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TOWARDS AN ECOSYSTEM OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of
Graduate School of Leadership & Change
Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Trisha Swed

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June 2023

TOWARDS AN ECOSYSTEM OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

This dissertation, by Trisha Swed, has
been approved by the committee members signed below
who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of
the Graduate School of Leadership & Change
Antioch University
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

TOWARDS AN ECOSYSTEM OF YOUTH LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

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Yellow Springs, OH

This study is aimed at understanding how youth leadership development programs can be more inclusive and promote a broader range of leadership values, qualities, and behaviors by focusing on young people who have been disaffected by leadership development programs. The study design was intended to provide a creative space for youth to engage in meaningful conversations about their evolving concepts and expectations of leadership. Using critical youth participatory action research to engage a group of youth, cohort members co-created a new youth leadership development program while addressing their identified challenges and needs. Findings from this study highlight the importance of adults in youth programs and provide insights toward an ecosystem approach to youth leadership development. Practitioners, funders, and community leaders can create more inclusive and meaningful youth development opportunities and programs by understanding the youth program's ecosystem. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu/>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

Keywords: youth leadership, leadership, leadership development, Black leadership, youth participatory action leadership, experiential learning, critical youth participatory action research

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The heat of the day finally began to break at sunset. The desert sun was ominous and there had been little relief from the force of its rays. This is the second day of an international four day leadership development retreat for high school students. Most of the participants were in their post-dinner program and I was taking a break walking along the open-air tents when one of the teens in my cohort ran up to me. She explained that Lori, another teen, was not well and that she needed my help immediately. Together, we urgently went to our tent, and I found Lori, sitting with her head in her hands sobbing, with a smattering of friends in other corners of the tent, concerned. Together, Lori and I walked to a private part of the camp where, between tears, she shared with me that she was not a leader, and she was pretending. She told me that she could not always be outgoing, she did not always want to be with people, she could not keep up with the intense back-to-back programming, and that she never wanted to tell me this before, but struggled with depression, and sometimes just wanted to do nothing. She apologized for wasting my time and wanted to call her parents to go home. My heart sank.

This program, which was built to help her harness her skills and empower her to lead, instead, taught her that she was not good enough. After hearing about Lori's experience of the program we went back to the tent and were met by her friends, all of whom were also skipping the current group program. "Why are you all here and not at the program?" I asked. There was a cluster of responses concluding with that they were tired and did not want to go. I questioned if this behavior was leadership behavior, and everyone started shifting in their spots. They were probably anxious about my reaction; I was a staff member of the program after all.

Once I gave them permission to share their feelings about the program and what they had been taught about leadership, I heard all the ways in which they felt the program did not meet

their needs. The obstacles the students described included the hour-to-hour programming with little down-time, no allotted alone time, and having to call themselves “sick” when they needed a break. The consequences of these experiences were wearing on their interpretations of what it means to be a leader and how they fit into that expectation. This moment strengthened my resolve to understand all the ways in which leadership development programs engage in meta-communication about who or what these young people should be. Leadership development programs are not only their curriculum content: The program is impacted by its structure, staff, programming, and distribution of resources all of which construct the leadership rhetoric being taught and internalized by young people and their communities.

I have been working in leadership program development for the past 12 years. Most of my experience has been working with non-profit organizations seeking meaningful ways for high school students and young adults to build and connect with their communities, which impact their daily lives. As a program director for several years, I witnessed various leadership development programs and their direct impact on youth. I developed some of these programs personally, and others were national or international curricula implemented locally. In these spaces there were many behind-the-scenes decisions being made and judgements being passed, all of them impacting teens in one way or another. There were times when judgments were passed on teens that impacted their ability to access resources and more times than not, sought to restrict their power. These judgements did not just come from other professionals but parents as well, sometimes calling me to say, “my child isn’t a leader, here is why, you may *not* want to consider them for this program.” These were some of my hardest phone calls. Often the reasoning the parent gave for calling commented on how “quiet” their child was or that they would never be fit for a board position at a school activity. In these moments I wondered what

would make adults treat teens in this way and how the youth were impacted by being either denied or granted access to youth leadership resources based on adult sensibilities.

Working with young people and helping them discover their ability to create change in their lives and communities is a passion of mine. Through experiential and youth-led programs, I have witnessed many young individuals with various abilities and backgrounds engage in meaningful community activities like philanthropy, grant-making, organizing educational community events, creating non-profits to meet community needs, and lobbying to create change local, national, and global policies.

Even in spaces where youth are advocating for incredible things and paving the way for great change, I have watched experts create and implement decisions in programs that have caused youth to disengage from their community and leadership altogether. Disconnection between how leadership is taught and how youth need to engage with leadership is perpetuated by parents, facilitators, community leaders, and curriculum developers. Raising the capacity for youth voices and identifying where these programs do not fully meet developing youth's needs is vital to serve and prepare all young people. I believe the co-creation of programs that serve youth and engage with research in positive youth development, leadership development, and community engagement, can promote organic and unique program models that tap into the needs of our changing generations and communities.

This study's goal was to uplift the voices of young people who have been negatively impacted by youth leadership development and focus on creating a space where those participants can create a program that would better meet their needs. Numerous studies on youth leadership development do not recognize or address the needs of youth who report having a negative experience of youth leadership development programs. Often, little attention is placed

on the feedback or needs of these students. This study sought to create a space for students to work together in developing a leadership development program that would meet their needs and expectations through youth participatory action research. The study's findings should contribute to the ongoing understanding of youth leadership development and critical leadership practices while providing youth development practitioners and educators with tools to critique their own youth development initiatives.

This chapter provides an overview of the study and its purpose, introducing youth leadership development and the current context of youth leadership development in the United States. The chapter will also review the intended significance of the study, related literature, youth participatory action research, and the study outline.

Background

Leadership development started taking root as a formalized practice in the United States in the 1920s. As the economy grew, organizations grew, along with the need to understand how groups are led (Avolio et al., 2009). Youth were not exempt from the trials and rhetoric of leadership development. Often, children are taught to fit leadership expectations and model the needs of adult communities (Roach et al., 1999; Whitehead, 2009). From organizations like Boys Scouts and Girls Scouts, even to high school educational programs, such programs largely rely on values and expectations of adults (Mechling, 2004; Roach et al., 1999). The Boy Scout handbook was written by adults, and while it references leadership as a value and resource, it does not explicitly define what the organization means by leadership (Mechling, 2004). This can lead to ambiguity for the youth who participate in the program, or provide opportunities for adults to create their own, sometimes self-serving, definitions. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching conducted a study on programs for gifted youth throughout New York

city, finding that leadership is often correlated with academic success which restricts the opportunities offered to youth who have varying academic performances (Roach et al., 1999). Furthermore, in some of these academic spaces, success was defined by how well a student adapted to an educator's expectations of leadership, regardless of independent student needs or cultural differences.

Research has displayed the immense successes of many youth leadership development programs in recent years (Klau & Hufnagel, 2016; Rushing et al., 2017; Stawiski & Martineau, 2014). A literature review of youth development studied by Karagianni and Montgomery (2018) found that many studies illustrate how programs have supported youth development and growth. However, how that change is measured, desired outcomes are defined, or how the program is monitored across teachers or groups of youths can leave room for interpretation of success. Often, significant resources are not put toward understanding how the program impacted students who did not benefit from it, especially if the program appears to have had positive results for most students.

When teachers, researchers and communities have little information about the reasons some students were disaffected by leadership development experiences those youth are left with the consequences. Some studies have expressed a concern for the possible harm being caused by a lack of understanding pertaining to the needs, resources and experiences of youth (Holland et al., 2007; Roach et al., 1999; Whitehead, 2009). Roach et al. (1999), in research for the Carnegie Foundation, described the potential for leadership development programs to be "an almost negative space into which practitioners project their own beliefs about what youth need" (p. 16). With little research focusing on the youth who do not benefit from leadership development programs, the potential to expand who participates in leadership is restricted. Moreover, some

negative leadership experiences can impact a student's self-esteem, motivation, and connection to community members (Buehler et al., 2020; Dworkin & Larson, 2007).

Assumptions Which Limit Leadership Development

Extensively reviewed by Liu (2018) and explored by others, leadership development is rooted in White Western cultural ideals, values, and expectations (Akorn, 2009; Boveda & Bhattacharya, 2019). Unfortunately, this lens for personal growth has fallen short for many people, including Black and Indigenous communities. Cultural values from other cultural groups clash with U.S. standards of leadership, but the experience of these communities within the social system is drastically different from that of White Americans (Boulden, 2007). Thus, leadership practices are often inaccessible due to power structures, privileges, and community preservation. This restriction on access to power and leadership processes is not exclusive to youth development but is seen throughout the field of leadership development field (Liu, 2018).

Educators and youth development practitioners should be concerned about what leadership development program practices isolate youth and overlook the realities of their needs and experiences. In a literature review, Whitehead (2009) discussed how some programs isolate students who exhibit anti-social behaviors and tend to focus on students who already exhibit adult vetted leadership qualities. Talking to young students to understand how the program did not support them can expose shortcomings in current leadership development practices and generate new ideas for how leadership can better serve more youth. Unfortunately, little work has been done to understand how leadership development programs modeled for young people impact young people who are disaffected by their programming.

When youth have negative leadership development experiences, it impacts how connected they feel to their community, their choices post-high school, and their emotional

well-being (Dworkin & Larson, 2007; Hansen et al., 2003). Youth leadership development programs can perpetuate the marginalization of youth by relying on a narrow lens of leadership development (Kahn, 2020). This study is aimed at understanding what type of program youth who have been disaffected by leadership development would create to support the growth of their peers and youth in the future. I hope this can expand information and knowledge on how programs, organizations, and communities can ensure more young people can exercise leadership and participate in the community. This chapter will next explore the concept of youth within society, youth leadership development and its shortcomings, the purpose of the study, study methodology, and study design.

Youth in Society

Until recently, it has been tricky to capture the narrative of youth. As Scheck (1988) argued,

The problem with being a childhood historian is there are almost no self-testimonies of children, in the past . . . If we want to have a description of children in history, we have to rely on reports written by adults. (p. 176)

Arguably we have had greater access to youth accounts through social media for the past couple of decades. However, even social media present altered content manipulated for a specific online identity performance (Turkle, 2016). As a result, it can be difficult to understand the full impact of youth leadership development programs. Therefore, it is essential to review contemporary accounts of youth leadership development programs and the theories that support them.

The experiences and expectations of youth change depending on the environment, culture, and context in which an individual is working (Jenkins, 2014). Young people develop their self-identity and a sense of personhood through the interactions they have with their environments and their internal process, emotions, and perspectives. This combination of internal

and external forces blends to create patterns of identification that impact how a person sees themselves and participates in society (Poole, 1994). Until recently, children have been primarily seen as extensions of their parents, beings without power, influence, or social capital (Holland et al., 2007). This perspective limits youth opportunities and experiences, which lessens the potential role children can play within their communities.

Because adult figures moderate much of an adolescent's life, it is essential to explore the various roles adults and organizations can play in supporting positive youth leadership development. A wide variety of literature touches upon mentors and the importance of positive non-parental figures on a young person's life (MacNeil & McClean, 2006; Roach et al., 1999; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Xing et al., 2015). In addition to the role of individuals, communities and organizations also play a vital role in developing teens and young adults (Dowds et al., 2017; Hastings et al., 2011; Klau & Hufnagel, 2016; Komives & Johnson, 2009; Rosch & Stephens, 2017).

Communities that engage with positive youth leadership development do so in various ways. For example, some programs focus on specific skills or leadership styles young leaders are expected to have (High-Pippert, 2015; Hohmann et al., 1982; Komives et al., 2005; Whitehead, 2009) while others take a more collective and youth-led approach (Archard, 2013; Dowds et al., 2017; MacNeil & McClean, 2006). Also, some programs engage non-traditional skills or aspects of leadership as a way to illustrate the different modes young people can enact and engage in leadership (Stawiski & Martineau, 2014; Young, 1986).

Youth Leadership Development

As the world has changed, so has the role of youth in society and the field of youth leadership development. As communities grow and become more connected, developing youth

to be the next community leaders is greatly valued. Unfortunately, in most leadership literature, youth are rarely if ever, mentioned (Klau, 2006; MacNeil, 2006), but adult leadership theories have historically taught young people what it means to lead their communities (High-Pippert, 2015; Hohmann et al., 1982; Roach et al., 1999; Rushing et al., 2017; Whitehead, 2009).

