's first supplemental evaluation with YLTA took place during the 2017–18

academic year and focused on highlighting additional positive impacts of YLTA, going beyond

the program's primary priorities of reducing adolescent substance use and improving school

climate (Tremblay et al., 2018). With the goal of capturing the "essential nature" of YLTA

programming, this evaluation integrated information from direct observation of YLTA activities

and events (i.e., a summer leadership academy, an adult advisor training, a regional group

meeting, and both the middle and high school 2017–18 school year annual conferences) and data

collection from YLTA participants and student facilitators at an annual conference. The study

also substantiated the findings from data collected at conferences through interviews of YLTA

school principals, YLTA alums, and YLTA adult advisors.

The data collected from YLTA students at the annual conferences were particularly

interesting and revealed seven clusters of outcomes. Researchers found that YLTA: (a) builds

skills and challenges youth; (b) builds a sense of community; (c) impacts the

environment/culture of schools and communities; (d) impacts schools; (e) provides opportunities;

(f) improves participants' interpersonal skills; and (g) improves participants' decision-making skills (Tremblay et al., 2018). Many of these outcomes were also endorsed in the substantive interviews. Beyond findings about the impact of YLTA on the involved students, Tremblay et al. (2018) highlight five major takeaway themes from the integrated supplemental evaluation: (a) The essence of YLTA begins with openness to experience and acceptance of others; (b) Experiential activities convey implicit and explicit skills (in small doses); (c) A steady diet of empowerment: practice, practice, practice; (d) YLTA conferences are galvanizing experiences; and (e) The power of YLTA to inspire north country youth is profound.

The Developmental Periods in Focus

Given this study's purpose of exploring emerging adult YLTA alums' lived experiences of leadership and that YLTA's target age group is adolescents, aged 12–17, a developmental perspective and explanation is warranted. Building off of Erik Erikson's (1950) lifespan theory of development, Arnett (2000) has identified a distinct period of life, for the majority of individuals socialized within industrialized countries, occurring between Erikson's adolescence (identity vs. role confusion) and young adult (intimacy vs. isolation) life phases. To fully understand the importance of these periods of life, the developmental tasks and characteristics of Erikson's (1950) adolescence and young adulthood and Arnett's (2000) more recently identified emerging adulthood are explained below.

Adolescence

Erikson (1950) explained: "With the establishment of a good initial relationship to the world of skills and tools, and with the advent of puberty, childhood proper comes to an end" (p. 261), and adolescence begins. Generally speaking, new life stages of Erikson's lifespan theory of development begin when the conflictual task of the prior life stage has been accomplished; life

stage transitions rarely align with one specific age. However, Arnett (2000) added that the confines of the adolescent stage of life are relatively clear. Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty, around the age of 10, and ends at the age of 18, with the social and legal transition associated with being the age of majority and the termination of secondary education.

According to Erikson (1950), the adolescent period of life is one centered around the conflict of identity versus role confusion, with the *basic virtues* of devotion and fidelity. During this stage of development, an individual experiences rapid physical and physiological changes, which often leads them to question, and subsequently explore, much of what they formerly believed to be true regarding their identities, values, and perceptions of the world. As these transitions occur, the influencing factors on the adolescent's self-concept and self-esteem shift as well. Erikson (1968) highlighted the increasing importance of other's perspectives, particularly peers' instead of parent's, during this phase; he stated that the adolescent is "preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are" (p. 128). These internal and external influences become integrated into one's self-concept and put the adolescent's *authentic identity* at risk (Erikson, 1950). It has traditionally been thought that the adolescent is tasked with clarifying their sense to identity during this time, and, while this is still commonly thought to be true, there is now wide understanding that the process of exploring one's identities begins with adolescence but is rarely completed by the end of this life stage (Arnett, 2000).

Emerging Adulthood

Erikson's and Arnett's perspectives diverge at the life stage following adolescence (Arnett, 2000). Erikson (1950) theorized that as one shifted out of adolescence, they entered adulthood, particularly young adulthood. Arnett (2000), on the other hand, called attention to the

clear differences between individuals from the ages of 18 to 29 and individuals who are either younger or older (adolescents and those in their 30s) and highlighted the necessity of having a novel way to conceptualize that stage of life, which he termed *emerging adulthood*.

While Erikson had no formal theory for emerging adulthood, Arnett (2000) likens the phase of life to Erikson's description of the extended period of adolescence afforded to privileged young people of Westernized cultures. Erikson (1950) described this extended period of adolescence as the *psychosocial moratorium*, which allowed young people to more freely experiment with their roles in society. Arnett's (2000) theory of emerging adulthood expands the notion of the psychosocial moratorium (preserving the cultural caveat) and makes the phenomenon a distinct phase of development.

The necessity of this distinction was the result of several historical changes that occurred in industrialized cultures over the course of the 50 years between Arnett and Erikson's initial works. The three primary shifts that acted as catalysts for societal change were (a) the increased need for continued schooling (beyond secondary education) due to the rise of the knowledge-driven economy, (b) the significant rise in opportunities allotted to women in education and occupation, and (c) the increase in permissive attitudes toward premarital sex, all of which led to individuals of this age range putting off marriage and childbearing longer than ever before in American history (Tanner & Arnett, 2009). Such societal shifts "made the late teens and early twenties not simply a brief transition into adult roles" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469) but, instead, a period full of transient explorations.

However, Arnett (2000) grounds his explanation of this stage in the fact that whether or not, and how much, a person gets the privilege to experience emerging adulthood is culturally dependent. He explains that marginalized populations (particularly those who experience

oppression based on race/ethnicity and social class), as well as individuals living in rural communities, are less likely to experience emerging adulthood than are non-marginalized and urban-residing individuals, even if residing in an industrialized country (Arnett, 2000). This is a result of systemic oppression and the fewer opportunities regularly presented to marginalized and other under-resourced communities in general.

When it is afforded, emerging adulthood, occurring from the late teens through the twenties, with a primary focus on years 18 to 25, is a period of development characterized by transition (Arnett, 2000). Appropriately termed, *emerging* (an active word), accounts for the "dynamic, changeable, fluid quality of the period" (Arnett, 2000, p. 477). This period of low responsibility and high freedom allows individuals to better understand who they are, which is the primary task of the developmental phase, with a particular focus on their options for work/career, love/romance, and worldviews. Arnett highlights five salient features of emerging adulthood; it is a period of (a) instability and (b) possibility, where one (c) feels "in-between," and is (d) self-focused, which (e) allows for more complete identity exploration (Tanner & Arnett, 2009). Because of these characteristics and the increased prevalence of risk-taking behaviors, due to such freedom and limited responsibility, progress in emerging adulthood is non-linear and interdependent (Arnett, 2000; Tanner & Arnett, 2009). It is the only stage of life where there are no normative demographics.

Young Adulthood

Arnett posits, then, that young adulthood begins non-definitively in one's late twenties or early thirties and is less determined by age than it is by subjective experiences of "individualistic qualities of character" (Arnett, 2000, pp. 472–473), such as one's situation in various life factors, perception of self-sufficiency, and acceptance of decisional, financial, and life responsibilities.

Arnett found that a person's residential stability as well as their student, professional, marital, and parental statuses all influence perceptions of one's transition into young adulthood from emerging adulthood. For the majority of people in Westernized societies, adulthood is marked only upon finishing school and establishing an occupation, becoming married or being in a long-term partnership, and/or becoming a parent (Arnett, 2000).

From Erikson's (1950) perspective, an individual shifts into young adulthood when one, "emerging from the search for and insistence on identity [the focus of adolescence], is eager and willing to fuse his identity with that of others" (p. 263). Erikson's young adulthood is a period of life focused on the conflict of intimacy versus isolation, with the basic virtues of affiliation and love. During this stage of development, Erikson believed, one's newly established identity, vulnerable in its novelty and uncertainty, seeks to be validated in intimacy with another. One's readiness for intimacy was equated with their ability to firmly commit to others, ethically endure commitments made, and accept the potential consequences of such commitments (Erikson, 1950). The failure to commit to intimacy and move closer to others, often due to fear of losing one's self to the self of another or the collective self of the pair, would result in isolation, which was thought to be the risk of this stage of life. For the purposes of this dissertation, an integrated understanding of Erikson's and Arnett's developmental theories, incorporating Erikson's adolescence, Arnett's emerging adulthood, and Erikson's young adulthood (through Arnett's lens of it occurring after emerging adulthood in industrialized cultures) is used.

A Relational Approach for Understanding YLTA Alums' Perspectives

To examine the meaning that YLTA alums make of their experiences of having been leaders in the program and further develop YLTA's research base, I have selected a guiding leadership framework. For this project, I selected the relational leadership model (RLM;

Komives et al., 2013) to frame my understanding and conceptualization of research questions and findings. While I considered using the more-widely researched positive youth development (PYD) model as the guiding framework, I determined that it did not fit sufficiently with the aims of this project for several reasons. First, the constructs within the model that align with the phenomenon of leadership (i.e., bonding, self-efficacy, self-determination, positive identity, prosocial involvement, and social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence) do not explain all the components of leadership or the complexity of relational experiences of youth leaders. Second, while O'Brien has highlighted the ways in which YLTA programming aligns with the PYD programming, the model does not ever explicitly address leadership. Third, PYD is not a model of adolescent- or emerging adult-leadership.

Given my primary focus on YLTA alums' lived experiences of the phenomenon of leadership, a model that is based in leadership theory and foundations and targets an emerging adult audience (college students; Komives et al., 2013) is better suited. The RLM fits that demand while also speaking to many of the YLTA principles and foci and attending to process, a major focus in phenomenological research (Smith et al., 2009). While any of the other contemporary leadership models might have also fit as a framework, I chose the RLM based on the attention it gives to its five primary elements, the developmental period in which it focuses, its integrity, and the fact that it authentically aligns with my own personal values and preferences.

The Relational Leadership Model

The RLM, developed in 1998 by Susan Komives, Nance Lucas, and Timothy McMahon, stemmed from earlier contemporary approaches to and understandings of leadership (Komives & Johnson, 2009). In their book, *Exploring Leadership*, Komives et al. (2013) explain the

progression of leadership theories from their origin, dating back to the early 1900s, emphasizing the prominent theories and approaches from which the RLM arose, such as reciprocal leadership approaches and the authentic leadership model. Primary tenets taken from such approaches view leadership as an inherently relational process in which leaders and followers share the responsibility for ethical social change (the ultimate goal of leadership), the followers' importance is also emphasized, and leaders lead with authenticity, thereby attending to their own values and morals and gaining the trust and respect of their followers. From this broader relational understanding, the concepts of leader and follower have been reconceptualized and leadership redefined.

The RLM defines leadership as "a relational and ethical process of people together attempting to accomplish positive change" (Komives et al., 2013, p. 14). Leaders emerge in a group when they collaboratively engage in action toward a common goal. Positive change is any altering action that is oriented toward improving circumstances and away from deliberate causation of harm. While this is the primary conceptualization of leaders in the model, the developers acknowledge that leaders are also individuals in positions to which they were appointed, elected, or hired who typically have ultimate responsibility and some level of power and influence in the group. The authors' reconstruction of what it means to be a follower is foundational to the understanding of leadership within the RLM. Komives et al. (2013) have chosen to move entirely away from using the term when discussing the reciprocal and relational dynamics and parts of leadership; instead, the term *participant* is used. Participants are expected to engage in the collective action of a group and hold the responsibility of bringing unique and important perspectives. Through the complex, "transformative" process of leadership, participants rise "to levels at which they can become effective leaders" (Komives et al., 2013, p.

93; Komives & Johnson, 2009). For the purposes of this dissertation, these definitions and understandings of positive change, leaders, followers/participants, and leadership are used.

Last, it is important to explore the model's guiding principles regarding leadership before further exploring the components of the RLM. From this view, leadership is considered the shared responsibility of everyone; given that each individual is a member of a community, each person must do their part (Komives et al., 2013). The concept is also ever-changing and therefore, the process of leadership must remain flexible and does not occur in one "right way."

In this frame, too, leaders are "not born," they develop within influential environments and relationships, often beginning with increased self-awareness and the identification of their own strengths and core values. Leadership skills and qualities can also be taught; the process requires reflection and that one be open to learning (both cognitively and experientially). Also, leaders who are capable of inciting positive change and a sense of communal responsibility in others are themselves committed to ethical and moral movements (Komives et al., 2013). These foundational assumptions of leadership set the stage for the RLM. Komives et al. (2013) state that relational leadership is most easily thought of as a practiced philosophy. In order to be effective, relational leaders must develop their own leadership philosophies that include a central focus on relationships, a level of responsiveness, and the five elements of the RLM.

The Five Elements of the RLM

Komives et al. (2013) state that the RLM "approach to leadership is purposeful and builds commitment toward positive purposes that are inclusive of people and diverse points of view, empowers those involved, is ethical, and recognizes that all four of these elements are accomplished by being process-oriented" (p. 95). These five elements are foundational to the leadership process. When they are a part of one's leadership philosophy and approach to

relationships, they direct one's actions as well as the expectations one has for others in their groups, communities, and the world. Each element is described in more detail below.

Purposeful. Purpose is central to the model as it has a seminal impact on the other factors (Komives et al., 2013). When developing a group's purpose, each member's individual vision is heard and taken into consideration. Once established, each group member should have the ability to vocalize the collective purpose and use it to fuel their motivation for working to achieve the common goal. It is essential to the process of relational leadership that the group's purpose is a shared collective vision for positive change (Komives et al., 2013; Komives & Johnson, 2009). Individuals' and groups' aligned visions create the committed action that comes from having purpose and dedication to social responsibility. Purpose and vision are usually at the heart of an organization's mission statement.

Inclusive. Relational leadership aspires to incorporate multiple individual perspectives and visions. Inclusive leadership takes into account a variety of different voices, actively commits to attaining diverse individuals (i.e., persons from various racial, gender, cultural, age groups, etc.), approaches, and perspectives in the group. Inclusive leadership also values equity, maintains respect for difference, and works to build upon the strengths of others (Komives et al., 2013). An attitude of openness, acceptance, and belief in everyone's capacity to have influence is crucial; participants, whether new or experienced in a group, should feel as though they matter to the endeavor and to others. Inclusive groups gain and preserve quality over time due to the positive systemic cycle and improved communication they engender. Finally, inclusivity also values incorporating the perspectives, opinions, and voices of those external to the group such as stakeholders and shareholders (Komives et al., 2013; Komives & Johnson, 2009).

Empowering. In order to feel empowered and to empower others, leaders must understand where power comes from, power dynamics, and their own and other's ability to manipulate, share, and gain power (Komives et al., 2013). According to the RLM, there are two prominent facets of empowerment, (a) an individual's ownership of and expectations for power and place in relationships and (b) the space or environment that a group creates, ideally providing the safety required for individual and collective empowerment. Individual empowerment often arises out of the capacity of positional leaders and group founders taking responsibility for creating the environment in which leadership occurs. Effective positional leaders have a healthy sense of their own power and its accompanying responsibility; they are skilled at sharing it. As a result, group participants are led to "lead themselves," gain a sense of mattering to the group, experience their talents and capacities for creating momentum toward the shared purpose, and are more likely to move into leadership roles through such "just empowerment" (Komives et al., 2013, Komives & Johnson, 2009).

Self-empowerment thus occurs both simultaneously and as a result of the empowering environment. Participants recognize that they "have a legitimate right to be heard and the self-confidence to be part of a solution or the change process" (Komives et al., 2013, p. 120). With that confidence and the safety of the inclusive, collaborative, and encouraging group, participants feel comfortable enough to take the risk to learn, lead, share resources, plan and structure events, begin mentoring others, and eventually become empowered.