Misalignment of youth and adult leadership is based on a failure to recognize the different ways systems privilege the power and status of these other groups, including youths, in addition to the individual's positionality within a community. In recent years, new questions about youth leadership and our youth leaders have begun to change the expectations of youth leadership development.

Many youths learn about leadership development through structured programming (Benson & Saito, 2001). These intentional environments, often led and created by adults, can take several forms and have their own goals and outcomes. However, most leadership development programs push youth toward pro-social behaviors (Champine et al., 2016; High-Pippert, 2015; Lamm & Harder, 2009; Whitehead, 2009), while few acknowledge other ways of leading such as self-awareness and reflection (Archard, 2013; Stawiski & Martineau, 2014).

Current Shortcomings in Youth Development

While many programs are consistent in their demand for pro-social experiences, many inconsistencies exist in how programs define leadership (Klau, 2006) and expectations related to gender (Archard, 2013; High-Pippert, 2015; Lamm & Harder, 2009), race (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014) and other identities. Furthermore, much of the research provides little to no room for racial or cultural distinctions (Klau & Hufnagel, 2016). These

inconsistencies can be challenging for students in the prime of their biological development (Van Linden & Fertman, 1998).

The foundation of leadership development does not match modern emergent youth (Klau, 2006; MacNeil, 2006). With leadership development's roots grounded in business, many of the applications for leadership development focused on productivity. Unfortunately, the needs of youth and youth development are not centered around business and productivity, but growth, experiences, and learning. Organizations and programs will often approach youth leadership development as something young people will learn about now but not use until another time or place (MacNeil, 2006). These practices of teaching students how they can lead later on can lose relevance quickly and disengage youth from important roles, messages, and processes.

The pro-social assumptions of youth leadership development place marginalized young people on the further outskirts of leadership (Archard, 2013; Stawiski & Martineau, 2014; Young, 1986). When put in overwhelming pro-social positions, many young people may shut down from participating or feel they need to change to participate (Cain, 2013). Since leadership comes in many forms, it is limiting to demand a pro-social orientation toward leadership and development (Stawiski & Martineau, 2014).

Young people often experience limited leadership because of adult-moderated and constructed content (Klau, 2006; MacNeil & McClean, 2006). At the same time, being "youth-led" is sometimes claimed to be at the heart of a program. Often, restrictive structures or organizational restraints around the process of leadership prevent young people from taking ownership of their experiences (Klau, 2006; Whitehead, 2009). Sometimes organizational priorities or personal biases can result in stakeholders taking advantage of a youth-in-development to indoctrinate their desires for youth outcomes instead of serving youth's goals

and desires (Clay & Turner, 2021; Klau, 2006; Roach et al., 1999; Whitehead, 2009). When students are granted the ability to create new models and are successful, often adult-educators become the center for translating and replicating success (Scheck, 1988). One approach that tries to overcome some of the challenges faced in youth leadership development is positive youth development.

Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development (PYD) is a systemic approach to supporting youth developing skills and tools which promote desired outcomes (Lerner et al., 2005; MacDonald & McIsaac, 2016). This approach to youth development contradicts more conventional deficit models of approaching youth. Deficit models address youth as lacking in resources and focus on preventing undesirable behaviors. However, as Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003) stated, “Problem free is not fully prepared” (p. 170), and so, PYD seeks to provide tools to help young people feel prepared for taking on adulthood.

Many PYD models include the “five Cs” of PYD: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Bowers et al., 2010; MacDonald & McIsaac, 2016). While they may seem desirable amongst youth, some argue that these traits do not consider a wider range of youth experiences and assume a level of power, privilege, and clear cultural expectations. To be more responsive to the needs of diverse groups of youth, studies should include two more tenets: critical reflection, and critical action (Gonzalez et al., 2020). When youth development programs successfully adopt a model which considers the tenants of positive youth development, young people have a better sense of possibilities and report more confidence, and self-efficacy (Delia & Krasny, 2018; Lerner et al., 2005).

To create development programs that support more types of youth, it is important to understand how leadership development and youth leadership development have evolved. Chapter II will further detail the nuances of leadership development and how it can promote limitations for youth. The following sections will review the purpose of this study as well as go into the research method and design and provide an outline for the rest of the study proposal.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to learn how youth leadership development programs can be more inclusive and promote a broader range of leadership values, qualities, and behaviors by focusing on young people who have been disaffected by leadership development programs. This study provided a creative space for youth to engage in meaningful conversations about their evolving concepts and expectations of leadership. Utilizing critical youth participatory action research (CYPAR) to engage a group of youth who have been disaffected by leadership development programs, the study co-created a new development program, while addressing the tools and needs identified by the young participants. Many students who have had positive leadership development experiences carry their confidence and skills to other life phases like participating in leadership positions in college and the workspace. By engaging with students who did not feel they fit the qualifications to participate in leadership or had been involved in a leadership development experience that affected them poorly, this study gained insight into the following research questions:

- What are current youth leadership development practices that can disaffect youth?
- How can current youth leadership development programs better reflect the needs and values of the youth and communities they serve?

- What would the content and structure of a leadership development program, created by youth who have been disaffected by leadership programs or discourse, look like?

Research Method and Design

Youth Participatory Action Research

This study used Youth Participatory action research (YPAR) to explore the needs of young people. Working with youth closely to address community needs has become increasingly popular since the 1980s (Anyon et al., 2018). Youth were once understood as a group with no social capital in society and with little-to-no relational influence on their communities. However, recent studies have shown that adolescents develop and utilize their social capital in many situations, including formal and informal school settings, community settings, and other even online (Hastings et al., 2011; Holland et al., 2007; Turkle, 2016). Developing social capital allows young people to access more information to help navigate complex life situations and promote community inclusion, belonging, and usefulness (Hastings et al., 2011; Riddell, 2017). Interacting with communities and being integrated into social systems are crucial components of healthy positive youth development (Klau & Hufnagel, 2016; Stawiski & Martineau, 2014; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Xing et al., 2015). These also help youth develop social capital or the ability to assist in significant growth and social transitions, like moving from one social context to another (Hastings et al., 2011; Holland et al., 2007). YPAR has gained popularity since it effectively upholds the value and influence of youth, allowing for non-traditional ways of understanding community needs to surface.

At the cornerstone of YPAR is Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which provided new ideas on creating knowledge, teaching, and understanding truth. Freire encouraged dialogue between people and communities so that together they can create new channels of

information and types of knowledge. Much of the foundation for action research is built on the principle that too often the expressions and concerns from members of particular group are overshadowed by a lack of power and privilege to participate in social and societal discourses (Bertrand, 2016; Powers & Allaman, 2012). Creating spaces for more dialogue between groups of people and improving society fueled the need for YPAR to exist. Adding youth, the YPAR is a fundamental way to move beyond a deficit lens by looking at youth in our communities. Instead, this process supports young people in discovering their resources, skills, experiences, and narratives are essential to creating change and repairing communities and relationships (Mirra et al., 2015)

YPAR is a research methodology that creates a relationship with youth and adults to identify, research, and design interventions to meet community needs (Anyon et al., 2018; Henderson & Tudball, 2016). The history of YPAR is entangled with several social movements worldwide (Mirra et al., 2015). At first, action research within educational contexts focused on empowering teachers throughout Britain to control their schools and focus on reshaping the teaching process. As critical perspectives in education and learning evolved, action research began to incorporate the voices of different groups of people. In each account, action research is understood to liberate communities of people and promote more equitable knowledge production (Mirra et al., 2015). Four principles lay the foundation for YPAR practice:

1. Researchers must substantiate the experience in youth perspectives and concerns.
2. Youth are co-creators of the methods used to explore the topic.
3. Youth must create an active intervention to address the needs and concerns of the community.
4. Youth must have a sense of ownership throughout the process.

Unfortunately, these principles are easier to have as intentions than put into practice. Most YPAR studies do not adequately utilize youth's knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, prioritizing adult ways of managing or addressing a community need (Anyon et al., 2018). Many adult-centric needs and ways of addressing those needs come into focus when leadership development programs do not include youth voices in every aspect. Having youth understand challenges with leadership development today and use new ways to engage with the concept of leadership, allows for new and less common or visible ways of knowing and leading to come front and center.

Study Design

This study recruited 12 high school students ages 15–18 from the United States who self-identified as having had negative leadership development experiences. Participants were recruited through a short anonymous survey about their leadership development experiences. This survey was distributed to the students through community partners with which I had established relationships through my work over the last 11 years. Once the students were recruited, they engaged in an online group process of learning and researching about leadership development, sharing their own experiences, identifying their ideal goals and priorities of a new development program, and designing how those goals will be met through creating their own learning activities and program curriculum. The group met for six two-hour workshops over the course of five and a half weeks. Some of the members also participated in post-program conversations. The study design will be further described in Chapter III.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter I has been an overview of the study and work to survey the major concepts and considerations included in this study. Chapter

II is a literature review exploring the complexities of youth leadership development, possibility development, and experiential education. Chapter III is an in-depth review of the study's methodology and implementation structure. Chapter IV presents the findings and themes which came out of the study. Finally, Chapter V reviews the implications of this study and provides recommendations to practitioners and communities that are involved in or considering getting involved in youth leadership development.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership development programs like the one described at the beginning of Chapter I, can be more common than realized. The language, expectations, and values of many youth leadership development programs share roots and experiences that are akin to one another. By taking a deeper look at the foundations of modern leadership development and its impact on youth, researchers can better understand who is included and excluded from leadership practices and positions.

This literature review explores the foundations of leadership development and how it led to a field of youth leadership development and programs. Within this context, this review will focus on who is left out of leadership institutions, where that exclusion comes from, and the impact exclusion has on youth. The first section is a brief introduction to leadership development, followed by a review of youth leadership development and a discussion of who is left out of leadership rhetoric and its impact on young leaders.

Leadership Development

Leadership and leadership development are a fundamental part of human society, and human beings have been working on creating systems to ensure the best practices are taught to future generations since before Machiavelli and Plato. As human beings evolved, so have our understanding and expectations of leadership. In 1978, James McGregor Burns wrote the book *Leadership*, which laid the foundation for more recent leadership characteristics and theories. Burns' take on leadership marks the first calling toward studying "new-genera" leadership theories such as transformational and charismatic models (Avolio et al., 2009; Gigliotti & Shankman, 2021; Van Vugt, 2006). The expansion of these leadership theories focused on the preservation and production of capitalism and goals of economic prosperity (Burns, 1978;

Gigliotti & Shankman, 2021). Burn's (1978) definition of leadership highlights this focus through an emphasis on economic and political gains and the cornerstones of capitalism: conflict and competition.

The leadership models that have been the focus of formal studies often developed from a White Western male-centric point of view (R. L. Allen & Liou, 2019; Liu, 2018). During the 1970s and 1980s, when some of the most influential modern publishing on leadership was released in the United States, the country was coming off the heels of recognizing the consequences of institutionalized segregation, assimilation, and gatekeeping, while also balancing a blossoming civil rights movement. Native Americans, African Americans, women, people with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQAI+ community are just a few of the groups who have been pushing for equal rights in the more significant political landscape. These groups did not have laws that protected their interests or, in many cases, recognized their humanity. For most of U.S. history, groups of people have been barred from social institutions and practicing their culture and language (P. G. Allen, 1990; Hudes, 2021; Kendi & Blain, 2021; National Library of Medicine, 2015). These groups faced extreme violence when they resisted assimilating to mainstream trends. Many of the new powers and nuances from social movements in the 1970s and 80s were missing from the leadership writing of that time. Preoccupied with protecting post-war economic prosperity, leadership theories did not consider that excluding different human identities may limit the reach of leadership studies and development for generations to come.

As leadership studies were blossoming, people with the most power intentionally created political figures, processes, and characteristics to bar groups of people from participating in primary social institutions (Alfred, 1999; Kendi & Blain, 2021). This filtration through access to

power and leadership created an ideal type of leader within American and Western society (Jenkins, 2014). These ideal types are models for what we look for in other and future leaders. Forming fundamental modern leadership theories against such a revolutionary moment in American history prevented particular identities, cultures, and values from being a part of mainstream leadership norms and expectations. Unfortunately, not enough focus is on the exclusionary practices of leadership rhetoric throughout leadership development in the United States. This section will take a further look into the ideal type of leader in American culture, how characteristics of leadership embody whiteness, and what groups and values are subsequently excluded from leadership and leadership development studies.