Ethical. The RLM highlights the importance of being ethical, honest, authentic, and committed to one's own morals and values as a leader (Komives et al., 2013). The model proposes that moral principles guide individuals' decision-making processes and actions. Additionally, the developers profess that leadership is not present when negative or bad ends are

the shared goal; as such, leadership must be values-driven and have a moral, integral base. In *Exploring Leadership,* Komives et al. (2013) state that the world needs courageous leaders that are consistently ethical in what they say and do. However, the authors also acknowledge that it can be a challenge to stand up for what one believes to be "right," particularly when it is the unpopular opinion or goes against the cultural norm. Overall, within the RLM, effective relational leaders lead by example and gain the trust of both internal and external group members by remaining authentic and reliable, portraying congruency between actions and values, and keeping honesty and ethics central in their leadership philosophy.

Process-Oriented. In the RLM, how leadership and action toward the shared purpose are conducted and accomplished matters just as much as the outcome (Komives et al., 2013). Leaders and groups that are process-oriented engage in several essential activities. They foster collaboration, partake in meaningful reflection, remain mindful in their meaning-making process, work to build up communities, and attend to civil duties. Collaboration is facilitated by group members' willingness to be cooperative and awareness of others' needs and what they themselves have to offer. Unhelpful experiences of competition are decreased when group members pay attention to process and work to get to know one another. By taking a step back, pausing, and reflecting on important questions about group dynamics, decision-making processes, approaches to tasks, member recruitment, and normative practices, groups process their process, consider how they come together as a group, learn, and remain open to feedback and flexible toward needed transitions (Komives et al., 2013; Komives & Johnson, 2009).

This attention to group process creates energy and collaboration in the group and trust in the whole endeavor. Time for reflection allows leaders to take in and bring out both cognitive and emotional information, gain understanding and wisdom, and translate it into ideas and

action; in other words, it allows meaning-making to occur. Meaning-making is an indispensable process of leadership that allows both leaders and participants to feel a sense of mattering (personally and to the group), recognize that what they do has purpose, and have fulfilling experiences (Komives et al., 2013). Additionally, meaning-making supports the process of framing and reframing problems, further enabling the inclusivity, civility, productivity, and vitality of the group.

Knowledge Gap

This study aimed to gain an understanding of the perspectives that emerging adult YLTA alums have looking back on their adolescent experiences of being program leaders. While leadership, as a socially constructed phenomenon, has been studied for more than a century, the existing literature on the topic is overwhelmingly focused on adult populations (Komives et al., 2013; Libby et al., 2006). Similarly, there are models and theories of leadership that focus on how leadership develops over the lifespan, but these too attend less specifically to leadership development during adolescence and emerging adulthood. In addition to the limited research on adolescent and emerging adult leadership development, there is scant information explicitly addressing the importance and impact of leadership experiences during adolescence on post-adolescent years (Komives & Johnson, 2009). Qualitative research exploring the perspectives that emerging adults have of their adolescent leadership experience is particularly sparse.

Notably, the extant literature points consistently to the positive short- and long-term outcomes of leadership experiences during adolescence. For example, using quantitative survey data, Eccles et al. (2003) explored the outcomes of extracurricular activity participation during adolescence and emerging adulthood with a particular focus on the impacts on academic

performance and problem behaviors. The study revealed that most extracurricular youth development programs produce positive academic and educational outcomes (i.e., increased school attendance, grade point averages, and likelihood of attending and graduating from college). Interestingly, the study points to the specific positive effects of service-learning and pro-social youth programming initiatives. In addition to the impact on academic success, these activities were found to decrease rates of adolescent drug and alcohol use and increase self-esteem and prolonged civic engagement among both participating students and alums of programs. Service-learning activities were also found to be influential in alums' abilities to attain higher quality jobs and have more favorable mental health conditions throughout emerging and young adulthood (Eccles et al., 2003). These finding are particularly salient to the required service-learning projects and frequent opportunities for pro-social engagement involved in YLTA programming. Gaining understanding regarding YLTA alums' perspectives of leadership post-participation, provides insight and depth to the understanding of YLTA as a youth leadership program.

There has also been some preliminary research conducted on the YLTA program itself. Previous studies conducted through the NCHC and BHII have uncovered various short-term outcomes of YLTA and detailed some of the experiences of individuals who were involved in the moment (i.e., current students and staff of the program and participating schools). However, there have been no studies to date exploring the perspectives of YLTA alums and their reflections regarding their own past experiences. As Adapt continues to grow and expand the YLTA program, Adapt staff remain interested in building their evidence base. Prior studies have confirmed the value of YLTA in supporting openness to experience and acceptance of others, developing self-knowledge and interpersonal skills, providing experiential opportunities for the

practice of leadership skills, and inspiring youth from diverse rural backgrounds to embrace and enact self-determination (Tremblay et al., 2018). The current study builds off of these findings by providing depth in the understanding of lived experiences of leadership post participation in YLTA programming through the perspectives of its alums.

Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to better understand YLTA alums' perspectives on their lived experience of leadership following participation in the program. Given this area of interest, the knowledge gap, and a foundation in the principles of the RLM, the following two broad research questions were addressed through interviews with YLTA alums:

1. From the perspective of emerging adult YLTA alums, what are the lived experiences of leadership at least two years post program participation?

2. According to YLTA alums, what aspects of their adolescent YLTA leadership experiences have influenced their emerging adult lives? How so or why?

CHAPTER III: METHOD

The current study employed the qualitative, phenomenological methodology of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) in order to gain insight into the lived experiences of leadership among Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA) alums. This section delineates the process I followed in order to conduct my research, including background information about IPA, why IPA was a suitable approach for this project, and a description of my own perspectives and the potential influences of my multiple roles. Additionally, I outline the procedures for data collection and analysis and describe how I attended to ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness.

Qualitative Methodology

As a qualitative approach, the principles of phenomenological research predominantly align with the views of constructivist theory; reality and ultimate truths are thought of as being unique to each individual, therefore allowing for multiple realities to coexist (Mertens, 2015). The idea of an individualized sense of reality and one's subsequent ability to make their own sense of the world and experiences is distinctly central to phenomenological research. As the primary theory upon which IPA was developed, phenomenology steers the focus of IPA research toward human experience and the idiosyncratic meaning people make of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). IPA maintains a primary focus on the subjective experiences and perspectives of human life, particularly regarding those experiences that matter most and that are deeply meaningful to the individuals.

Phenomenology takes into consideration the interconnected nature of human experience and leads IPA to its goal of understanding experience in both empathic and questioning, systematic ways without preconceived notions or exploration in search of particular findings

(Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). As such, IPA is inductive and IPA researchers make genuine attempts to discover the phenomenon for what it is, not for what they or others expect, think, or have found it to be in the past. This requires researchers to engage in constant self-reflection, bias and assumption monitoring, and intentional temporary separating from these and other existing notions and concerns, a process known as *bracketing*, for the duration of the research project (Mertens, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing, among other processes, allows for "phenomena to speak for themselves" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 8), the data to be rich and expansive, and the research findings to include accurate representations of the participants' lived experiences and perspectives.

In addition to phenomenology, the theoretical underpinnings of IPA also include hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Without hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, IPA could not come to an understanding of phenomena and vice versa. As Smith et al. (2009) describe it:

> [IPA] is phenomenological in attempting to get as close as possible to the personal experience of the participant, but recognizes that this inevitably becomes an interpretive endeavor for both participant and researcher. Without the phenomenology, there would be nothing to interpret; without the hermeneutics, the phenomenon would not be seen. (p. 37)

This articulation also speaks to one aspect of the hermeneutic dynamics involved in IPA, the *double hermeneutic*. IPA researchers become engaged in a double hermeneutic during the research process as they attempt to interpret the participant's experience, while the participant is simultaneously also engaging in a process of making sense of their own experience. This dynamic is a sort of second-order sense-making process; the information for the researcher to

interpret is limited to that which the participant has shared and that which the researcher is attending to. The researcher then has to work toward their own sense-making of the recollection, and, while they do this from a degree removed and through a highly self-aware and systematic process, they are still only a single human being, just like the participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009).

The other dynamic of hermeneutics in the IPA process is the *hermeneutic circle*. The hermeneutic circle involves the researcher's integrated, vacillating attention to both the individual parts and the whole of the parts encompassed in the study. These dynamics allow for IPA studies' results to include the participants' and the researcher's interpretations, as well as rich details about the experiences of individuals in the study and patterns arising from the entire sample.

Last, IPA is committed to the principles of idiography, which is primarily concerned with the individual and understanding the individual's experiences and the processes of such experiences in depth (Smith et al., 2009). While the outcomes of IPA research tend to be individual accounts and nuanced details regarding particular experiences, broader claims can be made across a group and when tied to relevant literature. In understanding phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, the process and reliability of IPA research becomes clear.

Rationale for Research Methodology

The purpose of this study informed my decision to take a qualitative and phenomenological approach for the research process. As previously described, IPA's inductive procedures allowed for a greater wealth of knowledge and evidence to arise for the understanding of YLTA and its alums' meaning-making of leadership experiences. There is evidence for the quality and benefits of research that can result from a qualitative study,

particularly for specific programs in need of a larger and more expansive evidence base (Mertens, 2015). Given the limited exploration of the experiences of the YLTA program's alums, a nuanced phenomenological study is warranted.

Additionally, several aspects of IPA nicely parallel some key tenets of the relational leadership model (RLM). Since the RLM is being used as a theoretical guide to orienting and understanding my research, it is advantageous to take an approach to the collection and analysis of data that is congruent. The ways in which the RLM aligns with the principles of IPA include an acknowledgment of the importance of philosophy and relationships, a commitment to inclusivity and ethics, and an emphasis on the process. Also, IPA tends to be highly responsive, flexible, and inclusive of difference and open to taking in the diverse perspectives of others as well as intentional about seeing both the part and the whole (Mertens, 2015; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The relationships between the researcher and participants and within the data are prioritized, the process is highly focused on reflection and meaning-making, the prominent role of philosophy in personal experience is highlighted, and the research process is emphasized as being just as important as the outcomes.

Research Setting and Researcher's Perspectives, Assumptions, and Multiple Roles

Given the double hermeneutic at play in IPA research, the factors that might influence the researcher's sense-making processes are important to consider (Smith et al., 2009). While consideration of such assumptions, prior perspectives, and potential biases is unlikely to make the researcher a complete blank slate for the interpretation of other's perspectives and the process is still likely to be viewed through the associated filters, an intentionally self-reflective process allows for greater clarity, awareness, and evaluation of assumptions (Mertens 2015; Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, the researcher endeavors to bracket out and monitor their assumptions, biases,

perspectives, and other potential influences throughout the research process, from its inception. In this section I make note of the preconceived notions, assumptions, and concerns I entered this study with as well as the multiple roles within which I was involved in this project. In subsequent sections of this chapter, I describe how I further monitored and bracketed my own reactions throughout the study.

While I am not a YLTA alum, I have had prior engagement with the program and with Adapt staff. During my previous four years of graduate school, I was an employee of BHII. Beginning in my first year working with BHII, I participated in data collection and analysis, report writing, and drafting of project materials for earlier YLTA supplemental evaluations. As such, I entered into this research project with some history of prior interactions with YLTA and the Adapt organization; I was already knowledgeable about the program and its mission.

This dissertation was also a part of a larger mixed methods supplemental evaluation that I developed and conducted with the support of my direct supervisor at BHII, George Tremblay, PhD. BHII contracted with Adapt to provide the supplemental evaluation for the 2020–21 school year. The intent of this entire endeavor was to further the evidence base for YLTA programming in order to work toward their recognition as an evidence-based program. I was significantly involved in overseeing all parts of the evaluation, which, along with my project, included piloting a recently developed YLTA implementation guide in a new school and assessing aspects of school climate (student morale and mental health) in the newly implementing school.

My own personal interests and values may have also had an influence on this research project from inception through the interviewing process and data analysis. There is a strong through-line between my personal and clinical values and my vision for this dissertation.

I chose the RLM as a conceptual framework to guide the development of this study and understand the results because it aligned so closely with my experience and worldview. Likewise, the approach I take toward my clinical work as a therapist is strongly based in relational cultural theory, which maintains the importance of relationships and particular aspects of them, such as mutual empowerment, authenticity, integrity, and connection. My values and perspectives naturally overlap with many of the principles that guide both the RLM and the IPA approach to research.

Indeed, my values, interests, and life experiences highly influence the way I view the world and make sense of the information, circumstances, and new experiences I encounter in life. Notably, my perception regarding the influences of the YLTA program on alums' lived experiences of leadership is likely to have been impacted by my own transformative leadership experiences. I also identify strongly as an avid outdoorsperson and lover of adventure and experiential education. The mission, values, and purpose of both YLTA and the RLM easily fit into the worldview and the perspectives I already hold. Last, I myself am developmentally somewhere between emerging and young adulthood, which is similar to the YLTA alums whom participated in this study. Given these shared values and my own leadership and adventure experiences, I believed that alums would be likely to have positive associations between YLTA participation and their current experiences. To avoid unsupported confirmation of my preconceived notions, I worked diligently throughout the research process to monitor and bracket these and other previously unforeseen assumptions.

Participants

In order to understand the sense that YLTA alums make of their leadership experiences after they have moved on from engaging in the program, study participants were recruited from

the population of alums who were at least two years beyond their experience in YLTA. This kind of purposive sampling is consistent with most IPA studies, given that the particular focus of IPA is on a certain phenomenon using a relatively homogeneous and small sample (Smith et al., 2009). Consistent with IPA guidelines, I determined that I needed a sample of 5–10 alums for this research project.

To recruit my sample, Adapt CEO, Sean O'Brien, identified and established first contact with a pool of program alums whom he expected would be willing and able to participate. O'Brien nominated 13 individuals who met my inclusion criteria. Nine out of these 13 nominated and contacted individuals consented to participate in the study. One of the nine consenting individuals was unable to attend their scheduled interview and/or reschedule for another time during the timeframe for data collection (limited by the study's inclusion in the larger BHII project) and, as a result, was unable to participate.

Thus, a total of eight YLTA alums participated in the study. Due to this recruitment strategy and the purposive sampling, the participants were a particular group of alums for whom YLTA participation has been enduring and positive. Additionally, each alum had been a student facilitator during their time in the program. Notably, too, these participants are part of the larger subgroup of alums that are still in communication with O'Brien and/or continuously involved with the YLTA program.

Procedures

To initiate data collection, I sent an email to O'Brien, describing the project and asking for a list of up to 10 YLTA alums who were at least two years post program participation and would potentially be able and willing to participate in the study (see Recruitment Email to Adapt CEO in Appendix A). Following my email, O'Brien sent both me and 13 eligible YLTA alums

an email to connect us. He also forwarded to them the relevant information about the study that I had shared with him in my initial email (see Connection Email from Adapt CEO in Appendix A). I then sent all 13 nominated individuals a separate email informing them of the study and asking them if they would be interested in scheduling a preliminary phone call to discuss the study and what their participation would entail (see Example Recruitment Email to Identified Potential Participants in Appendix A). Nine of the 13 nominated and contacted individuals responded and scheduled initial phone conversations. At that time, recruitment efforts ceased and initial phone conversations and data collection began.

The day prior to each scheduled initial phone conversation, I emailed each participant the informed consent document (see Appendix B) and let them know that we would be going over it during our call and that they would need to sign (electronically) and return it to me via email prior to their interview if they agreed to participate. During the initial phone conversations with the nine interested individuals, the informed consent document was reviewed and potential participants were further informed of the purpose of the study and requirements of participation, given the opportunity to ask any questions, invited to participate, and told of the e-gift card they would be offered if they agreed to participate. All nine individuals expressed continued interest in participating and scheduled a time, date, and platform (phone or Zoom) for their interview during their initial phone call. All nine individuals provided informed consent and returned the signed document to me following the initial call. The typical duration of initial phone calls was 10 minutes or less.

At the time of each scheduled interview, I initiated contact with the participant on the agreed upon platform. Eight of the nine consenting individuals attended and completed their scheduled interviews. To start each interview call, I re-introduced myself and reminded the

participant of the intended purpose of the interview. The terms described on the informed consent were again reviewed: participants were asked to verbally confirm their consent to participate and to have the interview audio-recorded, reminded of their right to withdraw participation and/or end the interview at any point, and asked if they have any final questions before we began. All interviews were audio-recorded using external recorders and recordings were stored in a password-protected, secure location until the raw data were analyzed. Consent for audio-recording was also included in the informed consent document.

Upon confirmation of consent, I began recording and started the interview, following along with a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix D for the interview protocol). In keeping with the manner of qualitative interviewing, I prioritized rapport and followed the participant's lead whenever possible. IPA supports such flexible inquiry, allowing the researcher to diverge from the planned path for further elicitation of seemingly salient topics and conduct interviews as more of an inquisitive conversation than a formal question and answer interview (Mertens, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, I mindfully reflected upon and attended to the process and feeling of the interview throughout; I was prepared to shift from interviewing to a more clinical conversation if concerns arose. I was the sole interviewer for this process and have been trained to maintain consistent focus and expectations across interviews in clinical and research-oriented interviewing as well as in human-subjects research.

Prior to ending the interview call, I implemented a preliminary member check by summarizing my understanding of the participant's perspectives and asking for clarification of accuracy. Interviews were completed between February 3, 2021, and February 26, 2021, and ranged in length from 47–69 minutes. All but one interview, which occurred via Zoom due to unreliable cell phone service at the participant's location, took place over the phone. All eight

interviews were audio-recorded. Directly following completion of each interview, audio-recordings were placed on a secure database and deleted from the external recording device. Additionally, I noted in my research journal whatever thoughts, questions, interpretations, and potential biases that arose directly after each interview.

The audio-recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim. A thematic abstraction utilizing IPA, was completed to make sense of the raw data. Recordings were immediately permanently deleted following each interview's individual analysis. Each interview was analyzed for emergent themes in order to gain a sense of individual alums' perspectives of their leadership experiences and general patterns were extracted from the individual analyses to provide group findings, which are this study's results. See Table 3.1 for qualitative results.

Following completion of an interview's individual analysis, I contacted each participant in order to complete the second instance of member checking. I emailed participants, providing them with the table of the emergent themes from their interview, asking them to review the analysis and provide feedback regarding the accuracy of the interpretation and representation of their perspectives (see Member Checking Request Email in Appendix C). Six out of the eight participants responded to this contact. Each response included only positive feedback and confirmed the accuracy of my findings for their particular meaning-making. Following these member checks, I sent $10 Mastercard e-gift cards via email to all eight participants (regardless of their engagement with member checking) as a small expression of gratitude and compensation for their time.

The resulting themes with my analytical interpretations are described in narrative form in the Results section. Evidentiary, de-identified extracts and quotes are presented to supplement

interpretations and accurately represent individual experiences. This process allowed for a detailed, nuanced, and rich picture of YLTA alums' leadership experiences.

Ethical Considerations

In keeping with both the RLM and the principles of phenomenological research, ethical considerations for this study included confidentiality, informed consent, and ethically sound interviewing. On a basic level, the use of flexible, semi-structured interviews in pursuit of deeper phenomenological understanding warranted ethical consideration as there was a potential for sensitive topics and existential concerns to arise (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). As such, and keeping with both the recommendations of IPA and my clinical training, I committed to ongoing reflection, careful review of processes, and attention to the feeling of an interview. As an ethical psychologist and researcher, I was prepared to shift to using more clinical skills or referring participants to others who could provide support if needed.

Confidentiality

While all efforts to maintain confidentiality during the process of this study were made, the nature of IPA presents some challenges for this ethical consideration. In reporting the results of the analysis, researchers must use extracts and direct quotes from the data to support their interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). This, by nature, could compromise the confidentiality of the data. However, the use of raw data in this way does not breach ethical confidentiality if appropriate measures are taken to prevent it from doing so (i.e., appropriate de-identification, obtaining informed consent to include quotes, and checking with individuals when an intended quote to be used contains particularly sensitive information before using it). This process as well as other ethical practices were followed in order to maintain confidentiality.

Any information obtained on study participants, audio-recordings, and all extraneous notes, transcripts, and analysis documents were maintained and stored on a secure, password protected, cloud-based storage system. This system is managed and accessible by BHII, however, only my primary supervisor, George Tremblay, who oversaw the supplemental evaluation, and I had access to the files. Each recording was given a coded ID number that was used for all other associated participant materials. Once uploaded to the cloud-based storage system, the audio recordings were deleted from any external recording device that was used and permanently deleted from the cloud storage following data analysis.

Audio-recordings were also uploaded to, and briefly stored on, a cloud-based technology company, otter.ai, for transcription. Otter.ai is a transcription service that uses artificial intelligence to turn speech and recordings into text (Otter.ai, n.d.-b.). The service has measures in place to protect uploaded and stored data, including recordings and transcriptions, and users are the only individuals that have access to, and control of, their files (Otter.ai, n.d.-a.). I uploaded the recordings the same day that they were being transcribed. Recordings and transcripts remained on otter.ai for a short period of time (about one week) while I listened to the recordings and edited transcripts as necessary. Once a transcript was complete and edited, it was permanently removed from the site and stored on BHII's secure cloud-based storage system. At this time, audio-recordings were permanently removed from otter.ai as well.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from each participant in this study prior to their engaging in the interview (see Appendix B). Upon initial contact, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the intention for the study's findings, what would be required of their participation, and the possible risks and benefits of engaging in the process. Risks and benefits

were likely to only concern participants' relationships with Adapt staff, including the CEO, as well as continued engagement with the YLTA program, such as reinvigorated excitement or a lack thereof for the program. The overall risks were minimal. All interested individuals were emailed the informed consent document prior to the initial phone conversation, given the chance to ask any questions, and asked to sign and return it to me before their interview occurred.

Consent was confirmed again prior to starting the interview. At that time, participants were also reminded of the primary tenets of the informed consent including their right to withdraw from the study and the voluntary nature of the process (i.e., participants could choose not to answer certain questions, etc.), that they could stop or pause the process at any point, that there were no right answers, and that their answers would be kept confidential and would not negatively affect their relationship with Adapt or the YLTA program. As the sole interviewer, I attended to any signs of distress and used my clinical skills to navigate any discomfort or unrest that arose from the interview activity. Taking such measures should have further minimized any possibility of psychological distress; however, at no point did any participant appear to be in or express experiencing distress nor did they express any needs to further process subjects discussed during or emotional reactions to the interview.

Data Analysis

To make my own sense and gain understanding of the raw data collected via interviews, I flexibly followed the processes outlined for IPA. While the developers of IPA provided steps for this process, they recommended using them as a blueprint for the work, not as a strict set of rules that must be followed (Smith et al., 2009). Given the complexity of the process, it is recommended that researchers approach data analysis with flexibility, an open mind, and willingness to change directions, shift, and adapt however is best for the data and analysis.

Additionally, data analysis in qualitative research is continuous; Smith et al. (2009) warn researchers that interpretations and understanding are likely to develop even through the writing of the final report. The process requires researchers to make sense of the sense that the participants are making of their experiences. As such, I focused on how I understand emerging adult YLTA alums' perspectives. I sought to make sense of their own understandings of their adolescent experiences of leadership then and now, in their current lives as emerging adults. In order to monitor and bracket my assumptions, perspectives, biases, and potentially unfounded interpretations, I journaled throughout the data analysis and the writing-up of results.

For the process of explicit data analysis, I was guided by the following IPA steps for larger IPA sample sizes (more than six participants) as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The first step in Smith et al.'s IPA involves listening to the audio-recording of an interview and transcribing it verbatim. Following transcription, analysis proceeds by reading through the interview transcript and making initial notes of anything that stands out as being interesting. Next, the transcript is read again, this time going line-by-line to make more intentional notes regarding the content of the interview, the language used, and the more abstract or conceptual topics the participant might have been referring to. These notes then act as coding for what is perceived as significant information. *Emergent themes* are constructed by looking for patterns across these codes. In larger data sets, the analysis of individual interviews stops there and initial visual graphics are created (Smith et al., 2009). Subsequent analysis of individual interviews follows the same process with an additional emphasis on bracketing, this time of findings from previous analyses. Once emergent themes from all of the individual analyses are developed, the interviews are analyzed as a group. Relationships and patterns as well as evidence of convergent and divergent themes across the emergent themes of the various interviews are explored. From

these relationships and patterns, researches create *super-ordinate* themes and a final visual representation of the findings.

The following is an account of my application of Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA method. First, I uploaded audio-recordings of interviews to the secure, cloud-based transcription service, otter.ai, for transcription. Otter.ai is a transcription service that uses artificial intelligence to turn speech and recordings into text (Otter.ai, n.d.-b.). The service is secure and users have ultimate control of their files (Otter.ai, n.d.-a.). All files were permanently removed from the otter.ai site with the completion of each transcription. Following transcription, I completed the following process for each interview separately before moving on to the next. With each subsequent analysis an additional emphasis on bracketing the findings from previous analyses was made. Smith et al. (2009) recommends treating each interview "in its own terms" (p. 100), until each individual interview's analysis is complete, and simultaneously recognizes the inevitability of influence from newly gained knowledge and experience.

For each interview I read through the transcript while listening to the recording and made initial notes of anything that stood out to me as being interesting. I then permanently deleted the audio-recording of the interview. Next, I read, line-by-line, through the transcript again and made more intentional notes regarding the interview content, specific language used, and abstract topics. My notes acted as preliminary coding for what I perceived to be significant information. These notes and relevant excerpts from the transcript (the quotes) were then entered into an Excel workbook for further analysis. I then coded for recurring concepts using the excerpts and my notes. The final step for individual interviews included constructing emergent themes. To do this, I used my codes, which highlighted patterns across the interview data set (quotes and my notes). The resulting emergent themes aimed to "speak to the psychological essence of the piece"

(Smith et al., 2009, p. 92) and represent a basic level of understanding of the points the participant was trying to make. Emergent theme tables were made for each interview. Tables included codes, subcodes, and emergent themes.

Once these initial analyses of individual interviews were complete, I emailed tables of findings to each participant for member checking and asked for feedback. Upon the completion of all of the individual interview analyses, I also shared my data analysis workbook with a peer for a first round of peer auditing. I asked this peer to randomly select half of the interviews to check the "chain of evidence," highlight interpretive drift, and provide any extraneous feedback to assist in both supplementing my confidence in my findings at this stage and realigning myself with my research questions and the idiographic detail in my data set. I integrated the peer feedback into my analysis before moving on to the analysis of the data set as a whole.

The across-interview analysis began at the code and emergent theme level. I input all the codes and emergent themes from individual interviews into one "Group Analysis" worksheet in the Excel workbook. I then looked for relationships, patterns, and evidence of both convergent and divergent themes among them. This process often creates the greatest shifting of interpretations and findings and frequently leads researchers to reconfiguring themes (Smith et al., 2009); I experienced such a shift during my analysis. Given the homogeneity and size of this sample, however, only recurrent themes (those that appeared in at least half of all interviews/four) were included; all of the resulting themes appeared to be convergent. The relationships across emergent themes were used to develop super-ordinate themes and, to provide more nuanced detail, sub-themes were extrapolated. At this point again, I shared my data analysis workbook with the same peer for a second round of peer auditing, this time asking them to review the group analysis. I incorporated the peer feedback again before creating a visual

graphic that represented the super-ordinate themes and sub-themes for the group analysis as well as the data extracts/quotes upon which they are founded (see Table 3.1).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Given the constructivist stance of phenomenological research, questions often arise regarding the quality of such research projects (Mertens, 2015). This may be due to the subjectivity of findings, the lack of concrete, objective, and measurable aspects (as is found in postpositivist and quantitative approaches to research), and/or the natural flexibility, smaller sample sizes, and abstractness of processes. As such, it is important in qualitative studies to consider the standards that are comparable to the quantitative concepts of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity, and make a case for the soundness of results and implications. The qualitative concepts that parallel those of the quantitative listed, respectively, include: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. For the purposes of this study, issues of transferability are not relevant. Since this study is a program evaluation, the results are only generalizable, and "externally valid," for YLTA. The other three issues are described below.

Credibility

Mertens (2015) suggests several techniques for establishing credibility within a qualitative project. She first explains the importance of *prolonged and persistent engagement*, which can be obtained with sufficient time spent with the data. Given my history of working with YLTA and BHII, as well as the inclusion of this study in the larger evaluation, I spent an ample amount of time with the data. Additionally, I had a "large sample" in IPA standards and, while Smith et al. (2009) warn of the possible negative impacts of having too many participants, they make this claim in response to the amount of time that having more than just a few

interviews to analyze will take. They also provide guidelines for the analysis of larger data sets. Other ways to establish credibility in qualitative research include member checks, peer debriefing, and progressive subjectivity (Mertens, 2015), all of which I engaged in throughout the process of this study.

As a form of member checking, I summarized my understandings of participants' perspectives and asked participants to confirm the accuracy of my recollections throughout the interview. I also asked for participants' willingness to engage in one post-interview contact to check the accuracy of my interpretation and representation of their perspectives. To do this additional member checking, I shared the table of themes that emerged from each participant's interview with that participant via email and asked them for feedback on my interpretation. All eight participants agreed to participate in this checking, but only six out of the eight provided any feedback. I also engaged in peer debriefing, which allowed for me to verbally reflect and clarify what I had been noticing in my progressive subjectivity checks and acted as a realignment toward my research questions and the raw data.

Dependability

Determining a sense of reliability in qualitative research requires evidence of consistency and dependability (Mertens, 2015). Consistency in IPA is unlikely to take place in the realm of being inflexible in one's data collection and analysis. However, due to IPA's commitment to the constructivist stance and expectation for major adjustments to occur, consistency can take place in the researcher's process of reporting on such shifts and the overall process. I kept a journal to allow for ease and monitoring of my bracketing during the data analysis process and was able to use it during other processes (i.e., writing up of results, interpreting data, and discussing findings) as well. In the journal, I reflected upon my process and made note of any necessary

methodological shifts in addition to tracking my assumptions, perspectives, and biases, and making comments for progressive subjectivity checks. I started journaling early on in the study and continued until the dissertation draft was complete.

Confirmability

Confirmability is concerned with the researcher's findings and claims and the evidence that supports such claims. Mertens (2015) described the accuracy of results as being confirmed by their ability to be "tracked to their source" (p. 272), in the raw data, through logical means that are also explicit. Confirmability can be established through "audits." I audited the accuracy of this study's finding in two ways. First, I kept an organized and detailed Excel workbook that clearly delineated the path of my analysis as well as notes regarding how I came to my interpretations. Second, my peer debriefing extended beyond basic conversations of my subjectivity, analysis, and understandings. It also included my peer's engagement in checking the "chain of evidence," reviewing my tables, and providing me with feedback that either confirmed or denied my findings. Peer debriefing ultimately supplemented my confidence in the accuracy of my thematic analyses.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Demographic Information

Eight Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA) alums participated in the current study. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 27 years old, identified as female (50%) and male (50%) genders, and identified racially as Caucasian (100%). Every participant had been a student facilitator during their time in YLTA and has remained involved with the YLTA program to varying degrees. Number of years that participants had been graduated from high school at the time of the interviews ranged from two to nine, with a mean of about six years and with two modes of seven and nine years.

All eight alums were from northern New Hampshire and completed their secondary education in the area. Following high school, each alum pursued higher education. At the time of the interviews, two alums were still students and the remaining six had graduated from college and were engaged in various forms of employment. Many of the alums had roles in helping professions (i.e., teachers/school employees, Adapt employees, supporting family/own businesses). One alum had completed a graduate/professional degree and a few other alums expressed interest in doing so in the future. Many of the alums were, at the time of the interviews, in committed/serious dating relationships and endorsed ability to sustain closeness in familial and peer relationships as well. Alums largely described themselves as maintaining high-quality lives. See Table 4.1 for demographic information.