Leadership and the Ideal Type

The best practices, values, and ideas of people in leadership and leadership positions are circulated amongst American media and business professionals. Through these materials, we can piece together a pattern of characteristics valued by the larger group. This pattern results in an *ideal type* that community members favor. In Weber's (1949) foundational work on ideal types, it is clear that the ideal type is based on a perceived sense of what is right and wrong and what traits will better serve the group, regardless of if the pattern of characteristics is truly serving the needs of the group. When communities create ideal types, those who decidedly emulate the ideal do not possess all the qualities within the construct. Instead, the individuals who represent the ideal type must orchestrate a convincing enough performance (Jenkins, 2014). Unfortunately, an aspect of the perfect type phenomenon is that community members who emulate all the qualities of the ideal type but provide a less-than-perfect performance are denied the privilege of being treated as leaders. Through a Social Identity Theory lens, this misalignment will change depending on the social context a person finds themselves in. If a person finds themselves in

social communities which deny their abilities to self-categorize it can impact their mental and physical well-being (A. Haslam, 2014). This confirmative approach to social expectations and the roles people play in them can create opportunities for power and resources to influence who is the ideal model (Lowe, 2013; Reicher & Haslam, 2009).

Ideal types are present in all aspects of human life. Before a person can form an opinion about a concept, they imagine an ideal type which they then use to measure their experience against deciding or placing judgment (Jenkins, 2014; Weber, 1949). The ideal types a person constructs personally are informed by social expectations and needs as well as personal ones. Slightly modified interpretations between people can leave room for variations in the community's ideal type; however, often, those variations do not stray too far from the community standard to preserve the individual's role, privilege, or power within the community and to ensure the continuity of the group in its present form (Lowe, 2013).

Any average person can uncover ideal leadership and leadership development types by picking up the latest magazine, reading the newest LinkedIn blog, or turning on the television. Weber (1949) first discussed the ideal types of leadership as rational, traditional, and charismatic. These ideal types were built upon by Burns (1978), who introduced transactional and transformational leadership styles. These ideal types continue to prevail through American organizations and expectations (Schneider & Schröder, 2012). However, these ideal types are associated with challenges, which may make leadership inaccessible to some (R. L. Allen & Liou, 2019; Liu, 2018; Liu & Baker, 2016). Underpinning most Western leadership ideologies is White supremacy or the belief that whiteness and White people are superior to all others, especially Black people (Embrick & Moore, 2020; Liu, 2018; Liu & Baker, 2016). A young person experiencing leadership for the first time and learning how leadership works in society

will not be exempt from heavy messaging about white supremacy. This foundational layer of Whiteness in leadership will set up the expectations and experiences of a young person, regardless of their race or cultural background.

Characteristics of Leadership and Whiteness

It is important to note that all the formative writers of leadership in the previous section were cis White straight men. This limited view of who or what brought about the systemic legitimization of leadership is at the center of colonial practices and white privilege. What these scholars uncovered and stamped as academic knowledge was done so through a system crafted to limit who has power and voice. Recently, more scholars have studied the importance of other ways of knowing and have been highlighting the implications of leadership ideologies based on whiteness and White power (R. L. Allen & Liou, 2019; Boveda & Bhattacharya, 2019; Embrick & Moore, 2020; Liu, 2018; Liu & Baker, 2016).

As Liu (2018) eloquently said, “Leadership had always been a love song to whiteness” (p.102). Traditional or White leadership practices value self-assurance (Liu, 2018), hierarchy (R. L. Allen & Liou, 2019; Embrick & Moore, 2020), and white skin (Gündemir et al., 2014; Lowe, 2013; Ospina & Foldy, 2009). In one study which demonstrates how this operates practically, students implicitly correlated individuals with white skin with positive leadership traits more often than other ethnic or racial groups (Gündemir et al., 2014). Even though Whiteness and other traits are not universal leadership requirements and only speak to a small group of people, whiteness is embedded in leadership at every level. With these traits occupying the forefront of leadership, many Black, Indigenous, or people of color cannot fulfill the fundamental requirements of “traditional” leadership culture. To delegitimize the leadership strengths of other peoples, Western leadership culture overemphasized structure, morality, and normalized

centering Whiteness over others at all costs (Embrick & Moore, 2020; Liu, 2018; Lowe, 2013). These principles of Whiteness in leadership are so pervasive that many White scholars working to support Black and Indigenous communities take on a savior complex by centering their Whiteness over the experiences, knowledge, and voices of others (Liu & Baker, 2016).

Black and Indigenous communities have been cultivating leadership norms that do not center on whiteness and are often overlooked or systematically restricted. These beliefs and traditions have provided a foundation for communal continuity and, in some cases, have offered a space for healing from colonial harm (Alfred, 1999; P. G. Allen, 1990; Boveda & Bhattacharya, 2019). The following two sections will take a closer look at North American and Black communities' leadership characteristics to explore further the barriers and challenges groups of people face in leadership development.

North American Indigenous Leadership

The indigenous people of North America have rich leadership traditions that honor emotional connections between people within a community, learning from elders, taking care of the earth, and storytelling (Alfred, 1999; M. E. Lewis et al., 2019). Indigenous customs of North America often look at the relationship between individuals and their communities through a lens of obligations instead of rights (Alfred, 1999). However, colonizers imposed different values and leadership expectations on indigenous communities. These styles introduced new power hierarchies, abandonment, exploitation of nature, and a new relationship to emotions. Indigenous people who did not assimilate and adopt the new power structures or behaviors were ostracized, tortured, or killed. Indigenous children were taken from their families to residential schools to indoctrinate youth with new ways of leading, learning, and operating in society (Alfred, 1999;

P. G. Allen, 1990). Many children who did not meet these expectations were abused, and thousands were killed and buried in unmarked graves.

In recent years, many Indigenous communities of North America have been exploring ways to reclaim their culture and voice within modern societal structures. Essential characteristics in Indigenous communities include emotional connection, listening, and shared leadership (M. E. Lewis et al., 2019; Monchalin et al., 2016). These traits contrast entirely with the foundations of white western leadership. One new leadership theory, ensemble leadership theory, does not focus on one individual in the group to carry the load of decision-making and supporting community needs (Rosile et al., 2018). Instead, this Indigenous leadership style focuses on all individuals and the quality of relationships between individuals and the collective. These practices are not only found within adult leadership development but work with their youth on developing community leaders who are embodied and healing through history.

For example, in one Cherokee community, youth leadership development programs focus on characteristics like listening, taking care of others, shared leadership, deep emotional connections, and transforming competition into cooperation (M. E. Lewis et al., 2019). In Canada, Indigenous youth leaders focus on cultivating characteristics like being humble, connected to family and community history, and a willingness to listen (Monchalin et al., 2016). Indigenous leadership styles do not intend to perpetuate the same leadership development practices that have traumatized generations. Instead, they have looked to reconnect with the traditions of their ancestors to find new ways of leading and growing communities (M. E. Lewis et al., 2019; Monchalin et al., 2016). This difference proves to be a challenge for individuals who connect to indigenous cultural norms but find themselves working in a white leadership space.

When indigenous people are excluded from communal discourse about leadership or their leadership values are dismissed, there are consequences not only to the individuals who feel undervalued but to the land and environment (P. G. Allen, 1990, 1993; Boveda & Bhattacharya, 2019). The consequences of colonialization and white leadership have left indigenous communities in poverty, cut off from life-sustaining resources, and faced with the burdens of addiction, poor living conditions, and poor mental health (Alfred, 1999; P. G. Allen, 1990). Leadership development programs honor indigenous ways of leading and learning by empowering individuals to make deep emotional connections and create counter stories to take back their histories and communities (Brayboy & Chin, 2020; Liu, 2018). In contrast, some Indigenous voices and values have been brought into community settings more recently (Lickers, 2016; Wihak et al., 2007) although these practices are rarely incorporated into mainstream leadership development programming.

Black Leadership

North American Indigenous communities have a different relationship with North American leadership than other cultures and groups. White settlers forced their way onto the indigenous people with brute force, stealing land and killing people. However, many Black communities in the United States were bought and brought to work as enslaved people. The relationship Black people have with leadership and the expectations for future generations of community leaders has been influenced by several factors. Some of these include, coming to a new land, sometimes through radical violence, and carrying unique cultural, practices, rituals, beliefs, and role models. Black leadership and American culture include people who have come to the country by means other than slavery. While some Black Americans may not have had direct experiences with racism or institutional racist practices, many Black Americans face

similar challenges as a direct consequence of implicit and explicit barriers keeping Black people from accessing their full power, privilege, and humanity (Kendi & Blain, 2021).

In August of 1619, the ship, *White Lion* landed in Virginia with a group of enslaved Black people, men, women, and children, one year before the *Mayflower* (Hannah-Jones, 2021). Since arriving, the humanity of Black people has been restricted, with their liberties often more constricted than livestock. The early 1900s were blanketed with rhetoric about the inferiority of Black people and presented with heroic imagery of White people “lifting up the rest of the world” (Battle-Baptiste & Rusert, 2018, p. 19). In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois posed an important question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” (Du Bois, 1903/2015, p. 2), describing a veil and double consciousness which burdens and restricts his existence as a Black man in White America. As a result, Black American communities are limited from participating in many, if not all, social institutions throughout the United States, including leadership. Even after the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, the struggle for Black communities and leadership did not end. Instead, as former United States Representative John Lewis (2012) noted, many leaders of the Black community are diminished in popular American rhetoric as old, meek, and passive. A long history of slavery, social injustice, displacement, political sanctions, brute force, and mass incarceration has left Black Americans to bear the stigma of being too loud, too mean, and too angry when demonstrating the same leadership privileges of their White-American counter parts (Adichie, 2013; Dunbar, 1913/2019; Giovanni, 2020; Kendi & Blain, 2021; Sices-Sibley, 2021).

Black leadership in the United States emphasizes survival, protection, community, expression, power, and decolonizing systems (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Love & Jiggetts, 2019). There is a particular emphasis on liberation, freedom, and emancipation from the systems built to keep Black people at a disadvantage (Akom, 2009; Kendi & Blain, 2021; Love &

Jiggetts, 2019). These characteristics often explicitly threaten the values and structures of white prototypical leadership theories. In one study, White school teachers, administrators, and principals in a Southeastern U.S. high school were seen to hold deep prejudices about the attitudes and cultures of their Black colleagues and students, often revealing their resentment and fear toward Black expressions of power, resources, and leadership (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007). This fear manifests not only among adult leaders but also in students.

Including Black leadership values into mainstream leadership often demands that the current systems and many of its aspects be dismantled. As Lorde (1985/2012) wrote, “For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 106). Black Americans have struggled to break from the challenges of their enslaved ancestors and are continuously met with a modern retailoring of laws and institutions that perpetuate the same restrictions and negative imagery of Black people and culture (Kendi & Blain, 2021). Often the work of retailoring these spaces is controlled by White power and privileges, preventing the complete redistribution of human rights (Liu, 2018; Liu & Baker, 2016). Critical race theory scholars call this gatekeeping “interest convergence,” in which there is an acknowledgement that the system only changes to benefit Black people when the changes align with the interests of White people. Interest convergence can be easily tied to the Emancipation Proclamation (Brown & Jackson, 2013) and the outcome of *Brown v. the Board of Education* (Bell, 1980), both instances where benefits were given to Black people in the interest of securing the privileges and comforts of White society. Black leaders working within these new confines may find moments of success; however, substantial change is always out of reach because of the implicit circumstances designed to prevent Black and other groups from challenging White power and privilege.

These blocks to leadership are especially present when working with Black youth. One study which engaged primarily youth of color found that youth, especially youth of color, involved in community leadership and change initiatives are often put into a managerialist subterfuge to muffle the voice of the students, cause delays, and diminish motivation (Clay & Turner, 2021). This convoluted and ineffective approach to fostering leadership was more prominent in communities that supported Black or Indigenous youth leaders. The following section will explore Youth Leadership Development, its impacts, and its shortcomings.

Youth Leadership Development

Youth leadership development and leadership development aimed at adult audiences share many similarities. Van Linden and Fertman (1998) outlined many ways youth and teens are shielded from leadership when they should be given real-life experiences that work with and impact communities. Much of their work fought against the deficit model of educating youth and teens. A deficit model, rooted in White supremacy, sees youth as agents who need to be prevented from doing “bad things” and are seen as non-contributors to the communal social system (R. L. Allen & Liou, 2019; Carroll & Firth, 2021; Gordon, 2009; Harlan, 2016; Kohli et al., 2017). When youth are received this way, it diminishes their experiences as community members and hinders their positive identity development. As Gordon (2009) pointed out, society operates on stereotypes of troubled youth, perpetuating a lack of support and resources and being unable to attain citizenship rights unless they correctly adhere to the request of adult audiences and powers (Carroll & Firth, 2021).

When thinking about youth leadership sometimes adults will look to youth who have been granted access to substantial resources to support their cause. Usually this is acknowledged through media such as television and social networks. However, in these instances, it is

important to consider the adult forces that control, influence and sanction the vehicles which they have access, often at the expense of other youth. For example, a youth like Greta Thunberg has the support of famous parents who gave her permission to go to protests (Marin, 2021). Her presence dominates the media screens (Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021) and in 2020, the Associated Press published a picture of Thunberg amongst world climate activists, cropping out the only Black youth leader, Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate, who was also present (Evelyn, 2020). Adults make the decisions in mass media on who is included and excluded often favoring traits like Whiteness (Ryalls & Mazzarella, 2021). Other youth who have taken front stage in popular media like Amanda Gorman, have been given their platform because they were invited by famous people and their essays and works have been given accolades by adults (theamandagorman.com). These youth were granted extraordinary access to adult platforms and privileges because they were being sanctioned and vetted by adults through vehicles mediated by adults.

Adults play an essential part throughout youth leadership development. Adults generally create programs, interpret goals and needs, define how youth will approach those goals and needs, and shape the narrative (Carroll & Firth, 2021; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; MacNeil, 2006; Swed et al., 2022; Whitehead, 2009). However, little research has explored whether youth definitions of leadership align with those of adults (Mortensen et al., 2014). Adults are so central to the conversations of youth development that one can quickly draw distinctions between types of youth programs through how adults interact with and support youth: adult-centric and youth-centric. Adult-centric programs center on the voice of the adults involved in the program, and youth-centric programs center on the voices of youth (Augsberger et al., 2018; Newman, 2020).

In this landscape, youth leadership development programs and practices have been infused with adult leadership practices, beliefs, and expectations, creating new theories of youth leadership. The next section will closely look at youth-centric and adult-centric leadership development models and two theories: positive youth development and youth possibility development. Like most other youth leadership development theories, positive youth development and youth possibility development can be responsible for programs and projects that are both youth-centric and adult-centric. This research seeks to uplift youth voices in developing youth-centric approaches to leadership and leadership development.

Defining Youth

Understanding who is considered “youth” or a “child” can be more complicated than calculating an individual’s age. Some believe that who is and is not a child can be biologically defined through years and brain development. However, the more we learn about the brain, the more complex the definition becomes. Where childhood starts and adulthood exactly stops can be hard to measure. Beyond medical definitions of “youth,” there are social definitions of who is and is not to be considered youth. Many young people from various socio-economic, religious, racial, and ability groups are either never allowed to be children or are perpetually kept in a place of childhood.

Who is considered a child and regarded as an adult is socially defined and changes between generations, cultures, and institutions (Cieslik & Simpson, 2013; Hartinger-Saunders, 2008; Jenkins, 2014). The boundaries of youth are largely politically situated and reinforce hierarchies of power. Society has a messy application of standards of who is or is not considered a child (Carroll & Firth, 2021; Jenkins, 2014). In one study of university students, when presented with profiles and scenarios involving Black and White children, Black children were

perceived as less innocent and provided fewer protections reserved for children (Goff et al., 2014). Within this study, researchers tested four studies at different universities and discovered similar outcomes across schools. The United States has a deep history of disparaging youth of color in this profound way. Examples include the following:

- the execution of 14-year-old George Stinney Jr. in 1944, whom investigators later found to be innocent (Bever, 2014),
- blindly overlooking the murder of 14-year-old Emmet Till in 1955 (Tyson, 2017); and
- the continued incarceration of youth of color at disproportionate rates in the United States today (BigFoot, 2007; Hager, 2021).

For my study, I will work with young people attending high school. Throughout the United States, it is common for people who are in high school to be considered youth. However, considering the inconsistencies in the social practice of labeling youth and children, it is essential when working with the group that not all members may view themselves as a youth. Some are not treated as such by their communities, and this inconsistency can contribute to childhood trauma (BigFoot, 2007). This understanding can help the study uplift the voices of these young people, making the insights gained from this project more impactful.

Adult-Centric Youth Leadership Development

Most youth leadership development practices and programs come from an adult-centric lens (MacNeil, 2006; Newman, 2020; Whitehead, 2009). An adult-centric lens considers the needs, experiences, and values of youth through adult meaning-making, often prioritizing the goals and conditions of the adult community over the youth (Buehler et al., 2020; Carroll & Firth, 2021; Whitehead, 2009). Adult-centric approaches to youth leadership development are a

traditional method of passing on information. Often these types of programs pressure young people to mimic the skills and fulfill the needs identified by adults (Benson & Saito, 2001). Unfortunately, this regurgitation of skills and needs can come at the cost of the student's own needs, learning, and feelings of acceptance and success (Benson & Saito, 2001; Clay & Turner, 2021; Salisbury et al., 2020).

For instance, according to one study in the Midwest, centering on adult values, needs, and interpretations was one of the top five reasons youth disengage with programming (Buehler et al., 2020). In another study looking at community youth councils, researchers found that youth in adult-centric youth boards were less motivated to participate but still accepted credit for doing work that was adult-driven (Augsberger et al., 2018; Newman, 2020). While the outcomes of these programs may seem successful in responding to adult needs in youth programming, long-term meaning-making and involvement fall short.

This research does not suggest that adults should not be a part of youth leadership development. Instead, non-parental mentors and adult figures can serve a vital role in supporting the growth of youth as well as increasing their community engagement and impact (MacNeil & McClean, 2006; Roach et al., 1999; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Xing et al., 2015). One of the most discussed areas of adult involvement in youth leadership development is mentorship. Adult mentors profoundly impact how young people experience and internalize their leadership experiences (Hastings et al., 2011; Riddell, 2017). When youth build trusting relationships with emotionally available adults that are not their primary caretakers, they become more invested in their communities and feel uniquely supported during times of uncertainty (Lerner et al., 2014; Xing et al., 2015). Being a mentor or adult support to a young person is a particular skill that

requires training (Klau & Hufnagel, 2016; MacNeil & McClean, 2006; Xing et al., 2015). This training helps inform how adult figures can quiet their voices to make space for others.

Youth-Centric Youth Leadership Development

Youth-centric leadership development approaches youth's needs, experiences, and values from a youth point of view. Instead of assuming a young person does not have meaningful needs or experiences to draw, youth-centric programming supports youth in expressing their needs and creating new systems to help support or integrate those needs into a community (Van Linden & Fertman, 1998). These types of programs often incorporate terms like youth-led and youth empowerment. In each of these instances, the goal is to address needs with the voices of youth while facilitating environments where young people can make decisions, enact change, and feel safe (Augsberger et al., 2018; Barry et al., 2002; Clay & Turner, 2021; Newman, 2020; Walsh & Black, 2021). One study led by the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America found that youth defined leadership through five ideas; leadership is available to anyone in any context and involves creating change, collective action, modeling and mentoring, and strong character (Mortensen et al., 2014). These unique characteristics run contrary to many popular leadership qualities discussed earlier in the chapter, like hierarchy and white skin. Youth-driven programs have become those most prevalent when working with specific communities, often supporting the needs of marginalized and black indigenous youth of color (Barry et al., 2002; Clay & Turner, 2021; Schoenfeld et al., 2019).

In a literature review in which they undertook a thematic analysis of youth council programs, Augsberger et al. (2018) outlined four practices of youth-centric programs: youth

representation, youth decision-making, youth leadership, and youth initiative. With these guidelines, youth-centric programs must start and end with youth people. The role of adults through this approach is to provide an environment that empowers young leaders to participate in the process and make it accessible to all youth who want to be part of it. However, youth-centric programs do not have to exclude adults from the process altogether. Instead of making judgments about the needs and experiences of the youth, adults offer themselves as aids to help make the creation of the process easier and more informed. In addition, adults play a vital role in providing resources such as power, money, tools, and expertise (Augsberger et al., 2018; Barry et al., 2002).

While youth-centric leadership approaches may seem like an ideal choice, these programs are resource-intensive and require community commitment. Some organizations or communities may not be ready to face the demands of the youth in their community (Clay & Turner, 2021; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Clay and Turner (2021) described a phenomenon of communities providing youth with “busy” work under the guise of supporting youth voices in *managerial subterfuge*. Adults in power consciously created this phenomenon to keep the status quo and resist change to the system instigated by the values and ideals of youth. Salisbury et al. (2020) had similar youth-centric experiences where adults in power exploited youth ideas and efforts, making adult players look good to the community while dismissing the needs and wants of the youth participants and reinforcing White standards and expectations of leadership. These programs diminish community trust and do a disservice to the youth who were a part of them. In one YPAR study by Clay and Turner (2021), youth who participated in a community-based leadership program felt dismissed by their community and subjected to busy work as a means of making them feel supported without providing support. Often the groups of youth who are

regularly devalued are minority or Black and Indigenous youth of color. If a community cannot commit to addressing the needs of youth and centering their voices, they can cause harm to the youth involvement and fracture community trust (Buehler et al., 2020).

Youth Leadership Theories

With a greater focus on youth education, involvement, and development, there has been a more comprehensive development of leadership theories targeted explicitly toward young people. For example, in a study on best models for youth leadership development Hastings et al. (2011) found that focusing on raising the social capital of youth was essential in providing them with meaningful leadership experiences. They also found that giving real-world contexts to teens provides a stronger foundation for teen programs and motivates teens to take greater ownership of their projects and communities. Other studies suggest youth leadership development programs need to be led by adults acting as coaches, talking students through various contexts or scenarios when needed (Roach et al., 1999).

The two leadership theories this review focuses on reflect the values of empowering youth and starting with youth voices addressing needs and community change: Positive Youth Development and Youth Possibility Development. Positive Youth Development works against a deficit model of working with youth by focusing on how to support healthy connections and living between students and youth (Lerner, 2005). Youth Possibility Development (Nakkula & Schneider-Muñoz, 2018) focuses on the limitations and expectations that limit how youth experience and imagine their personal and communal possibilities. Both theories share many common beliefs and goals. However, their approaches to amplifying youth voices manifest in different ways.

Positive Youth Development

Many people understand youth as beings who, without proper guidance, are “broken” (Futch Ehrlich, 2016; Lerner, 2005). However, in recent years, positive psychology has urged psychologists to abandon their trade as only fixing those who need help, but helping those who are thriving, and continue to do so (Seligman, 2012). Only recently have connections been drawn between the positive psychology approach and youth development (Lerner, 2005). Positive Youth Development, as Damon (2004) described it, “begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world” (p. 15). Despite attempts to focus on “good” qualities and skills of youth, positive youth development is criticized for being deficit-based, can be too focused on the individual instead of the whole system, and is hyper-focused on outcomes (Lerner et al., 2005). Utilizing participant voices and community factors in research allows an individual to elaborate on aspects of the process or program the researcher or practitioner did not consider an influencer (Futch Ehrlich, 2016; MacDonald & McIsaac, 2016).

In positive youth development, there are five (sometimes six) fundamental skills youth should have to foster a healthy identity and live within any given environment: competence, confidence, character, connection, caring, and contribution (Bowers et al., 2010; Clonan-Roy et al., 2016). Unfortunately, while many embrace these traits as healthy skills for youth, they are vague, culturally prioritized, hard to define, and lack acknowledgment of the power structures which contribute to skill performance (Lerner et al., 2005). Such an open-ended list of qualifications can lead to inconsistent experiences and consequences and undermine young people’s needs, values, and natural talents.

Positive youth development is often incorporated into programs and communities that work with young people from marginalized or Black and Indigenous communities of color (Akom, 2009; Clonan-Roy et al., 2016; Spencer & Spencer, 2014). These programs can relieve conventional ways of supporting groups of young people. However, they can fall short when the expectations and values of these programs are vague, unclear, or ever-changing. Having genuine resources and networks in place to support youth through their experiences regardless of their access to money, power, or status is a significant way positive youth development practitioners can best support these communities. Ignoring the social and political systems that impact how young people develop as leaders and community members is what has led to the continued evolution of this theory, including Critical Positive Youth Development (Gonzalez et al., 2020), which includes reflections on the impact of racial and cultural identity and Youth Possibility Development which will be discussed in the next section.