Qualitative Analysis

Themes were organized within five clusters: (a) Commitment, (b) Sense of Self, (c) Supported Development, (d) Community and Culture, and (e) Influential Components. Every cluster, with the exception of Influential Components (which was represented in seven of the

eight interviews), were spoken about by all eight interviewees. Themes are not mutually exclusive and there is some overlap of concepts between themes and clusters; therefore, there are instances when representative quotes might be representative of more than one theme. For the purposes of this study and simplicity, however, each representative quote was only used once. Table 3.1 is provided as a reference for qualitative results.

Cluster 1: Commitment

Participants reflected on their continued commitment to the YLTA program. Three themes emerged relating to this topic: Alums are committed (a) to the YLTA program, which can be seen through varying degrees of continued involvement; (b) to the YLTA values, community, and mission, seen in their desire to pay it forward/share the experience with others; and (c) because the experience was meaningful, rewarding, and something for which they are grateful.

Alums are Committed to the YLTA Program, Which can be Seen Through Varying Degrees of Continued Involvement

All eight participants discussed their continued commitment to YLTA in response to the first interview question, "What is your current relationship with the YLTA program?" While participants' level of continued involvement varied, ranging from maintained minimal contact with Adapt CEO, Sean O'Brien, to working for the program as a part- or full-time job, all remained connected to the program since graduating from high school. One participant commented on how they have remained involved despite the challenges they face in doing so:

> It's very hard to be involved in the program … I helped with orientation for the high
>
> school and the middle school. I try to talk to kids who are in YLTA, the program from
>
> my alma mater, as I'll call it. But just being in [city] makes it hard to be connected to that
>
> super closely. (Alum 3)

Another participant stated their love for being involved and their desire to stay involved:

> I had a lot of really great times, and like, hope to continue having great times with it. So, I mean, like I said, it's something that I've been passionate about for a long time and still am today. So, like, I honestly do love any chance I can get to, you know, support this program and hope that it will have a lasting impact for other students in the future. (Alum 5)

Alums are Committed to the YLTA Values, Community, and Mission, Seen in Their Desire to Pay it Forward/Share the Experience With Others

Seven participants spoke to their continued commitment to the YLTA values, community, and mission while describing the current activities, initiatives, and goals that they engage in and have. Such energy showed YLTA alums' commitment to the YLTA program and community through their desire to give back to it. For example, one participant described the simple choice they encounter when given the opportunity to help:

> It's pretty clear in my mind. It's, I feel like, if I can give back I will, you know? When given the opportunity, and Sean definitely has given me the opportunity, I'll always be back to help make it work. To help him. It's the whole reason I do. (Alum 1)

Additionally, participants described their desire to help others experience at least some of what they themselves experienced through their involvement with YLTA, whether in YLTA spaces or elsewhere. One participant reflected:

> That always feels like the natural progression . . . You do something as a participant and then you enjoy it so much that you want to then be a leader and help other people get the same experience you got. It just feels like you always kind of trickled down with what to

give the age group before you … The same kind of magic that you got to walk through.

(Alum 4)

In a similar vein, Alum 6 described the following:

I also love being able to help kids. A lot of my focus on, in high school and then even my

career now is helping people but ... It was always about, I wanted to make someone else's

life better so they didn't go through the shitty things I had to go through in high school, or

middle school. So, I wanted to give them those skills. And if I did, or didn't, I wanted to

at least make somebody's life slightly better.

Alums are Committed Because the Experience was Meaningful, Rewarding, and Something for Which They are Grateful

Four participants highlighted how meaningful their involvement in YLTA was while

discussing their reasons for staying involved. Two of the four participants expressed explicit

gratitude for Adapt's CEO, Sean O'Brien, and all four described being moved by their

experiences in the program. For example, one participant gave voice to a mixture of pride and

bewilderment looking back on all that they had accomplished:

I was like, thinking on like, all the things that I had done with YLTA and it's just like, I

can't believe I did all of that. I can't believe I like helped all these kids with these different

things. It's just like, this moment of like, almost like, disbelief at the fact that you were

there for those things, that you were able to actually like ... Because especially in like this

world, it's hard to believe that you can actually make any changes in it. And so, I think

that YLTA also inspires you to be able to make those changes and to believe in yourself

and not… to know that you can. (Alum 3)

Cluster 2: Sense of Self

Participants discussed the ways in which YLTA influenced their sense of self. Six themes emerged relating to this topic: (a) alums gained self-knowledge and a sense of identity through participating in YLTA; (b) engaging in YLTA improved alums' self-confidence and self-acceptance; (c) YLTA empowered alums to use the strengths and skills that they recognized they had and/or acquired in YLTA to take on leadership and create positive change for themselves and in the community; (d) alums' identities aligned with YLTA values; (e) alums gained confidence in outdoor skills, which solidified their interests in and orientation toward outdoor and adventure activities; and (f) alums maintained YLTA's values of self-care and wellbeing, authenticity, positive relationships, acceptance and inclusivity, and openness and flexibility.

Alums Gained Self-Knowledge and a Sense of Identity Through Participating in YLTA

All eight participants reflected on the ways in which they gained self-awareness and a sense of identity from their involvement with YLTA. One participant verbally explored the difference in the level of self-knowledge they had from before engaging with YLTA to after:

I definitely think I went into it lacking an identity and lacking self-awareness about who I was and what direction my life was heading and what I was and wasn't good at and left it with a strong sense of who I was, what type of person I was going to be, what direction my life was heading. Like, I definitely had answers or at least like, you know, I knew who I wasn't gonna [*sic*] be. (Alum 4)

Another participant described the level of comfort they had in knowing who they were and what that allowed them to do so far in their emerging adulthood:

I loved how much I could … I was able to apply what I knew already and what I was comfortable with, just to what I was doing. And a lot of that did come from knowing who I was, being comfortable in who I was, and then being able to know where my skill lies in these very specific areas. (Alum 6)

Engaging in YLTA Improved Alums' Self-confidence and Self-acceptance

All eight participants commented on the impact that their involvement with YLTA had on how they thought and felt about and, ultimately, presented themselves during and since they graduated from high school. For example, one participant summed up how they thought of and felt about themself at the time and the role they see YLTA as having played in influencing the change:

I really contribute [*sic*] YLTA, KIP [Kids in Prevention], all the things I did to, to my, to getting the confidence that I have. I was very, I guess, for lack of better terms, insecure about myself, and feeling as if I wasn't as cool or, or, or popular, as some of the other students. But after I did YLTA, it's like, you know, I don't care about that anymore. Like, I'm confident. I can step out of my comfort zone and put myself out there. (Alum 2)

Other participants recalled the changes they saw in their self-acceptance and confidence levels. One simply stated, "I think there was also an acceptance of just who I was as a person" (Alum 6), and Alum 8 said:

I think it had a gigantic effect in my confidence, in my ability to speak in front of people, you know? Like that, you mess up three times in front of a group and, all of a sudden, you're not afraid of messing up in front of people anymore. Literally ... you know? I, yeah it was ... I think it, it really affected confidence.

YLTA Empowered Alums to use the Strengths and Skills That They Recognized They Had and/or Acquired in YLTA to Take on Leadership and Create Positive Change for Themselves and in the Community

Six participants alluded to being empowered through their involvement with YLTA and explicitly named the influence the experience had on their willingness and tendencies to take on more leadership. Alum 2 described becoming empowered to be themself and feeling able as themself, which sparked their greater community involvement as an emerging adult:

YLTA has really had, had great meaning in my life because it's really taught me that, that I can do anything if I put my mind to it and I can put myself out there. And, if I'm different … you know… that's okay! I'm still doing what I'm passionate for. And, I'm still making a difference in my community. Like, I don't have to be like everybody else to make a difference and to, to be successful.

Another participant talked about their feeling empowered to actually make a difference because of their involvement with YLTA:

Being involved with it too, you can, you feel like you can make a difference. Like, even if it's just one person or two people, like, you do feel like you can reach somebody or, you know, make a positive impact on somebody else's life. That was one thing I really enjoyed about it. (Alum 5)

Yet another participant pointed to the clear influence of YLTA on their involvement throughout high school and beyond: "I really feel if I didn't have Adapt or YLTA, because what I was a part of, that I really wouldn't push myself to, like, go out there and do those other things" (Alum 7).

Alums' Identities Aligned with YLTA Values

Of the eight participants, seven discussed the enduring impact of YLTA values and principles on their identity development; they have internalized and woven YLTA ideals into enduring narratives of how they see themselves. For example, one such value, living a healthy/sober lifestyle, came up in multiple interviews. Several participants mentioned having temporary separations from this value but always returning to it, which often included at least using substances in moderation. For example, one participant described their experience of getting back on track with YLTA ideals and the value of sobriety and how it felt like a returning to who they are. They said, "Post college, the last two years, especially this past year, I think I've drank like once in the past three months. So, um, and I think that was more just a re-finding myself type of deal" (Alum 1). Another participant, who chose not to become involved with substances during college even after no longer being a YLTA student facilitator, reflected upon how the values of outdoors and alternative activities, which they gained from YLTA, almost acted as a protective factor for them:

> With being at college too, obviously, I mean, you're influenced all the time and the peer pressure … and I felt definitely more—better off from the education with YLTA and things. And, I was able to kind of avoid some situations because I was like, out hiking or something else. (Alum 7)

Two participants explicitly stated how they've integrated parts of YLTA into their identities and senses of self. Alum 4 spoke to a kind of mantra that they adopted from YLTA and Merrowvista (an American Youth Foundation program focusing on youth development, with whom YLTA often partnered) that stuck with them:

I know Merrowvista and YLTA are two different things but um, you know, we did our

conferences at Merrowvista but like their, their slogan at Merrowvista is like "my own

self at my very best all the time" and that, that like, concept was, was consistent with

YLTA—that you were going to try to be your unique version of yourself, at your very

best, consistently. And I, yea so definitely 1,000% like that is still very much my identity.

Another participant described an almost enmeshment of YLTA and themself in stating, "never

am I like, 'I learned this at YLTA.' No . . . it's engrained. You know what I mean? Those

experiences became, they became my experiences. It became my life as opposed to, 'this one

time when…'" (Alum 8).

Alums Gained Confidence in Outdoor Skills, Which Solidified Their Interests in and Orientation Toward Outdoor Adventure Activities

Four participants noted the influence of YLTA on their interest in, and confidence with,

outdoor experiences and adventures. One participant went so far as to say that getting into the

outdoors became "the direction of [their] existence" (Alum 8). Similarly, when answering a

question about the biggest change that they saw within themself from before engaging in YLTA

and after, Alum 1 said:

I mean the biggest one I feel is my confidence in the outdoors. Uh, I mean just, and like it

doesn't happen maybe the first trip or the second trip or the first conference or the second

conference or whatever it is but at some point, I'm just like fully confident.

Another participant described in greater detail how YLTA solidified their interest in outdoor

adventures:

I would say 100% that my experiences with YLTA, like backpacking and canoe tripping

and ziplining and whitewater rafting, all that, like, I knew that it was something I wanted

to do for the rest of my life. And like, still to today, I kind of based my, my hobbies and

like, all my interests around that, you know? (Alum 5)

Alums Maintained YLTA's Values of Self-care and Wellbeing, Authenticity, Positive

Relationships, Acceptance and Inclusivity, and Openness and Flexibility

Six participants spoke to the continued holding of values they acquired from YLTA. For

example, one participant described their accepting nature and how it allowed them to be an

advocate for others during high school and since:

With being in such a small school, I know.... a lot of my friends, when they were in high

school, they were/they are, they're gays or lesbians. But like when they were in school,

they couldn't, they didn't feel comfortable coming out. And I always found myself being

one of the first people that they told just because I was like, always, I was just accepting.

I mean, I am still accepting, I'm not was. I am still super accepting of that, where our

community maybe didn't portray that they were accepting. (Alum 7)

More broadly, Alum 2 summed up their commitment to these values well in reflecting upon how

they take care of themself when needed:

I feel like YLTA really, just that experience, has really helped me have a better outlook

on life and understanding that like, okay, if I'm upset one day, like what can I do to help

make that better? If I'm feeling depressed, like, what can I do? I can go outside and enjoy

nature, have a hike, I can, I can talk to somebody that makes me feel happy and makes

me laugh. You know, I can give back to the community and feel meaningful.

Cluster 3: Supported Development

Participants experienced YLTA as supporting their development. Three themes emerged

relating to this topic: YLTA supported (a) alums' personal growth through adolescence into

emerging adulthood; (b) alums' leadership, interpersonal, and decision-making skills; and (c) alums' professional skills, which helped to ease their transitions into their careers.

YLTA Supported Alums' Personal Growth Through Adolescence into Emerging Adulthood

Five participants experienced gaining a sense of maturity as a result of their YLTA involvement while they were moving from the adolescent stage of development into emerging adulthood. One participant recalled the resilience that YLTA provided them with when they encountered a tragic life event during their adolescence, when the circumstances could have led them elsewhere:

> I felt like I had the skills and independence, like I felt so independent as is … mostly because of what I learned with YLTA and everything like that. It helped significantly and … I felt really strong and, umm, mentally sound. (Alum 1)

Other participants described how their experiences helped them become more competent when facing new developmental challenges. One spoke to gaining a sense of responsibility through having others rely on them; they determined that, as a leader, they needed to step up and figure out how to complete tasks:

> In high school, it's definitely very easy to be flaky, or to like, I guess, you just have yet to develop, for some people, like a sense of like responsibility. I definitely, didn't have a sense of responsibility in all aspects of life. But like, when you know that, like someone's counting on you. That they've trusted you because, because they didn't, he [Sean] didn't handhold us. He didn't like, give us like a script to follow. He didn't, I often felt almost a little like—I did, I did feel this a lot, like, almost like, "I don't know what I'm doing but I have to figure it out." (Alum 4)

Finally, Alum 8 remembered the noisy, conflicting chatter in their mind during that period of development. A part of them seemed to still be attuned to their younger, less mature self and, at the same time, they desired the maturity that their role in YLTA offered to them. Alum 8 recalled:

> I think I had a really, I had a larger understanding once I began being the student leader of like that internal monologue you have with yourself on the idea of like, what's right and wrong, and how to handle a situation. You know what I mean? Like the 15-year-old within me wants to laugh at the joke that disturbs the debrief conversation. You know what I mean? But the youth facilitator in me had to be like, "Okay, even though you are one year older than these kids, perhaps, or maybe not even one year older than these kids, like, you still need to be the voice of reason in the situation … you need to be the person in the room that brings things together." And so, I think it was this, following that kind of, being a student leader that young, I think really helped me instill the idea of, of right and wrong in a public situation and kind of how to act like an adult even though you're not an adult.

YLTA Supported Alums' Leadership, Interpersonal, and Decision-Making Skills

Six of the eight participants provided nuanced details about how their experiences in YLTA allowed them to harness skills in a range of areas that continue to benefit them in their emerging adult lives. Particularly common, was the development of interpersonal skills that lend to the quality of relationships participants now have with their partners, friends, and coworkers. Additionally, participants seem to experience the combination of interpersonal and decision-making skills as allowing them to be better leaders. For example, one participant stated:

I think communication is a really big factor. I just feel like YLTA really teaches good

communication skills, teaches good teamwork skills. YLTA's really helped me be able to

learn how to be the best leader for my, for my group. (Alum 2)

In describing how the experience helped them with leadership and decision-making skills and

facilitated new brain activity for them, Alum 3 explained:

You're at a conference and there's what, 200 kids running around the property and you're

like, "Okay, well, someone has to be controlling all of them." And, then you're like,

"Okay, I have this coming up now. But I also have this in like, an hour. So, I have to

know what I'm doing for that too," which I think is an important skill—to be able to

switch your mindset on what you're actually supposed to be teaching at that moment.