Youth Possibility Development

Youth Possibility Development has been thoroughly discussed by Nakkula and Schneider-Muñoz (2018). It focuses on youth idealism, which seeks to create positive change for youths themselves, their communities, and the world. For example, in Colombia, Escuela Nueva, an educational model that centers on flexible learning strategies and engages teachers as facilitators (Colbert et al., 2018). This “new school” promotes students to engage in their learning path actively, implements social and emotional learning practices, and connects students to economic possibilities. Youth development programs structured in this way have proven to help youth from rural and impoverished communities gain skills to help them compete alongside youth from more privileged means. This focus on youth development looks beyond the abilities of youth to meet challenges in front of them, but for them to imagine and participate in creating

new changes for the future. Possibility Development considers the political, economic, and health of communities the youth are operating within. This theory relies on the understanding that these factors impact the possibilities a young person perceives as impacting their engagement in creating, changing, and leading (Nakkula & Schneider-Muñoz, 2018). Nakkula and Schneider-Muñoz's (2018) work is dependent on the same foundational principles of positive youth development, including the notion that youth are citizens impacted by and participate in their community structures.

Possibility development in the United States is particularly complicated. As Nakkula and Schneider-Munoz (2018) have discussed, youth throughout the United States are challenged by unequal power and resource dynamics between generations, a widening socio-economic gap that reflects educational shortcomings, and an increased need for increased mental health literacy. This is further exacerbated in recent years by a global pandemic and economic instability. The impact these new challenges will have on the idealism of youth is yet to be fully realized. The most successful youth Possibility Development Programs do not treat youth as “broken,” but instead take an almost youth-centric approach, centering on youth experiences, voices, and needs (Colbert et al., 2018; Cortelezzi et al., 2018; Guirola, 2018; Hoskins & Newbury, 2018; Ravitch et al., 2018).

Exclusion in Youth Leadership

Few studies explore the attitudes and experiences contributing to the negative or exclusionary experiences of youth participating in Youth Leadership Development Programs. Studies that have focused on the experiences of these young people have identified a set of characteristics that isolate and exclude students; heavy adult focus (Buehler et al., 2020), adverse behaviors of adults in the program (Dworkin & Larson, 2007), and experiences of racism, racial

restrictions, or White supremacy (R. L. Allen & Liou, 2019). However, much more work needs to be done to uncover the behaviors and traits contributing to a young person feeling disconnected from leadership. This study worked with young people in discovering their desired values, characteristics, and behaviors in leadership and designing a meaningful youth development program.

When youth are left out of leadership, they are told they are not worthy of becoming full citizens with respect and the right to create change (Damon, 2004). This outlook is detrimental to the positive identity development of young people and can impact their self-efficacy. When a young person finds their values, ideas, and beliefs are undervalued, they disengage from processes and communities (Buehler et al., 2020; Clay & Turner, 2021). Some youth may engage in repeating the expectations that are given to them. However, the learning in these instances is short-lived and can often result in youth who are disembodied or disconnected from their emotions, needs, and environment (Gordon, 2009). Youth are especially vulnerable to the negative interactions they have with adults through leadership development interactions, because their psychological and biological developmental state is being formed. Buehler et al. (2020) saw clear connections between negative interactions between adults and students and impaired development of self-confidence which impacted student self-determination. For students who consistently struggle with leadership or leadership development, this study intends to promote more embodied learning experiences which generates new ways of knowing and is inclusive of more young people. Through this work the definitions and expectations of popular leadership may be challenged, and process will encourage youth to connect with tools and resources which speak to their identities, their experiences, and their desired outcomes.

Conclusion

Leadership in the United States has a strong foundation in white-centric values, needs, powers, and beliefs. This foundation, coupled with the barbaric history of Western settlers, has created a clear distinction between who is and is not allowed to participate in leadership. Youth leadership is not exempt from these restraints and may face more significant challenges than their adult counterparts. Youth, a socially defined and constructed group of young people, are not valued as contributors to their community and instead are devalued, and their needs are often dismissed. Youth Leadership Development theories have tried to focus on positive identity development and the constrictive ideation of youth. However, communities are usually not ready or unwilling to make changes to their systems and structures to implement the change development and vetted by youth. When these instances happen, they often leave young people and educators feeling exploited, adding strain to community ties.

In order to expand youth leadership development so that it is accessible and inclusive of more types of leaders, environments, and worldviews, more researchers need to study the negative experiences of youth. My study aims to work with young people who have felt excluded from leadership development and provide them with a space to create a new leadership development program that would meet the needs of their peers and better reflect how they see leadership evolving. Through this work, I hope to better understand how educators and communities can better support youth who want to be engaged in community programs and reimagine for themselves and their peers. By centering youth voices, this study hopes to allow young people a space to express their needs and desires for the future.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

This study was concerned with reshaping leadership conversations in communities and providing an opportunity and space for youth to redesign what a leadership development space would look like for them. This project used Critical Youth Participatory Action Research [CYPAR] as the guide to understand how youth would reimagine leadership and design a leadership development initiative. I chose CYPAR as a methodology because it aligns with my values in its strong commitment to empowering the communities it serves and acknowledging the systems in which these communities exist and its impacts. Through this study, I worked with a group of 12 high school students from throughout the United States who have had negative experiences related to leadership or leadership programs. First, participants reflected on their personal experiences with leadership development and researched current leadership experiences, theories, and studies. This process culminated in the group designing a leadership initiative they believed will support both their needs and their communities' needs. Next, through six two-hour online workshops, the groups worked through a process that focused on giving voice to their experiences and efforts while participating in creating knowledge for their communities. Activities the group participated in include one-on-one interviews, group dialogues, peer-led discussions, and design time. This process aimed to understand where leadership development is doing a disservice to youth and how the young people who are most impacted would redesign leadership environments, experiences, and expectations. This chapter will describe the methodology for the study and will begin by exploring the foundations of CYPAR. This chapter will also outline the design of the study as well as any ethical considerations and expected challenges.

Method

Youth Participatory Action Research Literature Review

YPAR is a research methodology that creates a relationship with youth and adults to identify, research, and design interventions to meet community needs (Anyon et al., 2018; Henderson & Tudball, 2016). The history of YPAR is tangled throughout several social movements worldwide (Mirra et al., 2015). The predecessor to YPAR is participatory action research [PAR]. Depending on what field from which you are approaching PAR, its foundations stem from different voices and places; including Kurt Lewin (Elias, 2017; Stoudt et al., 2012), Paulo Freire, and Orlando Fals-Borda (Bellino, 2016; Torre et al., 2012) and earlier thinkers and philosophers (Mirra et al., 2015). Many of these different contributors to PAR were influenced by each other, contributing to an energetic field. One clear thread connecting these origin stories is that people wanted to reshape and reclaim their social systems. As critical perspectives in education and learning evolved, action research began to incorporate the voices of different groups of people. In each account, action research was seen to liberate communities of people and promote more equitable knowledge production (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017; Mirra et al., 2015).

Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is at the cornerstone of PAR. His ideas promoted new ways of creating knowledge, teaching, and understanding what is meant by *truth*. Freire encouraged dialogue between individual and the communities in which they lived so together they could create new solutions and opportunities to address needs. Creating spaces for more dialogue between groups of people with the improving society fueled the need for youth to participate in these communal discussions. Adding youth to PAR is a fundamental way to move beyond observing youth in our communities through a deficit lens. Instead, this process seeks to

support young people in discovering that their resources, skills, experiences, and narratives are essential to creating change and repairing communities and relationships (Mirra et al., 2015).

According to Mirra et al. (2015), four principles lay the foundation for YPAR practice:

1. Researchers must substantiate the experience in youth perspectives and concerns.
2. Youth are co-creators of the methods used to explore the topic.
3. Youth must create an active intervention to address the needs and concerns of the community.
4. Youth must have a sense of ownership throughout the process.

Unfortunately, these principles are more accessible to put into intention than practice. As a result, most YPAR studies do not adequately utilize youth's knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, prioritizing adult ways of managing or addressing a community need (Anyon et al., 2018). YPAR has gained popularity since it so closely seeks to uphold the value and influence of youth, allowing for non-traditional ways of understanding community needs to surface.

Centering youth and youth experiences through YPAR includes creating programs that are flexible and accessible to youth who are predominantly disaffected by the systems they work within (Anderson, 2020). YPAR programs can be conducted throughout the school day and include different media in exploring the topics at hand. Different media can include art projects, videos, and music, making the dialogue more accessible to students with various abilities. By creating spaces that are flexible and attentive to youth in this way, typical systems which support youth are reshaped and challenged. While many programs struggle to embody all the foundations of YPAR programs, those studies often have participants who report they learned more, felt they contributed to their community, increased their critical thinking, and are motivated to take action (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). Creating YPAR programs that meet

student needs goes beyond thinking about flexible spaces and diverse learning patterns. Mirra et al. (2015) discussed the importance of YPAR programs, including intentional recruitment practices, student incentives for their time and energy, a focus on relationship building between participants, and space for reflection and group dialogue. These additional considerations in YPAR can promote trust building, which will enhance the outcomes of the group experience.

Many adult-centric needs and ways of addressing those needs come into focus when leadership development programs do not include youth voices in every aspect and are not flexible to meet the needs of marginalized youth. By having youth understand challenges with leadership development today and new ways to engage with the concept of leadership, we can begin to understand new and less common or visible ways of knowing and leading. While YPAR has been a transformative model for including youth voices and ideas in community systems, it is sometimes criticized for ignoring systemic power imbalances between members based on race, socioeconomic privileged, or social status. This criticism has created opportunities for new values to emerge in YPAR studies resulting in new approaches like Critical Youth Participatory Action Research (Bellino, 2016; Elias, 2017).

Critical Youth Participatory Action Research

CYPAR is an extension of the values and practices of PAR and YPAR. While impactful for its time, PAR was not modeled to include the plethora of restrictions faced by people of all marginalized backgrounds. Instead, participants' racial and social status were regarded as generalized experiences, often ignoring the enormous systemic restrictions placed on the virtual experience of lived identities. Through critical participatory action research [CPAR], the contextual, historical, political, social, and system pressures of social identity were brought to the forefront of the Action Research process (Fine & Torre, 2021). As a result, marginalized peoples

and groups become coresearchers in uncovering their communities' needs, injustices, and solutions. Torre et al. (2012) described CPAR's essence as "lift[ing] responsibility of social problems off the backs of individuals who have paid the greatest price of injustice and exposes the social and political conditions that produce and justify injustice" (p.179). This does not include excluding them from identifying solutions. Instead, this method commands that the systems people are within are at the center of the restricted positions people find themselves. Therefore, it is unacceptable to blame a person's circumstance based on their perceived social identity; instead, one must consider the context in which the social identity forms and how it might misalign with an individual's personal identity and experience.

Youth have been included in critical action research; however, many studies do not follow the tenants of youth action research. In more than one study, youth and adults were in mixed groups, and the researchers did not account for the powerful influence the adults may have had on the outcome of the study (Stoudt et al., 2012; Torre et al., 2012). While some outcomes seem essential and valuable, little information is shared on interactions between adults and youth within these research studies, including moments when youth needs or concerns may have been overlooked or reframed by their adult counterparts. CYPAR aims to combine the tenants of YPAR and CPAR to create action research spaces that allow youth to embody their identities and lived experiences while making important community decisions and changes (Elias, 2017). Moreover, these programs emphasize the importance of participants learning about the experiences of their peers, as well as gaining further clarity into their narratives and identities (Caraballo et al., 2017). Adults who are a part of the study must not hinder this exchange through their meaning-making of what they have heard.

CYPAR programs often include practices sensitive to the identities and systemic conditions of the youth they are working with, while also pushing youth to the forefront of the research process by inviting them to be co-investigators. Bellino's (2016) focused on a CYPAR intervention to help students address environmental needs, they found that participants reported learning about their community resources, how to access those resources better, and had a stronger sense of their connection and place within the community. Moreover, students felt they were in an environment where they could ask these questions. Successful interventions implemented by the researcher throughout the study included remaining flexible in their idea of environmental education, creating safe spaces for students to express themselves, asking questions without judgment from the facilitator, self-reflection, and commitment to supporting youth voices and experiences. Many YPAR programs fall short because of the short-term commitment communities and adult community members have to uplift young voices and create change, including and valuing their input (Clay & Turner, 2021). In CYPAR studies, communities are looked at as ongoing and continuous partners who will continue to benefit from the skills and contributions of young people.

Throughout CYPAR, several tools can be utilized throughout the research to enhance the participants' experience. The following sections provide an overview of how these data collection methods are used throughout PAR studies and suggested best practices for group dialogues, participant interviews, and workshop facilitation. Through a better understanding of how these tools are used within a CYPAR space, this study can strive to best support the diverse, often underserved, and vulnerable youth populations. The next sections review the three primary data collection methods of the study: group dialogues, interviews, and workshop facilitation.

Each of these methods have unique expectations in YPAR and CYPAR that are important for creating a meaningful experience that supports youth.

Group Dialogues

Group dialogues are an excellent way for individuals to unite, exchange ideas, and learn from each other's experiences. Through CYPAR, group dialogues are a way for participants to form relationships, engage in reflection, and generate new knowledge. This methodology can specifically support vulnerable and underserved youth who are often not provided a space at the table (Aldana et al., 2016). Dialogues have been widely used throughout conflict education as a tool that promotes perspective taking, asking questions, turn-taking, and raising critical consciousness (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Malorni et al., 2022; Nagda et al., 2012; Swed et al., 2022). Dialogue's flexible nature also allows more people to participate in knowledge generation. Dialogues often invite media and art into the conversation, engaging more people and providing a space for meaningful expression. These modalities are significant to participants with a variety of abilities and vulnerabilities.

Group dialogues can follow various models, including circles, public conversations (Jones et al., 2020), and media-infused dialogue (Swed et al., 2022). These models provide processes that focus on ensuring the dialogues are conducted in democratic, inclusive, and critical ways. While each process has a slightly different approach, they all are dependent on four tenets:

1. Intentional groups of people are coming together.
2. Everyone is given the opportunity to speak and the same amount of time to speak.
3. The conversation is confidential and without ridicule.

4. There is a trained facilitator who is to refrain from intervening in the conversation or pushing a personal agenda.

For a group dialogue to create the opportunity for transformational experiences to emerge, it must also consider; the number of participants, the mode of facilitation, environment, recruitment, and evaluation (Gibbs, 1997; Kroll et al., 2007; Swed et al., 2022). The number of participants in a dialogue varies from four to 12 (Kroll et al., 2007). However, the group's appropriate size should consider its participants' needs as well as the researcher's. Sensitive topics or focus groups that will include people with a wide range of abilities benefit from smaller focus groups (Bosco & Herman, 2010; Kroll et al., 2007).

The role and training of the facilitator in these discussions are significant when working in CYPAR. Facilitators are responsible for maintaining the meeting agreements, such as supporting a respectful environment, keeping speaking time democratic, and asking questions that enhance the conversation (Gibbs, 1997; Wyatt et al., 2008). An unskilled facilitator may extend their own opinions over the participants, unintentionally dismiss the concerns of others, or exacerbate power dynamics within a group dynamic. The facilitator should be sensitive to the research topic, the needs of the group, and their role in the group dynamic. Researchers and facilitators can play different roles in group dialogues. While facilitators in dialogue help grow a conversation between the participants to gain information about the topic at hand, researchers are focused on looking not just at the conversation in the dialogue but the broader experience of the group dialogue. This includes looking at how participants interact between each other as well as how they interact with the facilitator. Holding the two realities of working with the students through the experience and observing the space from a broader viewpoint can be very challenging for a single researcher. Instead of controlling the conversation, the researcher and the

facilitator must emphasize the participants' experiences and co-create a dialogue (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 2005). To help maintain a better experience for the students and the overall research, this study invited a co-facilitator to be a part of the workshops. The co-facilitator helped the group work through the CYPAR model and was supportive of the students' emotional and programmatic needs. The co-facilitator shared their observations and notes about each workshop with me. These debriefing sessions were audio recorded on Zoom and transcriptions were used when incorporating data from the conversations.

Another critical part of the dialogue is the environment where the conversation takes place. The environment can impact how comfortable participants are and who feels able to participate fully (Bosco & Herman, 2010; Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 2005; Kroll et al., 2007; Swed et al., 2022; Wyatt et al., 2008). For example, a space with a symbolic significance to the project or the students, such as a school, admirative office, or playground, may impact students' responses. Planning the environment includes preparing for participants' physical and emotional needs. Imagining and planning for a dialogue environment is not limited to in-person YPAR programs. In one study working with students online, for instance, researchers worked with students through an art collage to imagine and design the spaces they wanted to space to represent (Swed et al., 2022).

When dedicated to justice, democracy, and the transformation of power structures, group dialogues can help create new collective knowledge that include more people and catalyze community change (Cook & Krueger-Henney, 2017; Swed et al., 2022). In addition, when dialogues are intentionally radically inclusive environments, many marginalized or disadvantaged groups can participate in research and be counted in knowledge creation (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Kroll et al., 2007; Wyatt et al., 2008). Well-planned dialogues can

provide valuable information about the needs of young people and the best ways to approach satisfying those needs (Wyatt et al., 2008). Many YPAR studies use dialogues to hear student experiences and uncover a collective experience (Anyon et al., 2018; Carl et al., 2018; Villa et al., 2018). When holding conversations in a CYPAR setting with young people, it is essential to put the students' needs, perspectives, and experiences first and to not be overwhelmed when students approach the questions and topics with a different lens.

Interviews

Interviews are an important part of working with young people. Interviews are generally an important aspect of the study design if the study is grounded in CYPAR or other qualitative methodologies (Fine & Torre, 2021; Mirra et al., 2015; Singh et al., 2014). When working with youth, interviews provide an opportunity for students to create a narrative, learn about the researcher and research, and help provide an open space for youth to explore experiences and feelings they haven't have the opportunity to investigate in the past. In past studies, interviews have been the data collection method with which youth are most familiar (Courchesne et al., 2021; Mirra et al., 2015). However, it is important to have clear protocols and explain to any participants the expectations of the conversation, the flow of the protocol, and the confidentiality agreement.

A variety of interview protocols are used throughout working with youth. Some protocols are more formal, including Autism Voices (Courchesne et al., 2021), Ethnic-Perspective Taking, and Ability Interview Protocol (Hashtpari et al., 2021). However, prominent commonalities exist between these different interview protocols, including flexibility, semi-structured processes, integrating non-tradition methods of communication, and promoting an exchange of information and reciprocal meaning-making between the interviewer and the interviewee (Fine & Torre,

2021; Mirra et al., 2015). Through YPAR and CPAR studies, interviews are an opportunity for the researcher to gain critical information about the participants, including their identity, meaning-making, and their place in the social system (Carrico et al., 2013). While important information can be discerned from one-on-one interviews, the power dynamic between the student and the researcher may impact the information shared. Shaw et al. (2011) suggested ways a researcher can help make one-on-one interview more comfortable for youth, for instance by making sure the participants have a clear understanding of the study and process, dressing more casually for meetings, and dedicating time to engaging in general getting-to-know-you conversations.

Within critical contexts, it is vital that topics of identity and the influences on the lives of individuals are at the forefront of the questions, often asking the participants to acknowledge the identities and lived experiences that are important to them (Fine & Torre, 2021). Acknowledging identities allows participants to own their narratives and enhance their speaking and listening skills. Fine and Torre (2021) provide additional examples of CYPAR interview questions, including: What might we adapt? What kind of questions do you want to ask? What kind of questions do we wish were asked?

As researchers and interviewers, it is crucial to put the experience of the interviewee at the center of the conversation (Courchesne et al., 2021; Fine & Torre, 2021; Hashtpari et al., 2021; Mirra et al., 2015). These interviews can become a pitfall in YPAR where adults introduce meaning-making to the interview, often ignoring or dismissing the participant's input. Additionally, some researchers or interviewers may be overwhelmed by youth responses that do not fit the expectations of the academy or that youth responses manifest in a new form (Mirra et al., 2015). Capturing all the information in an interview with youth is essential, including

non-verbal communication. In some protocols engaging youth with varying learning abilities and different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, pictures are used to increase how identities, feelings, and information can be conveyed (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Courchesne et al., 2021).

Workshop Facilitation

Facilitation in any community engagement setting is important. However, how workshops are conducted, and the role of the facilitator, is particularly critical in CYPAR. Facilitators must create safe and accessible environments where participants can fully engage with the information, knowledge creation, and general study (Bates et al., 2020). Good facilitators are trained in working with various people in different settings. They are flexible, respond to the needs of their participants, and understand what material may be complex or challenging for participants (Malorni et al., 2022). Barriers to participation often manifest in the presentation of materials, language used, emotional reflections, undergoing negative relationships, or experiencing negative behaviors (Buehler et al., 2020; Courchesne et al., 2021). When students report negative experiences in youth programs, their perception often stems from destructive behaviors of adult staff and facilitators, feeling unsupported, and being unheard (Buehler et al., 2020).

Facilitation in CYPAR also requires flexibility and openness to new points of view, and the willingness to engage in unconventional methods for collecting data. For example, in one study by Mirra et al. (2015), the youth participants rejected conventional data collection methods like surveys and focus groups and relied on informal interviews and reflections. When communities, institutions, and researchers have rigid protocols that undermine the group's needs, they further marginalize groups of students, adding to their negative experiences, robbing them

of self-determination, and preventing their full participation in leadership and navigating systemic change. When engaging with CYPAR a facilitator must be well prepared to meet the needs of the participants, topic, and environment, while also remaining flexible and reinforcing the value of participant insights.

Ethical Considerations for Recruitment and Working with Teens

Working with youth raises many ethical considerations to consider. Through this program, we want to ensure that young people are safe, valued for their time, and gain valuable resources. Fine and Torre (2021) outlined 11 crucial ethical considerations when conducting YPAR research that was considered in this study. These considerations include respect, the privacy of information and credit, and financial equity. I address these ethical considerations and how my research design responded to them in this section.

Respect

When working with communities, it is vital that the community you are working with feels respected. My research design includes space for youth to raise their voice, be in dialogue with each other, and invite them to work as coresearchers. The participants co-created ground rules for the program, and the group reinforced those rules. Through using JamBoard the group was able to list out all their expectations for how people are treated and act. This list was present at every meeting as it was the first page of our ongoing JamBoard. At one meeting where the group felt their peers were showing low engagement, one member, Jane, referenced the list we had made and asked for her colleagues to remember “why they are here.”

Respect also includes considering the impact on participants when gatekeeping language, which includes editing participant words for grammar, excluding slang, and overemphasizing jargon. In presenting the finding I refrained from making edits to youth quotes or voices unless

the participant or the group requested edits to be made. Youth voices and decision-making were at the forefront of significant elements of the study. Any schedule, program, or changes in analysis also happened in collaboration with the coresearcher-participants. All the youth who joined this project were connected to a marginalized identity in some way. To ensure the safety and respect of all participants, a list of counsellors was made available for them to consult if needed. To promote mental health awareness throughout the program and reduce anxieties about seeking the services of the counselors, the availability of mental health resources were reiterated several times during the study. In addition, the counsellors and services that were listed support a wide variety of youth identities and respond to a variety of needs including domestic abuse support and drug addiction support.

Privacy of Information and Credit

Privacy considerations of the study were complex. The participants were given an informed consent form from the study for themselves and their parents to sign. A copy of the informed consent form can be found in Appendix I. All data collected were stored in a password-protected computer and a password-protected iCloud account. CYPAR can become more complex when considering the anonymity of participants. If the youth participants are coresearchers, they may be deserving of credit for the work they produce through the study. Coresearcher-participants dedicate significant time to the project and participation in data analysis. To make interpretive decisions on their behalf can come off as demeaning and the dedication to their well-being can seem to be shallow. Keeping the anonymity of students can hinder youth from taking credit for work they contributed, which in turn contributes to how their voices are perpetually downgraded.

Fine and Torre (2021) recommended that researchers ask coresearcher-participants what they would like to happen in relations to how they will be identified, offering opportunities for youth to be named under pseudonyms, their actual names, or remain completely anonymous. The findings from this dissertation are intended to be published, and while the study aims to honor the voices of the students who made the study possible by allowing them to discuss the equity advantages and disadvantages of anonymity, it is my responsibility to protect these youth from any possible harm. Therefore, the study uses pseudonyms when naming individuals or organizations mentioned in the study. However, youth are encouraged to take ownership of the work they have done. Through the study there were brief conversations about how they might want to use this work outside of the workshop space and were encouraged to put their programs into action. Youth in this study were strongly encouraged to build off the program they designed, possibly running programs in their communities, or designing their own.