YLTA Supported Alums' Professional Skills, Which Helped to Ease Their Transitions into

Their Careers

Six participants experienced their transitions into the workforce as being smoother due to

their experiences with YLTA. One participant highlighted the usefulness of skills they acquired

through running YLTA conferences for their current employment:

If I'm stuck without something to do, I'm like, pretty good at thinking on my feet. And, I

think I got that from YLTA, because it's like, "Oh, I have a game that we can play," or "I

have something else we can do instead of that," or "Let's just," I think that one of the

things that I learned the most from YLTA is how to debrief. And like, "Okay, what did

we learn from this," because it's really hard to just, like, know how to do that. (Alum 3)

In a similar vein, another participant reflected on how, through YLTA, they developed skills and

composure not afforded to their peers:

I think it put me in a position that I became a considerably better interviewee than a lot of

my friends. I know that's a very specific situation. But I definitely noticed that through

the years more people asked me for help with interviews and resumes than anyone else I

know. And I think that that probably comes from, you know, having to be composed.

And having to, and even at being 15 years old, having to do that, you know, like you get

your first taste of having to talk to people in front of a group and having a debrief. And

putting those things together. You're doing something that the average kid is not learning

until they're 19/20 years old. (Alum 8)

Cluster 4: Community and Culture

Participants reflected on the YLTA community and culture. Three themes emerged

relating to this topic: (a) Relationships with other student facilitators, adult mentors, and YLTA

participants were empowering and engendered a sense of belonging to a community; (b) being a

member of the regional group was a unique, growth-fostering, and deeply meaningful

experience; and (c) the unique, expansive, and accepting culture of YLTA is powerful and has

lasting effects.

Relationships with Other Student Facilitators, Adult Mentors, and YLTA Participants Were

Empowering and Engendered a Sense of Belonging to a Community

All eight participants spoke to the benefits of the close and connected relationships they

had with members of the YLTA community. Speaking to the influence of relationships built with

peers in YLTA settings, one participant stated:

You know, that's what really, that's what really shaped my confidence. It helped me

become more secure as a person, because I would, I would hang out with these really,

really awesome people from different schools who are really cool. Especially like,

definitely, at a younger age, when I was definitely in the younger parts of YLTA and I was hanging out with some of the older students ... they were just so cool to me. And it was just awesome to be able to hang out with them. (Alum 2)

Alum 6 described the impact of relationships student facilitators have with adult advisors and Adapt staff through YLTA. For example, recalling the value of their relationship with Adapt CEO, Sean O'Brien, they said:

Sean is one of the best mentors I've had. And I can appreciate the relationship we've built over the years, because he's just a, an incredible person ... the way he works with people the way he gives you the leeway you need, but the, the respect he has for you, as well. And I have a huge amount of respect for Sean, and what he does. And, I think for me, that sort of was the, the core tenet of what I enjoyed most is that I built a relationship with somebody who, who cared about what he was doing, but also cared about me enough to make sure I was getting everything I needed and making sure I was, was on the right path and doing these things correctly.

Participants also described the value of their relationships with younger students. For example, Alum 8 highlighted the mutually empowering benefit of being a student facilitator:

Where . . . kind of having that, where I was saying earlier that like, focal point of motivation, like, "well, you know, I'm already, I'm somebody in these circles of Youth Leadership Through Adventure," you know what I mean? Like, I, even, even then you can imagine, you're a 17-year-old kid, and you know, there's a group of 14-year-olds at the school miles away, that believed in you, and you may have had an effect on those kids. That's kind of a . . . you know what I mean? That's a momentum to push you to not go drinking or to not go to parties or something like that.

Being a Member of the Regional Group was a Unique, Growth-fostering, and Deeply Meaningful Experience

Six participants pointed to the significance of being part of a regional group. For example, one participant tried to make sense of the bond that develops among regional group members. They described it as:

A bond that's just created not … you're all willing to be there, that's one thing. You're all volunteering pretty much to be there and so everyone has at least one common thing together but they also fully believe in the system, umm, because it's been successful for them. And then they're also facilitating groups separately, and then coming back and communicating about it, and trying to be better. (Alum 1)

Similarly, participants spoke about the deep sense of belonging generated by participation in the regional group. For example, Alum 2 commented on how important and influential the group was for them:

It just felt like to me, I really felt like, like I was, I had a place there. And I felt like I was hanging out with some really cool kids, who, if I didn't do YLTA, I probably wouldn't have been able to hang out with them ... I felt like I actually meant something to them.

The Unique, Expansive, and Accepting Culture of YLTA is Powerful and has Lasting Effects

Six participants discussed YLTA's culture and its enduring impact. They spoke to the distinctiveness of the culture, describing it as "a very different environment from, honestly almost anything else [they've] experienced" (Alum 5), and proclaiming its uniqueness in both practice and theory. Alum 4 stated, "what was so kind of addicting about YLTA was it was about character. Who you were mattered!" Another participant described how the culture is expansive in opening youths' eyes to the possibilities they have:

What's happening is you're taking a bunch of kids who have this idea of what's cool is their uncle or their cousin, or you know what I mean, their older brother, or whoever. That's their idea of cool. And maybe that is smoking cigarettes. And maybe that is smoking weed. Maybe that is having a big truck. You know what I mean? You take that construct and you completely rip that construct down, you throw it out the door, and you're giving a whole bunch of 13-year-olds, 12-year-olds, 15-year-olds, the opportunity to see, you know, this guy's happy. This guy smiles. This guy's wearing a cool hat. This guy's got the shoes that I think are cool. And, he doesn't have a big truck and he doesn't smoke cigarettes and he doesn't smoke weed and he doesn't go partying. You see what I'm saying? You're building these brand-new constructs and all Sean meant to do was take us snowshoeing. (Alum 8)

Cluster 5: Influential Components

Seven of the 8 interviewees provided insight into the specific YLTA components that most influenced their adolescent leadership experiences. Three themes emerged: (a) Conferences are opportunities to grow, expand, and empower self and others; (b) meaningful reflection with self and others in the program serves as an avenue for growth; and (c) the program took place during a critical period of development.

Conferences are Opportunities to Grow, Expand, and Empower Self and Others

Four participants pointed to the importance of conferences in facilitating their growth and development. Conferences were highlighted as the place where many skills were learned and practiced. Conferences were also described as expansive and freeing, offering participants an additional sense of empowerment. For example, one alum described how conferences showed them new possibilities for interpersonal interactions:

> I feel like the conferences specifically, really open up your eyes to people, like life could be like this. Like everyone can be open. Everyone can be accepting. Everyone can challenge opinions in a respectful way and have fun doing it and so there was, that in itself opened it up. (Alum 1)

Alum 6 echoed these sentiments, also further highlighting the power of conferences for expanding their own sense of self:

> The thing I loved about a conference is that you could be whatever version of yourself you wanted to be there. And that was the best for me and trying to figure out who I was as a person anyway.

Still another participant recalled a significant moment at one conference that allowed them to see how they had empowered another student, which in turn fostered a sense of self-empowerment:

> It kind of came full circle for me when I was in college and I had to run like a family group, is what they call them. So, you're, you're the like leader for the younger kids. And I remember I was, I was subbing in or something and like, the kid that was the leader—I happened to be just kind of like outside of the room—and he was like, reflecting on his experiences. And he used me as an example. And he said, "Well, the reason really, why I continue to come to these things is because [Alum 7] pushed me out of my comfort zone." And so like, that was when I kind of realized … I was like, "Oh, I kind of can make a difference." (Alum 7)

Meaningful Reflection with Self and Others in the Program Serves as an Avenue for Growth

Four participants described the power of reflection, a common activity in YLTA programming, in facilitating meaningful growth. For example, Alum 4 spoke to the emphasis on

self-reflection in YLTA and the role that it can have in producing self-awareness, a potential

catalyst for change and growth:

> There was so much reflection in YLTA about like, what type of person you're going to
>
> be, about like how your actions affect other people, about the direction your life is
>
> heading. So, like, constantly in a state of reflection, even reflecting on your skill set, like
>
> "How did that go, when I ran that event? What would I do differently next time?" And so,
>
> the act of reflecting obviously, makes you more self-aware.

Another participant commented on the value of a reflective practice, focusing more specifically

on the importance of YLTA's emphasis on debriefing. The participant described the collective

benefits this way:

> Yeah, like your ability to look back at a situation and pull information out of it. And…
>
> you know, your, your ability to, to not just have a situation happen, maybe a
>
> disagreement or something like that, and then just be mad. Your ability to, to take that
>
> emotion that you're feeling, turn it into words that make sense and aren't hurtful. Talk
>
> about it. You know, like the whole part of debriefing, of like, how do we turn what
>
> happened into a conversation that everyone leaves the room right now, feeling like
>
> they've gained something? … Like the idea of a winner and a loser is literally irrelevant.
>
> Everyone is growing. (Alum 8)

The Program Took Place During a Critical Period of Development

Five of the eight participants called attention to the great value of participation for

teenagers; they spoke to their sense that there would not have been a better age group for YLTA

to have targeted. For example, Alum 3 explained that "YLTA comes at a time when you need it

the most," and added:

It may not be because you have petty issues in middle school. It may not be because you're scared of college. You may not want to go to college. But there's got to be something in your life, especially during that time when you're changing so much and your life is changing so much, that YLTA helps you to like, not only step away from it, but think about different ways to approach it than what you're already doing.

Similarly, another participant commented that YLTA was exactly what they needed when they got involved:

It was what I was searching for. I was searching for a sense of self. I was searching for some, somewhere that I could . . . I was just, dude, I was just like, trying to figure out life. I was trying to figure out like, how all these things that happened to me made sense … what they meant for me, what it meant about who I was, what options I had moving forward in terms of character, but also like, career and, like life, I just was trying to figure life out and it gave me something stable to hold onto for sure. (Alum 4)

Finally, unprompted, another participant reflected on the challenging tasks of adolescent development. They noted that the timing of YLTA engagement could not have been better:

You're still learning a lot about yourself when you're that young. You don't even know who you are, what you want, or what you like, at that point. Just kind of going through the motions, cus [*sic*] we're talking in like early middle school. But I would say after like, you know, especially then, those like developmental years, I think that the program's time is pretty crucial. (Alum 5)

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

As Adapt works toward establishing Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA) as an evidence-based program to support its dissemination beyond the north country of New Hampshire, the findings from this dissertation may strengthen the model through a better understanding of alums' perspectives of their adolescent leadership experiences. It is also important to highlight what components of YLTA programming are most salient in producing such experiences and perspectives. This is particularly true given the limited existing research on leadership during emerging adulthood, the impact of adolescent leadership experiences on emerging adulthood, and the influence of YLTA participation on the lives of its alums. The current study explored one component of the lattermost through the following research questions: (a) from the perspective of emerging adult YLTA alums, what are the lived experiences of leadership at least two years post program participation and (b) according to YLTA alums, what aspects of their adolescent YLTA leadership experiences have influenced their emerging adult lives?

In this section, I discuss the study's major findings as they relate to the literature on the impacts of youth development programs on emerging adult lives and the existing evidence of impacts of the YLTA program. Additionally, I consider implications of the research process and findings through a developmental lens and the relational leadership model (RLM). Finally, I reflect on the limitations of the study and indicate potential areas for future research.

Through qualitative methodology, interviews with eight YLTA alums and an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the data, five clusters of themes about YLTA alums' leadership experiences and the influential components of YLTA programming surfaced. The findings suggest that (a) alums are committed to the program for various reasons, (b) alums gained a

sense of self through program participation, (c) YLTA supported multiple aspects of alums'

development, (d) the YLTA culture and community were significant factors in alums'

experiences, and (e) three other aspects of YLTA programming (conferences, its emphasis on

reflection, and its timing) were highly influential in alums' experiences.

Summary and Implications of Findings

This program evaluation offers significant support for the YLTA program. The findings

can be interpreted for greater meaning by comparing them to the existing literature base and

exploring their intersections with the guiding frameworks (the RLM and a developmental

perspective). The meaning that can be ascribed to the five clusters and their resulting themes is

described in more detail in each section below.

Cluster 1: Commitment

The current study found that YLTA alums are overwhelmingly still committed to the

YLTA program in some shape or form. While some alums work for the program or stay involved

through continued volunteering to support programming, others seek to spread and/or maintain

for themselves the YLTA values and principles that were instilled in them as student facilitators.

The findings of the current study underscore Tremblay et al.'s (2018) conclusion that YLTA has

a profound power to inspire youth in the north country of New Hampshire; alums stay involved

and give back to their communities, the YLTA program, the new youth choosing to participate in

YLTA, and Sean O'Brien, Adapt's CEO.

The Role of Process-Oriented and Empowering Leadership in Maintaining Commitment

Alums' commitment to the program seems to be supported by the leadership that is

instilled in participants through the process-oriented and empowering nature of YLTA

programming. Komives et al. (2013) highlight the benefits of process-oriented leadership,

positing that it allows for an integration of thoughts and feelings, which fosters meaning-making, highlights for individuals what they have to offer, and subsequently leads one to experience a sense of mattering, purpose, and fulfillment. Process is emphasized in YLTA through the debriefing sessions that are a part of each YLTA activity and the space that is provided for participants to reflect on their experiences during check-ins at school and regional group meetings (O'Brien, 2014). These individual and group reflection experiences presumably facilitated meaning-making for and subsequent experiences of purpose and mattering in YLTA participants. Therefore, it seems likely that alums recognize the value of what they did as student facilitators, albeit sometimes through disbelief, because of the frequency and level of reflection that they engaged in while participating in YLTA and that many continue to engage in on their own. This recognition also likely allowed alums to see for themselves how meaningful their participation was, during and since their youth involvement, and has played a role in maintaining the strength of their commitment to the program over time.

Komives et al. (2013) describe empowering leadership through both environmental and individual lenses; they highlight that one is empowered through an environment that safely supports one's taking on responsibility and where the positional leaders share their responsibilities. This definition of empowering leadership is enacted clearly by O'Brien and student facilitators in YLTA. By taking the onus for tasks, students start to see what they are capable of and take on more responsibility, thereby empowering themselves. YLTA further provides an empowering environment by allowing participants to find success in responsibilities given to them by O'Brien. Through such experiences in adolescence, these YLTA alums began to realize what they were capable of. This sense of competence, and likely the impact that they saw they were having on the lives of others, made the experience highly fulfilling, rewarding,

and meaningful. Several alums even explicitly stated their gratitude for the opportunities O'Brien and the YLTA program had afforded them. The sense of empowerment gained through YLTA participation is likely highly influential in alums decisions to remain committed.

Commitment Despite Alums' Phase of Life

While it is not entirely clear in which developmental phase each of the eight YLTA alums who participated are currently, based solely on their ages all would fall into the life phase of emerging adulthood, according to Arnett (2000). Arnett has described emerging adulthood as a period of life characterized by transience. This phenomenon appears to be true for many aspects of alums' lives, as evidenced by demographic and extraneous information collected during interviews; at that time, many alums had moved multiple times since leaving high school, several had yet to establish a career, few were in longer-term relationships, and the great majority were childless. However, although alums' lives were unsettled in some ways, all, notably, had sustained an enduring level of commitment to the program and its values.

There are a couple explanations that might account for this unusually high level of commitment and continuity in alums' lives otherwise marked by flux and transition. It is possible that the unique combination of elements in YLTA—community, acceptance, empowerment, purpose, support, meaning—might offer a different path forward for alums whose developmental desire might have otherwise been to be free and relatively unfettered during this time in their lives. It is also possible that O'Brien's enduring engagement with alums provides a unique opportunity for continuity and offers them the chance to be involved and stay connected. Alums' relationships with O'Brien seem to be powerful motivators for them to remain engaged.

Cluster 2: Sense of Self

The current study provided further evidence for the positive impact of YLTA involvement on alums' sense of self. The results suggest several areas where emerging adult alums' sense of self were influenced through program involvement. At baseline, alums gained self-knowledge and a sense of identity through their participation in YLTA. This is consistent with Tremblay et al.'s (2018) findings that current YLTA participants developed self-knowledge as a result of their involvement. Those results came from data that included the range of YLTA participants—not just student facilitators. The alums involved in the current study tended to have more intensive and prolonged exposure to the YLTA program due to their student facilitator statuses and were, therefore, presumably that much more likely to have developed a more integrated identity through their participation. Indeed, alums clearly came to align their sense of identity with the values of YLTA.