Financial Equity

Community members working as coresearchers and participants in this project deserved compensation for their contributions to the study (Shakesprere et al., 2021). Compensating study participants is a debated topic and scarcely covered in CYPAR and PAR literature. However, when youth are not compensated for their time, it isolates who can and cannot participate in the program. Not paying young people who may otherwise be making money with their time, knowledge, energy, and effort; only supports a group of youth who can afford it. According to Pineda (2022), embracing the tenants of CYPAR and acknowledging the contributions of youth through compensation is becoming “standard practice.” This study paid participants \$200 for their time in the study. While this amount does not reflect the total value of their work, I hope it provided an incentive to students who may otherwise have dismissed this opportunity.

The Study

Overview

This study was aimed at improving understanding of how leadership development programs and rhetoric can isolate youth from participating in or identifying as leaders through a Critical Youth Participatory Action Research (CYPAR) design. Through engaging with youth who reported negative associations with leadership and leadership development, this study was aimed at uplifting ways of knowing and leading that may enhance youth development initiatives and promote more inclusive expectations of leadership in our communities. Working with community partners throughout the United States, this study recruited 12 high school students. Participants attended six online two-hour workshops centered around a CYPAR model. Each workshop reflected the following topics: relationship building, researching, group dialogues, community involvement, planning and design, and self-reflection. For this time commitment, participants received a stipend for \$200, which was funded by the Ethical Leadership and Social Justice grant at Antioch University. By the end of the study, participants had designed a new leadership initiative which reflected their experiences and ideologies. The information gathered from interviews, workshops, surveys, and researcher reflections was analyzed with students and reflect much of the cohort's work.

As in other studies, a successful CYPAR project can be defined by the insights, tools, and skills the students gain throughout the process. Beyond writing, reading, and listening skills, the CYPAR model aimed to help students build perspective-taking skills, empathy, self, narratives, new relationships, trusting adult relationships, self-confidence, self-assurance, self-actualization, and cultural knowledge development (Caraballo et al., 2017; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Courchesne et al., 2021). Student feedback about their experiences reflected many of these goals,

including students building meaningful relationship with each other, learning about themselves, and getting to practices skills such as communication, listening, and working collaboratively. While the students were not able to run the program they designed, the students reported that the study offered many leaning and growth opportunities. YPAR is renowned for working with youth as coresearchers, making it essential to remember that the youth who participated in this process had the opportunity to shape what the experience was going to be like from the initial interviews. While I imagined the youth building a program when developing the study, through our research and collective learning the participants made adjustments to the process and designed a unique program which built on the everyday youth experience.

This study had many important elements to ensure that the youth felt safe, empowered, and at the center of the study. The following sections of this chapter will touch on the design elements of the program: recruitment, interviews, workshops, and data analysis. Each of these elements is vital to protecting the essence of CYPAR and illustrating a space where young people feel respected, heard, and valued.

Recruitment

How recruitment for this project was undertaken was a crucial element of the study design. As a young person, saying you do not agree with leadership or had negative experiences with leadership development programs is difficult. In my experience with past studies, communal influences such as parents, teachers, and other authoritative figures will affect how a young person responds to this question. Moreover, an adult will sometimes override a youth in how they identify their relationship to leadership. Sometimes these interactions occur with an adult figure dismissing their comments or reassuring them of their leadership skills. While not consistently successful, people often go to great lengths to protect their image. Identifying as

having had negative experiences with leadership may pose a threat to face for students, teachers, community partners, and others. Despite the precautions taken to mitigate this effect throughout the recruitment process, it was apparent that adults' interpretations of their child's experiences impacted who was allowed to participate. For example, at least one parent discussed their child's success in leadership roles as not making them a candidate for the study and other students expressed that their parents believe they needed to "stick it out" when it comes to programs they do not enjoy.

To recruit participants, I worked with community partners throughout the United States. These partners are connected to high school students or run high school programs. Twenty Community Partners were contacted to help disseminate an anonymous questionnaire that asked generic questions about youths' leadership experiences and basic demographic information. The community partners I worked with were through my personal professional network. As a teen leadership development practitioner for the past 12 years, I have created valuable connections to organizations that run youth development programs, many of them non-profits. All community partners had the same letter explaining the study and providing a link to a website participants, partners and parents can access for more information (Appendix B).

In the questionnaire, many demographic questions were in a short answer format with a few drop-down menu options. Questions regarding the participant's leadership experiences were positioned on a Likert scale. A full copy of the questionnaire is in Appendix A. Students who rated their leadership experiences poorly were asked if they would like to participate in a study to rethink leadership for future generations and were given the option to leave their contact information. I then contacted those students to discuss the study's parameters, share the informed consent form, set up a time for one-on-one interviews and choose the first workshop date.

Participants were selected using the following criteria:

- Is a high school student between the ages of 15 and 18.
- Goes to high school within the United States.
- Has a negative opinion of leadership and/or had negative experiences with leadership development programs.
- Has actively decided to not participate in the leadership development program or left a leadership program before completing 20% of the activities or schedule.
- Indicated on the questionnaire that they wanted to participate and provided contact information.
- Is willing and capable of joining the six online workshops.

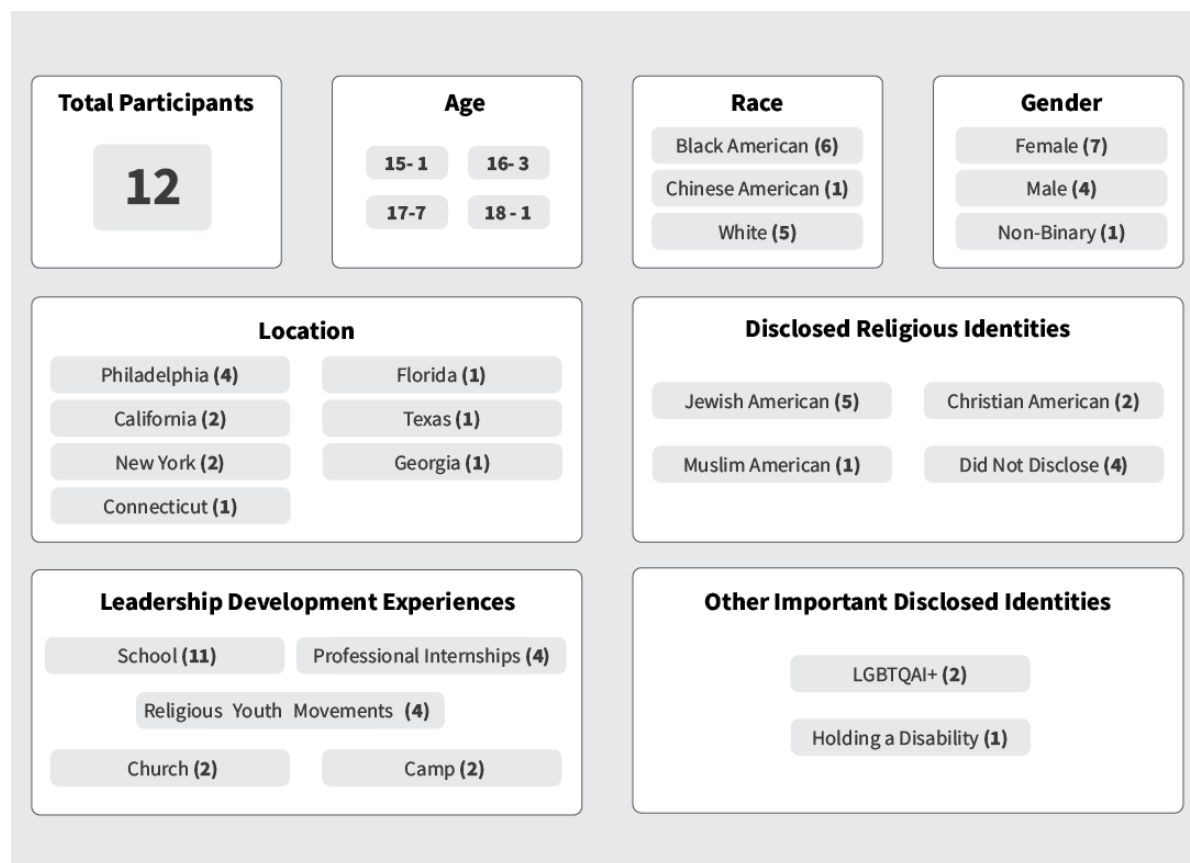
Over the course of six weeks, 53 unique individuals took the survey and 28 were eligible to participate in the study. Of the 28, 17 indicated they wanted to participate. Participants were then selected on a first-come first-serve basis. The first 12 participants who met the criteria for the study, including parental consent, became participants of the study. All participants attended at least four of the six workshops and remained in the study for the duration. Due to illness or family events a few students had to unexpectedly miss a session.

Participants

There were 12 participants in the study. All the participants were between the ages of 15 and 18 and attend High School in the United States. In addition, every student had either actively decided not to join a program or had left a program before finishing 20% of the activities. Participants also joined from seven different states: Pennsylvania, New York, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Texas, and California. Seven participants identified as female, four participants as male, and one participant as non-binary. Participants also identified as being part of the

following additional identities; Black American (6), Chinese American (1), LGBTQAI+ (2), holding a disability (1), Jewish Americans (5) and Muslim American (1). Every participant in the study held at least one marginalized identity, with most members of the cohort representing two or more.

The group had a variety of youth leadership development experiences, although some participants had more experience with programs than others. Through these activities, only a few students had taken on any formal leadership positions in those spaces. Youth Leadership Development experiences the cohort had were through; school (11), professional internships (4), religious youth movements (4), church (2), and camp (2). All experiences the teens discussed were in-person programs. Participants came to the study with a variety of personal interests and experiences; however, every person had expressed being dissatisfied with their programs or leadership positions in some way. Figure 3.1 illustrates the demographics for the 12 participants.

Figure 3.1*Critical Youth Action Research Study Program Demographics*

Using a CYPAR framework, the participants engaged in a set of six two-hour long workshops to build relationship between each other, research, discuss, and plan their own leadership initiatives. Each workshop had a loose framework, and the sessions were heavily informed by the cohort's needs and interests. In addition to these workshops, participants met one-to-one with the researcher for an introductory interview and were also included in post-workshop conversations regarding data analysis. All the activities for the CYPAR study took place online and utilized technologies such as Zoom, Jamboard, Spotify, and Google Forms. Figure 3.2 shows the planned process for the study and what actually happened through working with the teens. There are many elements that remained the same in both iterations of the study,

however the order and time spent on particular subjects changed based on students' feedback, decision making, and commitment to the task at hand.

Figure 3.2

Critical Youth Action Research Study Phases: Planned Versus Actual

PHASES	PLANNED	ACTUAL
 INTERVIEWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship building between participant and researcher Answering questions Understanding their experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship building between participant and researcher Answering questions Understanding their experiences
 WORKSHOP 1 Relationship Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship building between cohort members Relationship building between cohort members and cofacilitators Setting group expectations and Guidelines Introduction to the study Sharing personal stories and experiences Sharing leadership development experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationship building between cohort members Relationship building between cohort members and cofacilitators Setting group expectations and guidelines Introduction to the study Sharing personal stories and experiences Sharing leadership development experiences
 WORKSHOP 2 Sharing Personal Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction of research techniques Identifying cohort research questions Answering cohort research questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing of leadership development Experience and personal critiques Introduction of research techniques Identifying cohort research questions
 WORKSHOP 3 Researching Youth Leadership Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group dialogues about their research findings and personal critiques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answering cohort research questions Group dialogues about their research findings and personal critiques Brainstorming what they wanted to do next
 WORKSHOP 4 Designing a Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding how the community can support their efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designing and creating a group survey Deciding how to share the survey
 WORKSHOP 5 Data Analysis and Group Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design an initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Data analysis of their survey information Group analysis of researcher themes Starting to imagine a new initiative
 WORKSHOP 6 Creating an Initiative and Debriefing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reflect on the process Data analysis Overview of next steps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designed their own initiative Group reflection on the process Overview of next steps

Interviews

Each participant had a 30-minute introductory interview with me at the end of January and through the first week of February. The primary goal of this interview was to start building a relationship with each other, understand the participants' goals and needs from the study, and provide participants with the opportunity to ask any questions they have about the program. The interview also provided an opportunity to ask about their leadership experiences, overall attitudes toward leadership and leadership programs, what they hope to learn from the experience, and their personal learning needs. A complete list of questions is in Appendix A.