Empowered Leadership Begets an Empowered Sense of Self

Interestingly, the opportunities provided by YLTA often empowered alums to take on additional leadership and create positive change for themselves and in their communities. This finding is aligned with results of the Eccles et al. (2003) study, which found that youth development program participation facilitated both current students' and alums' continued civic engagement. Alums of the current study reflected on the role that their involvement in YLTA had in their decisions to get involved and take on leadership in other capacities, particularly in ways that support the community (i.e., through being an ally for members of marginalized communities, by developing work that supports local agriculture, and in continued volunteer efforts). The Tremblay et al. (2018) study highlighted two results that are congruent with these findings of the current study as well. The results suggest that (a) there is value in YLTA

participation due to it inspiring youth from rural areas to welcome and perform self-determination and (b) that YLTA provides copious opportunities for youth to experience their abilities and capacities and, therefore, become empowered to continue with leadership roles into emerging adulthood.

The current study provides nuanced details about the influential components of YLTA in creating empowered leaders. Alums felt empowered by the responsibilities and trust in their abilities to succeed that O'Brien gave them while they were student facilitators. This provided alums with a sense of mattering, an opportunity to figure it out and learn what they are capable of, and feel justifiably empowered. The other aspect of alums involvement in YLTA that empowered them seemed to be their role as student facilitators. This put alums in a position as adolescents of holding a certain level of power, knowing it, using it responsibly, and seeing the benefits for themselves and their peers, schools, and communities.

Risk-Taking Behavior Mitigated by an Empowered Sense of Self

On a related note, participation in YLTA may serve as a buffer to developmental challenges common to emerging adulthood. For example, Arnett (2000) pointed to the increased risk-taking behaviors, including substance misuse, of emerging adults because of their lesser responsibility and greater freedom compared to adolescents. The alums who participated in this study did not seem to be engaging regularly in risky behaviors and, on the contrary, tended to behave in ways that supported the value of making healthy choices, which they developed during their experience with YLTA. This conclusion is supported by the North Country Health Consortium's (NCHC; 2014a) study's finding that YLTA participants felt empowered to and capable of decreasing their own and other's substance use.

It is notable that most of the alums in the current study experienced increases in their confidence and self-acceptance due to their participation in the program. This finding is consistent with previous youth leadership research concluding that alums of extracurricular youth development programs experienced higher self-esteem as a result of engaging in the program's activities (e.g., Eccles et al., 2003). It is likely that higher levels of self-confidence and self-acceptance would be associated with decreased propensity for risk-taking, decreased need for validation from others, and the probability of better mental health overall.

Another potential reason that alums' risk-taking behaviors tend to be lower than non-YLTA peers, could be a by-product of their early and ongoing exposure to the outdoors and adventure activities. For example, one alum recalled avoiding parties in college; they didn't get into the substance use scene because they were out camping or doing other outdoor activities that they enjoyed on the weekends instead of getting drunk or stoned. In a similar vein, YLTA provides participants with opportunities to engage in "alternative highs" (Adapt NH, n.d.-b). Tremblay et al. (2018) similarly found that YLTA provides opportunities to youth who are typically under-resourced and have few extracurricular experiences in the rural area in which they reside and go to school. The findings of both the current study and the Tremblay et al. (2018) study call into attention the importance of providing hope, purpose, and alternative activities to disenfranchised youth.

Maturity Through Ethical Leadership and Sense of Self

In addition to being empowered through YLTA programming, alums appeared to benefit from the elements of ethical leadership inherent to YLTA values. Komives et al. (2013) describe ethical leadership in terms of one being authentic, acting in line with their morals and values, and allowing such values to guide their decision-making. In order to do this, one must have

self-knowledge. Through gaining a sense of self in YLTA and choosing to adhere to and align identity with the values and principles of YLTA, alums might be more easily able to facilitate authentically and stand up for what they believe in—even if they hold an unpopular opinion. For example, one alum recalled a situation in which they felt pulled to join their peers in joking that was occurring during a debriefing event at a conference. Since they were a student facilitator at the time, had been facilitating for a couple of years, and had so thoroughly aligned with the values of YLTA (i.e., positive leadership, maturity, composure, etc.), they recalled that they were able to easily refrain from joining in with the distracting behaviors of others and chose instead to serve as a positive role model for their peers.

It is challenging at any time in development, but especially in adolescence, to make unpopular decisions that put a teen at odds with their peers (Erikson, 1968; Komives et al., 2013). It is notable, therefore, that participation in YLTA appears to influence alums' ability to think on their own and care less about what their peers thought about them during their adolescence. It is also possible that their connection to the YLTA community has served as a significant alternative *in-group* that Erikson (1950) describes as being so formative for adolescents. From this perspective, it would make sense to think that the student facilitators did not actually care less what their peers thought about them; rather, they prioritized the opinions of their peers and advisors (O'Brien included) in YLTA over those of other classmates. It is also likely that the sense of responsibility felt by student facilitators in YLTA may have fostered this greater developmental maturity.

Cluster 3: Supported Development

Given the factors that influence one's capacity to experience emerging adulthood as outlined in Arnett's (2000) theory of development and since YLTA serves youth in the north

country of New Hampshire—a rural and under-resourced area—it is possible that teens in the area experience pressure for more rapid transition into the workforce, marriage, and parenthood than these alums describe. However, all of the YLTA alums that participated in this study describe a life of relative privilege. They self-identified as Caucasian and chose to pursue higher education following high school graduation, which seems to have afforded them all time between adolescence and starting a career and family. These alums seemed to leave the adolescent phases of their lives with a robustly formed sense of self and clear views about what they believe to be true for their own path forward. Alums' solid senses of self and highly developed interpersonal, decision-making, and leadership skills has likely been advantageous as they have navigated the exploration common in emerging adulthood and might have fostered a lesser potential for derailment via risk-taking and emotional turmoil.

Sense of Self and Values Aided Alums' Personal Development

It seems evident that YLTA participation had a significant effect on alums' identity development during adolescence. Alums recalled having learned about themselves particularly through their facilitation and leadership. They referenced YLTA as being unique in providing student facilitators with a purpose, direction, and a sense of identity. One alum named this explicitly, stating, "Who you were [in YLTA] mattered" (Alum 4) and others remembered being prompted to reflect on who they wanted to be during many YLTA events. This focus on identity development aligns with the task of both adolescence and emerging adulthood. Erikson (1950) deemed adolescence as the time to establish one's identity and Arnett (2000) corrected that identity exploration begins in adolescence but is more firmly prioritized through the tasks of emerging adulthood.

The sense of identity that alums gained while they were participating in YLTA during adolescence seemed to stick with them. In particular, alums have tended to maintain the values learned/gained in YLTA. Alums reportedly sustained the values of authenticity, openness and flexibility, acceptance of others and inclusivity, positive relationships, and self-care and wellbeing—from managing their mental health to their careful substance use habits. The findings that alums were able to maintain YLTA's values of self-care and wellbeing align with Eccles et al.'s (2003) study results, which suggest that both current students and alums of extracurricular youth development programs had decreased rates of substance use and led to better mental health in general. The latter was found by Eccles et al. to be most impacted by program participants' engagement in service-learning activities—which also happens to be one of the required activities of YLTA programming (O'Brien, 2014).

YLTA Supported Alums' Development of Professional Skills

In addition to supporting personal development, adolescent participation in YLTA helped alums to grow professionally. In particular, experiences in YLTA facilitated alums' smooth transitions into the workforce. This finding is consistent with the results of the Eccles et al. (2003) study, which states that alums of youth development programs that include service-learning activities had greater abilities when it came to attaining higher quality jobs throughout emerging and young adulthood. Similarly, YLTA alums in the current study either attended or are still attending college and some have gone on to attain graduate and professional degrees and certificates. This outcome is in line with the Eccles et al. (2003) study as well; the study found that students who participated in extracurricular youth development programs were likely to have better educational outcomes, such as increases in school attendance, higher grade point averages, and a greater likelihood of attending and graduating from college.

It is possible that alums' acquired leadership, interpersonal, and decision-making skills afforded them the opportunity, and therefore choice, in their educational and career paths. Alums seemed to be aptly prepared to make decisions about attending college and establishing a career. Results of past internal and external YLTA evaluations align with this conclusion. Findings from NCHC's (2014a) internal evaluation supplement current findings regarding alums' development of leadership skills. The NCHC found that youth who engage in YLTA gain skills that allow them to feel empowered and capable of creating positive change for themselves and their peers. Additionally, external evaluation from Tremblay et al. (2018) found aligned results in that YLTA impacts participating youths' leadership skills by giving them opportunities to lead themselves and each other, develops and improves participants' interpersonal skills, and facilitates participants' improved decision-making skills.

Tremblay et al. (2018) added potential influencing factors of YLTA on such development. They highlighted YLTA's use of experiential activities as being fruitful opportunities for participants to practice skills both implicitly and explicitly and shed light on the impact of having challenging yet empowering spaces for such practice. Notably, O'Brien (2014) called attention to the positive youth development (PYD) constructs of providing opportunities for prosocial engagement and promoting bonding, social competence, and behavioral competence, which he claimed are present in every YLTA activity and have been found to have a positive effect on interpersonal skills.

Cluster 4: Community and Culture

Results of the current study highlighted the significance of the YLTA community and culture on alums' experiences of leadership. The YLTA community and culture provided alums with a sense of belonging to something that was empowering, growth-fostering, meaningful,

unique, expansive, accepting, and bigger than themselves. These findings resonate with O'Brien's claims that YLTA adheres to PYD constructs and are supported by previous findings from Tremblay et al. (2018): YLTA builds a sense of community, promotes openness, inclusivity, and acceptance, provides opportunities for participants to grow and learn, and has the ability to impact larger environments, including the cultures of participating schools and communities.

The Influence of Meaningful Relationships With Younger Students, Peers, and Adults

YLTA alums spoke eloquently to the value of meaningful and reciprocal relationships, noting the deep connections they felt with Adapt staff, other student facilitators, and their peers and younger students who chose to participate in YLTA activities in some capacity. Importantly, the sense of responsibility and reliability that student facilitators felt coming from and having for others was meaningful in their development and capacity for sustaining enduring connections. Several alums recalled feeling empowered and capable of performing their assigned role because their peers and O'Brien had trusted them to do so. Additionally, one alum addressed the significant impact of admiring younger students on their sense of empowerment and healthy decision-making.

The relationships alums formed in the YLTA community were significant and unique. Several alums called attention to the fact that they did not experience similar empowering and inclusive spaces anywhere other than at YLTA. This was particularly true regarding alums experiences of being in the YLTA regional group. Part of what was so empowering and connecting about the regional group experience was that this was a space where student facilitators came together from different schools across the region, with a common goal (positive change for the larger community) and mission in mind (O'Brien, 2014). In this way, not only

was YLTA inclusive; it was also purposeful. Komives et al. (2013) highlight the value of a shared purpose in relational leadership and how it sparks commitment. This shared purpose and level of commitment underscores alums' sense of mattering and belonging to the group.

It is important to consider the influence of a dynamic and charismatic leader like O'Brien on the development of YLTA participants as well. O'Brien was—and remains—a powerful and compelling influence on the lives of these alums. It seems clear that O'Brien's preternatural capacity to see student facilitators' individual strengths was meaningful and empowering for them; when he distributed responsibilities, they had the added incentive of this relationship to motivate them to accomplish what he'd asked. It's likely that having a confident, caring, and *cool* adult that alums could look up to and who believed in them was instrumental in bringing out the best that YLTA student facilitators had to offer. Alums spoke to the role of O'Brien and other YLTA adult advisors in showing them what they are capable of, including pursuing higher education and discovering unique ways to be authentically successful.

Community as a Secure Base Supporting Acceptance of Difference and New Experiences

The YLTA culture, as enacted through its community and the relationships that make it up, supported alums' acceptance of self and others and pursuit of both individualized and collective dreams. YLTA's accepting culture had an enduring impact on alums' capacity to tolerate dissenting opinions. For example, alums described their developing skills in taking into consideration others varying perspectives and challenges without being offended or angry. Some alums even explained that they flourish in group projects because of their commitment to attaining diverse perspectives; they see the value in working with others who think differently than they do. This is the exact perspective that Komives et al. (2013) offer regarding the ways in which relational leadership can be inclusive. The value of inclusivity and acceptance promoted

by YLTA seems to have become a foundational characteristic in these alums. Such open mindedness easily spreads beyond student facilitators when they bring such values back to their schools through their roles in YLTA and in other leadership positions.

Additionally, alums in the current study expressed an openness to having new experiences. For example, one alum recalled taking the risk to go sailing for the first time because of the confidence they gained through other YLTA outdoor experiences. Another alum described taking the risk to move across the country to pursue a dream of living out west; they left the security of their home in New England, family, and a stable job to do so. The culture, values, and security in sense of belonging in the YLTA community likely aided in providing alums with the courage they needed to take on new opportunities and work toward achieving life goals.

Cluster 5: Influential Components

A through line among the additional three components of YLTA programming that arose as salient influences on alums' leadership experiences (program timing, emphasis on reflection, and the role of conferences) is each component's impact on alums' identity development. Primarily, it was significant that YLTA was offered in high school. To this point, alums highlighted the crucial role that YLTA played in providing them with something stable amidst the many other life changes associated with adolescence. As though conjuring a program like YLTA, Erikson (1950) claimed the virtues of the adolescent phase of development are devotion and fidelity; teens need to know to whom and with which groups they might identify to learn more about themselves.

Alums spoke to the ways in which the YLTA culture allowed them to be themselves, offered different perspectives to help them overcome developmental challenges, and helped them

to identify (through many opportunities for reflection) who they were and were going to be, in both character and career. Indeed, alums often aligned their identities with the values of YLTA. Such a level of devotion to the YLTA community and culture seems congruent with what would be expected of adolescents finding a way to learn who they are by becoming part of something bigger than themselves. YLTA's emphasis on self-exploration is intentional, based in an understanding of the developmental task of adolescents; the experience proves to be both formative and enduring in influence.

The YLTA alums interviewed maintained the value of reflection and presented as self-reflective both during the interviews and in their lives; this too seems like a skill fostered by engagement in the program. YLTA's emphasis and use of meaningful reflection with self and others seems to have been highly influential in alums' understandings of themselves and their leadership experiences. Such relational leadership is process-oriented; it deepens understanding of oneself and others and enriches meaning-making. YLTA experiences provided a multitude of opportunities for alums to understand who they were and wanted to be as adolescents, transform thoughts and emotions into meaningful and intentional action, and develop a sense of self. Relational leadership also allowed them to support such processes in others, further facilitating collective growth and deep connection.

It is notable that conferences, too, played a role in fostering positive identity development among the alums in the study. Indeed, conferences provide opportunities to grow, expand, and empower self and others. For example, one alum explicitly named conferences as a safe space for them to figure out who they were. From year to year, this alum showed up at conferences in different ways and felt free to explore how it felt for them to be presenting in the various ways. Conferences were deemed safe places for identity exploration because of the communities'

accepting culture. Additionally, the fact that conferences were regional events and, therefore, most students attending conferences had no prior knowledge of who the student facilitators were, afforded them the freedom of having no predetermined expectations or ideas about who they had to be. They didn't have to fit anyone's mold for them as they might have had to back at their own school; alums were free to be themselves, in any version. Tremblay et al. (2018) found similar results regarding the "galvanizing experience" and opportunity producing nature of conferences.

Implications of the Research Process

Congruent with a common theme among the five clusters, the research process for this study appeared to be empowering and meaningful for both me and the alums who engaged in it with me. By engaging in a semi-structured interview that focused on exploring alums' experiences, the study's participants were offered a new experience and a space to reflect upon the meaning of their YLTA experiences. While alums have continued to engage in meaningful reflection, many explained that it had been some time since they had pondered on their experiences with YLTA; some alums had never devoted time or energy toward understanding the meaning of their experiences with YLTA. Additionally, interviews served as a space for alums to enter into a richer dialogue with someone about their transformative experiences with YLTA. These novel conversations seemed to provide further meaningful experiences for them.

The six alums that also engaged in member checking appeared to derive further additional benefits. Many expressed how "cool it was" to see the ways in which I had parsed down all of what they had expressed over the course of about an hour into meaningful and relevant themes. They seemed proud and grateful for *being seen* and understood by me. They expressed appreciation for this extra opportunity to give back to the YLTA program and O'Brien, both so influential and meaningful in their lives. I, similarly, felt a sense of

empowerment by helping to reignite power and passion in the alums who were willing to engage with me. I felt connected to them and to those aspects of outdoor- and experiential-based learning and growth that I too feel so passionate about.

<div align="center">**Limitations**</div>

This study has a few notable limitations. The foremost limitation is the generalizability of a qualitative program evaluation. Implications and conclusions drawn can only extend to be meaningful for the YLTA program itself. While some broader speculations could be made regarding this study's implication for youth development programs' impacts on their alums, such conclusions are beyond the scope of the data collected. Additionally, the degree to which the current study's findings are meaningful to the whole YLTA program is also limited by the sample. Participants of the current study were alums who had been student facilitators in the recent past; they were selected because their engagement in YLTA had been meaningful and positive enough for them to have remained in contact with Adapt's CEO, Sean O'Brien. Therefore, we do not know about the impacts of adolescent YLTA participation on alums of the program who were not student facilitators and/or for whom YLTA had not been meaningful or positive enough for them to have remained connected to the program or O'Brien. This is also likely the reason why the current study's results are so overwhelmingly positive.

Findings are also limited by the fact that only qualitative methods were used to explore the meaning that emerging adult YLTA alums make of their adolescent leadership experiences. While many measures were taken to minimize the number of human errors and bias present in the study's results (i.e., reflective research journaling, peer debriefing and review of themes, member checking), I am not able to eradicate implicit bias nor entirely control my attention to responses that held particular salience for me. The results are therefore limited by the questions I

chose to ask in each interview, what I attended to during interviews and analysis, what alums were and were not attending to in their own experiences, and the fact that all interpretations were filtered through the lens in which I see the world.

Directions for Future Research

There are many avenues for future research regarding the impact of adolescent leadership experiences in YLTA on emerging adult alums' lives and the impact of YLTA more generally. Given the limited research that currently exists on youth leadership as well as Adapt's intention to establish YLTA as an evidence-based program for further dissemination, I can identify several compelling avenues of future inquiry. First, a quantitative study exploring leadership qualities and identity development might allow for more statistically-significant results, which tend to be more favorable when attempting to establish a program as evidence-based (G. Tremblay, personal communication, 2021). Through such research methodology, one might highlight outcomes, beyond general themes of experiences, of YLTA program participation in alums.

In another strategy, a longitudinal study might allow for pre- and post-program information to be collected. This would highlight concrete change and provide comparison data examining growth and development through adolescence and emerging adulthood. Exploring the maintained impacts of adolescent leadership in YLTA beyond two to nine years post-program-participation would further provide information about long-term outcomes.

Other avenues for future research could explore comparative data. Researchers might take interest in exploring life outcomes, stages of development, career, love, and worldview paths (building on the rich and growing body of data on emerging adulthood). Researchers might employ a sample similar to the one used in the current study with the clear difference of including either a control sample or comparison sample. The benefits of participation might be

compared to peers who did not participate in YLTA and/or attended a similar school in an under-resourced, rural area like the north country of New Hampshire that did not offer a YLTA program. Findings from research comparing YLTA to other youth development programs would also be informative.

Another fruitful direction for research might include exploration of other elements of intersecting identities. For example, studies might compare themes related to experiences in emerging adulthood of White, rural-residing YLTA alums with experiences in non-White, rural residing YLTA alums. This could highlight the impacts of intersectional oppression and/or the potential added benefits of YLTA programming for Students of Color in rural communities. However, prior to conducting such a study, YLTA will have to be further disseminated to include more Students of Color.

A last topic of interest for potential future research is alums' risk-taking behaviors post-YLTA participation and the role that the program's timing, values, and relationships play in mitigating such behavior. Research could focus on understanding how YLTA participation—and ongoing contact with the program—alters emerging adults' tendencies to engage in risk-taking behavior and the influencing factors on these tendencies. Particularly, a deeper dive into the role that the program's timing has on the alignment of alums' identities with YLTA values could call into attention the importance of the stage of development that YLTA participants are in while involved with the program.

Conclusion

This dissertation explored the meaning that emerging adult alums ascribe to their adolescent leadership experiences in a program being implemented in middle and high schools across the north country of New Hampshire, Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA). The

study's results highlighted the meaning that alums make of their adolescent leadership experiences and the factors that were influential in creating such experiences and meaning. Most notably, being a student facilitator in YLTA during adolescence elicited for alums profound and enduring senses of self, belonging, and empowerment. Clearly, the meaningful relationships and abundant opportunities offered through YLTA are significant and far-reaching, especially in supporting smooth transitions during a challenging time of development.

Overall, the study provided novel information regarding the lived experiences of YLTA alums' adolescent leadership experiences and broadens the base of research supporting the impacts of YLTA programming. Such nuanced findings provide implications for the benefits of YLTA programming that are maintained in alums who are at least two and up to nine years post-program participation. These findings support the dissemination of the YLTA program beyond the north country of New Hampshire. Further program dissemination could provide other adolescents and subsequent emerging adults the opportunity to have similar experiences to the alums who graciously agreed to participate in the current study.

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Tables

Table 3.1

Qualitative Data Table of Themes

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Commitment	… to program seen through varying degrees of continued involvement	8	It's very hard to be involved in the program…. I helped with orientation for the high school and the middle school. I try to talk to kids who are in YLTA, the program from my alma mater, as I'll call it. But just being in [city] makes it hard to be connected to that super closely. (Alum 3) I had a lot of really great times, and like, hope to continue having great times with it. So, I mean, like I said, it's something that I've been passionate about for a long time. And still am today, so like, I honestly do love any chance I can get to, you know, support this program and hope that it will have a lasting impact for other students in the future. (Alum 5)
	… to values, community, and YLTA mission seen in desire to pay it forward/share the experience with others	7	It's pretty clear in my mind it's, I feel like… if I can give back I will, you know? When given the opportunity, and Sean definitely has given me the opportunity, I'll always be back to help make it work. To help him. It's the whole reason I do… (Alum 1) ... that always feels like the natural progression, you do something as a participant, and then you enjoy it so much that you want to then be a leader and help other people get the same experience you got… it just feels like you always kind of trickled down with what to give the age group before you the same kind of magic that you got to walk through. (Alum 4) But I also love being able to help kids. A lot of my focus on, in high school and then even my career now is helping people but... It was always about I wanted to make someone else's life better so they didn't go through the shitty things I had to go through in high school, or middle school. So, I wanted to give them those skills. And if I did, or didn't, I wanted to at least make somebody's life slightly better. (Alum 6)

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Commitment	… due to experience having been meaningful, rewarding, and something for which they are grateful	4	... I was like, thinking on like, all the things that I had done with YLTA. And it's just like, I can't believe I did all of that. I can't believe I like helped all these kids with these different things. It's just like, this moment of like, almost like, disbelief at the fact that you were there for those things, that you were able to actually like... Because especially in like this world, it's hard to believe that you can actually make any changes in it. And so, I think that YLTA also inspires you to be able to make those changes and to believe in yourself and not - to know that you can. (Alum 3)
Sense of Self	Increased self-knowledge and identity	8	I definitely think I went into it lacking an identity and lacking self-awareness about who I was and what direction my life was heading. And what I was and wasn't good at and left it with a strong sense of who I was, what type of person I was going to be, what direction my life was heading, like, I definitely had answers or at least like, you know, I knew who I wasn't gonna be... (Alum 4)

I loved how much I could, I was able to apply what I knew already and what I was comfortable with, just to what I was doing. And a lot of that did come from knowing who I was, being comfortable in who I was, and then being able to know where my skill lies in these very specific areas... (Alum 6) |
| | Improved self-confidence and self-acceptance | 8 | Right, yea well I really contribute [sic] YLTA, KIP all the things I did to, to my, to getting the confidence that I have. I was very, I guess, for lack of better terms insecure about myself, and feeling as if I wasn't as cool or, or, or popular, as some of the other students. But after I did YLTA, it's like, you know, I don't care about that anymore. Like, I'm confident. I can step out of my comfort zone and put myself out there. (Alum 2)

I think there was also an acceptance of just who I was as a person. (Alum 6)

I think it had a gigantic effect in my confidence, in my ability to speak in front of people, you know? Like that, you mess up three times in front of a group and all of a sudden, you're not afraid of messing up in front of people anymore. Literally... you know? I, yea it was... I think it, it really affected confidence. (Alum 8) |

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Sense of self	Empowered to use strengths and skills recognized and acquired in YLTA to take on leadership and create positive change for themselves and in the community	6	YLTA has really had, had great meaning in my life because it's really taught me that, that I can do anything if I put my mind to it and I can put myself out there and if I'm different… You know...That's okay. I'm still doing what I'm passionate for. And I'm still making a difference in my community. Like, I don't have to be like everybody else to make a difference and to, to be successful. (Alum 2) … being involved with it too you can, you feel like you can make a difference. Like, even if it's just one person or two people, like, you do feel like you can reach somebody or, you know, make a positive impact on somebody else's life. That was one thing I really enjoyed about it. (Alum 5) I really feel if I didn't have Adapt or YLTA, because what I was a part of, that I really wouldn't push myself to, like, go out there and do those other things. (Alum 7)
	Identity in alignment with YLTA values	7	… post college the last 2 years, especially this past year, I think I've drank like once in the past three months so um, and I think that was more just a re-finding myself type of deal. (Alum 1) I know Merrowvista and YLTA are two different things. But um, you know, we did our conferences at Merrowvista but like their, their slogan at Merrowvista is like "my own self at my very best all the time." And that, that like, concept was, was consistent with YLTA, that you were going to try to be your unique version of yourself at your very best consistently. And I, yea so definitely 1,000% like that is still very much my identity... (Alum 4) … with being at college too obviously, I mean, you're influenced all the time and the peer pressure. And I felt definitely more, better off from the education with YLTA and things. And I was able to kind of avoid some situations because I was like, out hiking or something else. (Alum 7) … never am I like "I learned this at YLTA..." no... it's engrained. You know what I mean? Those experiences became... they became my experiences... It became my life as opposed to, "this one time when." (Alum 8)

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Sense of Self	Increased confidence in outdoor skills solidified interest in and orientation toward outdoor and adventure activities	4	I mean the biggest one I feel is my confidence in the outdoors. Uh, I mean just, and like it doesn't happen maybe the first trip or the second trip or the first conference or the second conference or whatever it is but at some point, I'm just like fully confident. (Alum 1) I would say 100% that my experiences with YLTA, like backpacking and canoe tripping and ziplining and whitewater rafting, all that, like, I knew that it was something I want to do for the rest of my life. And like, still to today, I kind of based my, my hobbies and like, all my interests around that, you know. (Alum 5) In my mind at the time, it felt like I was being force fed this alternative lifestyle that little did I know, would begin to become the direction of my existence... was getting outside. (Alum 8)
	Maintained values of self-care/wellbeing, authenticity, positive relationships, acceptance/inclusivity, and openness/flexibility	6	I feel like YLTA really, just that experience, has really helped me have a better outlook on life and understanding that like... Okay, if I'm upset one day, like what can I do to help make that better? If I'm feeling depressed... Like, what can I do? I can go outside and enjoy nature, have a hike, I can, I can talk to somebody that makes me feel happy and makes me laugh. You know, I can give back to the community and feel meaningful. (Alum 2) With being in such a small school, I know.... a lot of my friends, when they were in high school, they were, they are, they're gays or lesbians. But like when they were in school, they couldn't, they didn't feel comfortable coming out. And I always found myself being one of the first people that they told just because I was like, always, I was just accepting. I mean, I am still accepting I'm not was. I am still super accepting of that, where our community maybe didn't portray that they were accepting. (Alum 7)
	… of personal growth through adolescence into emerging adulthood	5	I felt like I had the skills and independence…like I felt so independent as is… mostly because of what I learned with YLTA and everything like that. It helped significantly and…I felt really strong and umm mentally sound. (Alum 1)

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Supported Development	… of personal growth through adolescence into emerging adulthood	5	… in high school, it's definitely very easy to be flaky, or to like, I guess you just have yet to develop for some people like a sense of like responsibility. I definitely, didn't have a sense of responsibility in all aspects of life. But like, when you know that, like someone's counting on you, that they've trusted you because, because they didn't, he didn't handhold us he didn't like, give us like a script to follow. He didn't, I often felt almost a little like I did, I did feel this a lot, like, almost like, "I don't know what I'm doing. But I have to figure it out." (Alum 4) I think I had a really, I had a larger understanding once I began being the student leader of like that internal monologue you have with yourself on the idea of like, what's right and wrong, and how to handle a situation. You know what I mean? Like the 15-year-old within me wants to laugh at the joke that disturbs the debrief conversation. You know what I mean? But the youth facilitator in me had to be like, "okay, even though you are one year older than these kids, perhaps, or maybe not even one year older than these kids. Like, you still need to be the voice of reason in the situation, you need to, you need, you know what I mean? You need to be the person in the room that brings things together." And so, I think it was this, following that kind of, being a student leader that young, I think really helped me instill the idea of, of right and wrong in a public situation and kind of how to act like an adult even though you're not an adult. (Alum 8)
	… of leadership, interpersonal, and decision-making skills	6	Yeah, I mean, I think communication is a really big factor. I just feel like YLTA really teaches good communication skills, teaches good teamwork skills. YLTA's really helped me be able to learn how to be the best leader for my, for my group. (Alum 2) You're at a conference and there's what, 200 kids running around the property. And you're like, "Okay, well, someone has to be controlling all of them..." And then you're like, "Okay, I have this coming up now. But I also have this in like, an hour. So, I have to know what I'm doing for that too..." which I think is an important skill, to be able to switch your mindset on what you're actually supposed to be teaching at that moment. (Alum 3)

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Supported Development	… of professional skills and eased transitions into careers	6	If I'm stuck without something to do, I'm like, pretty good at thinking on my feet. And I think I got that from YLTA, because it's like, "oh, I have a game that we can play," or "I have something else we can do instead of that," or "let's just," I think that one of the things that I learned the most from YLTA is how to debrief. And like, "Okay, what did we learn from this," because it's really hard to just, like, know how to do that. (Alum 3) I think it put me in a position that I became a considerably better interviewee than a lot of my friends. I know, that's very specific situation. But I definitely noticed that through the years more people asked me for help with interviews and resumes than anyone else I know. And I think that that probably comes from, you know, having to be composed. And having to, and even at being 15 years old, having to do that, you know, like you get your first taste of having to talk to people in front of a group and having a debrief. And putting those things together. You're doing something that the average kid is not learning until they're 19/20 years old. (Alum 8)
Community & Culture	Relationships with other student facilitators, adult mentors, and YLTA participants were empowering and engendered a sense of belonging and community	8	You know, that's what really, that's what really shaped my confidence. It helped me become more secure as a person, because I would, I would hang out with these really, really awesome people from different schools who are really cool. Especially like, definitely, at a younger age, when I was definitely in the younger parts of YLTA and I was hanging out with some of the older students... they were just so cool to me. And it was just awesome to be able to hang out with them. (Alum 2) Sean is one of the best mentors I've had. And I can appreciate the relationship we've built over the years, because he's just a, an incredible person... the way he works with people the way he gives you the leeway you need, but the, the respect he has for you, as well. And I have a huge amount of respect for Sean, and what he does. And I think for me, that sort of was the, the core tenet of what I enjoyed most is that I built a relationship with somebody who, who cared about what he was doing, but also cared about me enough to make sure I was getting everything I needed and making sure I was, was on the right path and doing these things correctly. (Alum 6)

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Community & Culture	Relationships with other student facilitators, adult mentors, and YLTA participants were empowering and engendered a sense of belonging and community	8	Where... kind of having that, where I was saying earlier that like, focal point of motivation, like, "Well, you know, I'm already I'm somebody in these circles of Youth Leadership Through Adventure," you know what I mean? Like, I, even, even then you can imagine, you're a 17-year-old kid, and you know, there's a group of 14-year-olds at the school miles away, that believed in you, and you may have had an effect on those kids. That's kind of a... you know what I mean? That's a momentum to push you to not go drinking or to not go to parties or something like that. (Alum 8)
	Being a member of the regional group was a unique, growth-fostering, and deeply meaningful experience	6	it's a bond that's just created not, you're all willing to be there, that's one thing. You're all volunteering pretty much to be there and so everyone has at least one common thing together but they also fully believe in the system umm because it's been successful for them and then they're also facilitating groups separately and then coming back and communicating about it and trying to be better. (Alum 1) It just felt like to me, I really felt like, like I was, I had a place there. And I felt like I was hanging out with some really cool kids, who, if I didn't do YLTA, I probably wouldn't have been able to hang out with them... I felt like I actually meant something to them. (Alum 2)
Community & Culture	The unique, expansive, and accepting culture of YLTA is powerful and has lasting effects	6	… what was so kind of addicting about YLTA was it was about character. Who you were mattered! (Alum 4) It created a very different environment from, honestly almost anything else I've experienced. (Alum 5) What's happening is you're taking a bunch of kids who have this idea of what's cool is their uncle or their cousin, or you know what I mean, their older brother, or whoever. That's their idea of cool, and maybe that is smoking cigarettes. And maybe that is smoking weed, maybe that is having a big truck. You know what I mean? You take that construct and you completely rip that construct down, you throw it out the door, and you're giving a whole bunch of 13-year-olds, 12-year-olds, 15-year-olds, the opportunity to see, you know, this guy's happy, this guy smiles, this guy's wearing a cool hat. This guy's got the shoes that I think are cool. And he doesn't have a big truck and he doesn't smoke cigarettes and he doesn't smoke weed. And he doesn't go parting. You see what I'm saying? You're building these brand-new constructs and all Sean meant to do was take us snowshoeing. (Alum 8)

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Influential Components	Conferences as opportunities to grow, expand, and empower self and others	4	I feel like the conferences specifically really open up your eyes to people, like life could be like this. Like everyone can be open. Everyone can be accepting. Everyone can challenge opinions in a respectful way and have fun doing it and so there was, that in itself opened it up. (Alum 1) The thing I loved about a conference is that you could be whatever version of yourself, you wanted to be there. And that was the best for me and trying to figure out who I was as a person anyway... (Alum 6) It kind of came full circle for me, when I was in college and I had to run like a family group is what they call them. So, you're, you're the like leader for the younger kids. And I remember I was, I was subbing in or something. And like, the kid that was the leader, I happened to be just kind of like outside of the room. And he was like, reflecting on his experiences. And he used me as an example. And he said, "Well, the reason really, why I continue to come to these things is because [name] pushed me out of my comfort zone." And so like, that was when I kind of realized. I was like, "Oh, I kind of can make a difference," and things like that. (Alum 7)
I	Meaningful reflection with self and others as avenue for growth	4	There was so much reflection in YLTA about like, what type of person you're going to be, about like how your actions affect other people, about the direction your life is heading. So, like, constantly in a state of reflection, even reflecting on your skill set, like "how did that go, when I ran that event? What would I do differently next time?" And so, the act of reflecting obviously, makes you more self-aware. (Alum 4) Yeah, like your ability to look back at a situation and pull information out of it. And… you know, your, your ability to, to not just have a situation happen, maybe a disagreement or something like that, and then just be mad. Your ability to, to take that emotion that you're feeling, turn it into words that make sense and aren't hurtful. Talk about it. You know, like the whole part of debriefing, of like... how do we turn what happened into a conversation that everyone leaves the room right now, feeling like they've gained something? … like the idea of a winner and a loser is literally irrelevant... Everyone is growing... (Alum 8)

Category	Theme	# of Interviews	Representative Quote
Influential Components	Timing of program during critical period of development	5	YLTA comes at a time when you need it the most. And so, it may not be because you have petty issues in middle school, it may not be because you're scared of college, you may not want to go to college, but there's got to be something in your life, especially during that time when you're changing so much and your life is changing so much, that YLTA helps you to like, not only step away from it, but think about different ways to approach it than what you're already doing. (Alum 3)
			It was what I was searching for. I was searching for a sense of self. I was searching for some, somewhere that I could... I was just, Dude, I was just like, trying to figure out life. I was trying to figure out like, how all these things that happened to me made sense… what they meant for me, what it meant about who I was, what options I had moving forward in terms of character, but also like, career and, like life, I just was trying to figure life out and it gave me something stable to hold on to for sure. (Alum 4)
			… you're still learning a lot about yourself when you're that young. You don't even know who you are, what you want, or what you like, at that point, just kind of going through the motions, cus we're talking in like early middle school. But I would say after like, you know, especially then, those like developmental years, I think that program's time is pretty crucial. (Alum 5)

Table 4.1

Demographic Information

Age	Percent (%)	N
19	12.5%	1
21	12.5%	1
22	12.5%	1
24	12.5%	1
25	25%	2
27	25%	2
Gender Identity		
Female	50%	4
Male	50%	4
Years Since High School		
2	12.5%	1
3	12.5%	1
4	12.5%	1
6	12.5%	1
7	25%	2
9	25%	2
Higher Education Pursued		
Graduate/Professional Degree	12.5%	1
Bachelor's Degree	87.5%	7
Current Occupational Status		
Student	25%	2
Professional	75%	6
Total	100%	8

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT LETTERS

Recruitment Email to Adapt CEO

Hi Sean,

Happy New Year! I hope you had a nice holiday season with your family!

As I mentioned during our last meeting, I'm starting the process of alum interviews. So, I'm reaching out in hopes that you can provide me with a list of up to 10 names, with accompanying email addresses, of YLTA alum who are at least 18 years old and 2 years post program participation and would likely be willing and able to participate in the study. I'm interested in learning how YLTA alum perceive their time in the program as having stayed with them over the last few years.

If you speak with any potential participant in advance at all, you can just let them know that I'll be reaching out to them via email asking to schedule an initial phone conversation where I will give them more information about the study so that they can decide whether or not to participate.

Thank you so much for your help with this,
Raynalde

--
Raynalde Schagen, M.S.
Evaluation Assistant
Behavioral Health Improvement Institute
Keene State College
Keene, NH

Connection Email from Adapt CEO

Hi all,

Happy New Year! I hope you are well. I am reaching out to connect you with our YLTA evaluator Raynalde Schagen. In addition to evaluating our program Raynalde is working on her doctorate at Antioch and is in need of interviewing YLTA alumni as part of her capstone project. Please read her email below and let me know if you have any questions.

Be well
Sean

As I mentioned during our last meeting, I'm starting the process of alumni interviews. So, I'm reaching out in hopes that you can provide me with a list of up to 10 names, with accompanying email addresses, of YLTA alumni who are at least 18 years old and 2 years post program participation and would likely be willing and able to participate in the study. I'm interested in learning how YLTA alumni perceive their time in the program as having stayed with them over the last few years.

If you speak with any potential participant in advance at all, you can just let them know that I'll be reaching out to them via email asking to schedule an initial phone conversation where I will give them more information about the study so that they can decide whether or not to participate.

Example Recruitment Email to Identified Potential Participants

Hi [Participant Name],

My name is Raynalde Schagen. I work with the Behavioral Health Improvement Institute at Keene State College, which has partnered with Sean O'Brien for several years to evaluate the impact of the Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA) program. We would like to tell part of that story through the eyes of young adults who participated in YLTA at least two years ago. Sean provided me with your contact information in hopes that you would be willing to share your version of the story with me. More specifically, I'd like to interview you about how you look back on your experience as a leader in YLTA, and any ways that experience has shaped your path into adulthood.

Participation in this project would involve three contacts with me: an initial phone call; a later 45–60-minute phone interview, and one follow-up email exchange for you to check how accurately I've captured your experiences in writing.

I'm also a student at Antioch University New England's Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program, which I mention because the results of the interviews with YLTA alum will become part of my dissertation project. No identifying information about interview participants will be included in my report for YLTA or for my dissertation. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have about how I plan to include alum stories in these reports.

In appreciation of your time and effort, I will offer you a $10 Visa e-Gift card after the project is complete.

If you are interested in participating in this project, please either reply to this email or send me a text message at (XXX) XXX-XXXX to schedule a time for our initial phone call.

Please be assured that if you choose not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with the YLTA program in any way.

Thank you for your time and consideration,
Raynalde

--
Raynalde Schagen, M.S.
Evaluation Assistant
Behavioral Health Improvement Institute
Keene State College
Keene, NH

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

Project Title: *Youth Leadership Through Adventure: Alum Perspectives on the Experience of Leadership*

Project Staff:	Supervisor:
Raynalde Schagen, M.S.	George Tremblay, PhD
Behavioral Health Improvement Institute	Behavioral Health Improvement Institute
Keene State College	XXXX@XXXXX
229 Main Street	
Keene, New Hampshire 03435	
Telephone: (XXX) XXX-XXXX	
Email: XXXX@XXXXX	

Purpose of this data collection activity: We seek to increase understanding about the leadership experiences of Youth Leadership Through Adventure (YLTA) alum. We hope to learn how being a leader in the program has impacted their young adult lives.

Eligibility: You are being invited to participate in this project because you are:

- A YLTA alum
- Over the age of 18 years old
- At least two years past the time that you were a student in YLTA

Procedures: You will be asked to have three contacts with the project staff:

1. An initial phone call to discuss the project
2. A 45- to 60-minute-long recorded phone call for the interview
3. A follow-up email contact to check that the project staff correctly understood what you told us in the interview

We are taking steps to protect your privacy. Each interview will be recorded. This will allow us to take time to sift through what we learn from you. The recordings will be stored without any identifying information in a password-protected, secure location.

Your real name will be replaced with a code in our records. We will use a pseudonym if we refer to specific participants in reporting. Only the staff named above will have access to the list of pseudonyms and codes. This list will be kept in a password protected, secure location.

Only the staff named above and one additional coworker will have access to the data collected through interviews. The coworker will help analyze the data. The coworker will not have access to the list of pseudonyms and codes.

Direct quotes from interviews will likely be used in the reporting of the project. These quotes will not be connected to any participant's personal information.

Risks & Benefits: It is unlikely that you will experience any harm from participating in this project. The interview does not intentionally explore any highly sensitive topics.

To thank you for your time and effort you will be offered a $10 Visa e-Gift Card after the project is complete.

Future Publication: By agreeing to participate in this project you are allowing us to include any results in future presentations and/or publications. All information will be de-identified before we use it.

Any quotes that are used will not be connected to any participant's personal information. We will ask for permission before we use any quotes that have sensitive subjects.

Voluntary Participation: You do not have to participate in this project if you do not wish to. You may stop at any time. You can withdraw even after we have completed your interview and we will not use your data. We will not ask for any explanation. To withdraw just let us know using our contact information at the top of this form.

Sean will not be notified of who participates. Opting out will not affect your relationship with the YLTA program.

Questions: Please feel free to contact the project staff at the phone number and email addresses listed at the top of this form.

Consent for Project: I, _____, have read the information in this form or it has been read to me. All of my questions have been answered. I willingly consent to participate in this project.

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Participant Age: _____ Participant Gender: _____

APPENDIX C: MEMBER CHECKING EMAIL REQUEST

Hi [participant],

I hope this email finds you well.

I've completed the initial data analysis for your interview. Attached is the table of themes I created for it. The themes are things that I saw as being prominent either across or at various points in your interview. They were my attempt at trying to make meaning of what you had shared about your experience.

Please note that I've used "they" as the only pronoun in all of the themes to help with de-identification purposes for later steps. "They" is referring to you in most cases.

If you wouldn't mind and are still able, I'd appreciate it if you would look over the table of themes, reviewing each theme for accuracy and for anything that I might have missed that feels like it would be important in capturing your experience. After reviewing it, please send me an email letting me know your thoughts/feedback (you can do this directly in the email or on an attached version of the currently attached Word document with track changes).

Once I have your feedback, I'll make any necessary edits and use the final themes from your interview in my overall analysis that spans across interviews. I'll also send you the $10 eGift card at that point.

If you have any questions about how I reached the themes I did or anything else regarding this process please let me know and I'd be happy to answer them.

Thank you again for your willingness to help. I'll hope to hear back from you soon.

Thanks,
Ray

--
Raynalde Schagen, M.S.
Evaluation Assistant
Behavioral Health Improvement Institute
Keene, NH

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Preamble

Hi, is this [participant's name]?

Hi, this is Raynalde calling from Keene State College's Behavioral Health Improvement Institute! We had scheduled this time for our interview about your experience of being a leader in YLTA. Is this still a good time for us to do the interview?

[If not – ask when a good time would be for us to reschedule. If it is, continue…]

Great! Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me and for taking the time to do this.

Just to give you a quick reminder, I'm doing these interviews so that I can gain an understanding of YLTA alum's perspectives of being leaders during their adolescent years and the impacts the experience has continued to have on them so that we can continue to grow the base of evidence supporting YLTA as an effective youth development program.

During the interview, answer the questions to the best of your abilities. There are no "right" answers.

I don't anticipate there being any topics that we discuss that will cause you to experience stress but that doesn't mean that it won't happen. Please know that, for whatever reason, if it does, you can ask to stop or pause the interview at any time. You can also have your interview withdrawn from the project if that feels necessary. And, your participation with this should not affect your relationship with the YLTA program at all.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Okay, great! Are you comfortable starting the interview now?

Okay, I'm starting the recording now and again, please let me know if you need to stop at any time.

Interview Schedule

[Numbered questions are starting points; alphabetically labeled questions can be used as prompts to elicit elaboration, as needed. Other unlisted questions can be included as well.]

1. What is your current relationship with the YLTA program?
   a. What prompted your decision to stay involved?

2. How did you first become involved in YLTA?
   a. What prompted your decision to join?
   b. What did you imagine the experience would be like?
   c. How many years as a participant in the program?

3. When did you begin to feel yourself stepping into a leadership role?
   a. How did it feel to transition into a leadership role during that time of your life?
   b. Where there influencing factors on the progression into the leadership role?

4. Can you tell me about what you did in your role as a leader in YLTA?
   a. How did it feel for you, as a high school student, to do [activities]?
   b. Is there any way in which you feel like you continue to engage in [activities] now?

5. What was the biggest difference you saw in yourself before you became involved in YLTA and after?
   a. What about differences in the way your life was?

6. Did being a leader in the YLTA program shape how you lived your life during high school?
   a. Decisions about other extracurricular activities?
   b. Choice of leisure activities?
   c. Relationships with (friends, family members, peers, other adults, etc.)?

7. Do you perceive your life now as having been shaped by the experience of being a leader in YLTA?
   a. What do you make of this influence?
   b. What is the significance of the timing of your involvement (adolescence)?

8. Beyond leadership, how are other parts of your life going now?
   a. Quality of life?
   b. Relationships?

      c.   What do you imagine, from your experience in YLTA, has been influential in your current experience?

          i.   Were there certain activities that YLTA provided that were more impactful than others?

         ii.   Was there anything about the people you were with that made it a particularly important or noteworthy experience?

9. How does it feel to discuss this experience now?

10. Is there anything else that would be important for me to understand about your experience of being a leader in YLTA during your adolescence… and the impact that it has on your life now?