All interviews were held through video meetings online. Barriers to holding interviews online include some youth not having access to private spaces, internet connections, or technology. However, many youths can access technology like computers through their high schools or public library. In addition, video calls are supported on many cellular devices. If needed, the interview was held on the phone or done through a form of text like email or messaging. Like in the Autism Voices (Courchesne et al., 2021) study, allowing one-on-one interviews to take a text approach can be more accessible. The calls were recorded without video, saved to my device, and uploaded to my iCloud account with password protection.

In this space participants also discussed their learning needs. The teens made requests and suggestions for how the meetings should function to be an inviting, comfortable and safe space. Some students indicated having anxiety and wanting to be invited to speak, while others requested more opportunities to work in small groups. All these suggestions were incorporated into the activities of the following workshops.

Description of the Workshops

The CYPAR process included six major steps: relationship building, researching, group dialogues, community involvement, planning and design, and self-reflection. The workshops mirrored these six steps in that order. Minimal-to-no work was assigned to the participants between sessions to minimize additional time commitments from the study. The study design included six, two-hour online workshops with all participants in attendance. While it was expected that students might miss a workshop for circumstances outside of anyone's control, all workshops were well-attended, and participants who missed any information had the opportunity to connect with me and learn what happened in the previous workshop. In these workshops, the group worked through the CYPAR process and ultimately designed their leadership development intervention for other high school students.

Each workshop followed a similar flow. Participants started each session with a general check-in between group members, then an introduction activity, the main activity, and a reflective closing. Keeping a consistent flow between workshops helped students better manage expectations and helped students become more comfortable with practices like self-reflection. The sessions also included a mix of group activities, individual activities, and the opportunity to work in small groups or with partners. To ensure the participants were able to influence design of the study, a significant portion of the first workshop was focused on talking through the study layout and allowing the students to adjust the timeline, activities, and flow of the study. They also were asked about any expectations and needs throughout the study in their interview. An emphasis was on small group discussions and personal reflections as part of participant feedback in the introductory interview and initial workshop. All workshops were recorded through Zoom and saved on my personal computer and my iCloud account, both password protected.

The workshops were the most time-consuming portions of the project for participants and required much dedication from the participants. As mentioned previously, to honor their commitment and contribution, youth were paid \$200 for their participation. The following sections outline what was expected from each workshop and what actually happened. As discussed earlier in the chapter, CYPAR relies on the needs, wants, experiences, and creation of youth and is therefore an open process. However, CYPAR as a methodology is a process which has elements that cannot be overlooked, such as relationship building, researching, and community involvement. Ensuring a successful CYPAR process which honors the students and the CYPAR tenants would require a sense of what should be accomplished at each meeting. The next sections will provide a sense of what was planned for each workshop and what actually occurred (as shown in Figure 3.2). The next section will describe the workshops in detail.

Workshop 1: Relationship Building

Positive relationships and trust are the essential building blocks of any PAR project. Therefore, relationships must be fostered between the researcher and the coresearcher-participants and between coresearchers. This first workshop was dedicated to participants getting to know each other, reflecting on past leadership experiences, and starting to reflect on what they hoped to get out project. Through this process, I hoped to start laying down some foundations of trust, which would help the group cooperate and work together. By the end of the workshop, my goal was for the group to have developed a list of questions answering the question “what would you change about leadership?”

This session started with participants being asked to create group agreements about their expectations in the space. After individuals had the opportunity to create agreements their energy was turned to the CYPAR process and timeline of the actives. Participants worked in small

groups to discuss the timeline and create any recommendations. While all the groups did not change the order of the timeline, some of them had requested more time hosting group dialogues and reflecting on their personal experiences. This feedback helped inform the following sessions, which started with research. Even though it was my suggestion we start with research, the group came to a consensus that this was the right place to start after sharing their personal experiences.

Workshop 2: Research

A step often overlooked in YPAR studies is involving youth in collecting information and research. The act of learning about researching and doing research is an easy step to overlook because youth are often not relied upon for determining helpful information. In this workshop, my goal was for the group to learn about critical research techniques and secondary research sources on the questions they posed about leadership development in the previous workshop. In this time, participants worked together in uncovering important information about leadership that responded directly to the questions they created. The teens then shared the information they learned while identifying gaps they recognized in the research and their own experiences. The questions and topics that stood out most amongst the group informed the focus of the next workshop.

Throughout the experience, participants were highly engaged in sharing more personal stories and ideas, learning about research, and forming their research questions. Participants shared examples of organizations and types of programs they found to be the most rewarding. Organizations that fostered cultural identities were an important outlet for some of the group members. Other positive qualities they discussed were spaces that allowed for youth to participate in meaningful decision-making that impacts communities and change. These youth

want to be given opportunities to use their voice and life experiences to impact their peers and communities. These group conversations lead into the next step of the process, research.

Together, the group developed research questions and collaborated on condensing the number of questions they came up with to four. The research questions they designed are as follows:

- What challenges do youth face in leadership development?
- To what extent does youth leadership development (YLD) act as a steppingstone to professional leadership?
- To what extent does leadership promote community?
- How does YLD affect people in the long run?

Researching their questions and allowing time for the group to process the information they gathered would take up much of the following workshop.

Workshop 3: Group Dialogues

As previously noted, group dialogues allow participants to effectively engage in personal reflection and perspective taking. In this workshop, I anticipated that participants would focus on holding a group dialogue on the topics they found most important in the previous session. This dialogue would encourage youth to share their personal experiences and knowledge that could inform the design of their leadership initiative. The goal of this workshop was to have participants connect with each other's leadership experience better and start to share their opinions and ideas about youth leadership development programs.

Much of the focus of this workshop changed because of the students' input in the research process. The participants had been integrating group dialogue throughout each workshop and therefore the emphasis of this workshop shifted to exploring their research

questions together and reflecting collectively on the information they gathered. They also used this time to consider questions they still had about the subject matter and how they wanted to further their understanding of youth development programs and experiences. Collectively, they decided they wanted to create a short anonymous survey they could share with teens in their networks to learn more.

Workshop 4: Community Involvement

As previously noted, CYPAR is more successful when youth connect to communities in a meaningful way. In this workshop, my goal was for participants to discuss the community members or institutions which impact their experience of leadership. The intention was to create a space where students could unpack the systems that influence participant ideas and experiences of leadership and consider who should be involved, if anyone, in their initiative. In this space, it could have been possible that the group decided to design a short survey or hold conversations with people in their communities about their ideas. However, like all the components of this study, the youth decided on a more appropriate way of considering community context in their initiative; considering how to get more youth experiences and opinions. The importance participants placed on community information and involvement was apparent throughout the workshops.

Much of this workshop was spent talking about what they wanted to learn from their survey and who they wanted to learn it from. They designed an 11-question survey which focused on understanding access to youth programs, opportunities for growth through those programs, the skills other youth found valuable, what skills other youth wanted to gain. This survey was anonymous and open to any high school student. The cohort also discussed how they

wanted to share this through their communities, considering the time limitation between workshops.

Workshop 5: Design

The design session was the space for the participants to focus on designing the elements of a new leadership initiative. The initial goal of this workshop was for the group to answer questions like, “what should happen?”, “who should be involved?”, and “what are the anticipated goals and outcomes?” in relation to youth leadership development. Additionally, they were to answer any questions the group had identified throughout the process thus far. This workshop planned to rely on the participants to work together and collectively make decisions about what they would like to create as a youth leadership initiative. Instead, this workshop’s focus became about data analysis.

After seven days of collecting survey results from their perspective communities, the participants were eager to see the results and make sense of what participants had shared. They had 15 individuals take the survey from a variety of places. Considering the data from their survey and what happened in the workshops the teens considered themes and ideas that stuck out to them the most.

Participants also had the opportunity to start having small group and large group discussions about the type of initiative they would like to plan. The cohort, divided into two groups, came up with two different program models that shared some of the same qualities. Both programs were planned to be in person, individualized, multi-year, and were oriented around the goals and needs of the youth participating. The programs differed in that one program was oriented around a speaker series that program participants helped influence and the other program was focused on a coalition model where youth could connect with each other and adult

mentors to work on their personal goals and or projects. The next workshop was focused on the groups continuing to talk about the qualities they want to see in a youth leadership development program and start planning.

In this space, I was able to share some of the themes I saw from their collective work and verify my interpretations and meaning making of their experiences and data matched their intentions and realities. Some of the themes we collectively discussed in this workshop will be further discussed in Chapter IV include the impact of adult influences on youth programs, an emphasis on supporting individual needs, and lacking real world experiences that are meaningful.

Workshop 6: Self-Reflection

This final session's original intention was to be a space for the students to reflect individually and together on the work they accomplished, what they learned, and how they felt throughout the process. The goals of this study were for participants to feel empowered and to have gained valuable lifelong skills and knowledge. In this workshop, I had the opportunity to gain insights as to where the study met the goals of CYPAR and where it may have fallen short. In addition, debriefing and reflection conversations can uncover the tools and skills the students felt they engaged with or did not throughout. In this space, I intended to ask students to reflect on where they felt heard, encouraged, and connected. This workshop also was intended to provide them with the space to think about analyzing the data gathered from the study. However, the work of discussing aspects of the analysis method and how students could be involved in analyzing the data alongside me started in the previous session. Including youth in this data is invaluable to the researcher in unpacking meaning-making processes and uncovering otherwise unobvious differences (Mirra et al., 2015). Reflection and continuing data analysis were

important aspects of the workshop, but the cohort members were most energized in imagining their own program. A significant portion of time was spent further discussing and collaborating on a youth development program they would find meaningful and engaging.

Analyzing Data

The data streams from this study included interview data, recordings of the workshops and group dialogues, workshop notes, and my personal reflections. A thematic analysis was conducted between these data streams, interviews, group discussions, and facilitator notes. Youth were included in the data analysis through member-checking and providing input about the accuracy of what I was describing. Opportunities for youth participation were provided in the workshops and as part of post-workshop conversations. Youth were also consulted about their experiences through the study. These activities are similar to what other studies have done to include youth voices at this stage. For example, in one study, the students participated in most of the primary data analysis bringing their insights into research activities like coding, member-checking and ongoing analysis (Davis, 2020). CYPAR is a process that happens with youth participants as coresearchers and does not end once the data is collected. Instead, teens need to be invited into data analysis. The coresearchers are just as crucial in the project intervention as they are in unpacking the processes and meaning making of that intervention (Mirra et al., 2015). When coresearchers are the experts in their experience and when left out of the process, specific values, behaviors, and worldviews are often overlooked (Aldana et al., 2016).

For this study, I expected data collection to start in the reflexive conversation at the last workshop. However, including the participants in data analysis started in the fifth workshop. Multiple data streams made it necessary to start conversations about data analysis with the cohort

before the last session. In addition to including participants in the data analysis, all recordings and data collected, aside from the initial one-on-one interviews, were shared with the group in an online folder. I made sure to constantly communicate with the participants about my analysis and the information, even post workshop. Through this protocol, the coresearcher-participants could contribute beyond the last workshop and resolve any misrepresentations in the analysis. Some of the participants met one on one with me to discuss the study, in these conversations I received feedback about the study, and we discussed any changes they would make. Every conversation with the cohort members about the themes and data agreed with that I captured, however, they did stress certain themes, like lacking authority, were more important than others.

Methods Chapter Conclusion

This study was designed to engage young people in a CYPAR model of inquiry aimed to uncover the needs, experiences, and desires of those who have had negative experiences with leadership or leadership development. Through this study, coresearcher-participants engaged in a process of research, discussion, design, and reflection that amplified their voices and provided the youth with valuable lifelong skills. While the study faced challenges in working with teens and online engagement, it is worthwhile to collaborate with youth in this way to enhance how we think about leadership and leadership development for future generations. Many items discussed in this chapter can be found in Appendix I, including a participant letter of consent, the recruitment questionnaire, recruitment materials for the community partners, and a copy of the survey the teens developed as part of this process.

Moving through this process with the cohort of participants was at times exciting and curious and at other times, chaotic and retrospective. I believe the cohort members were courageous in sharing their stories, inquisitive in everything they touched, and emotionally

impacted by the work they were doing. The next chapter will focus on the findings of this study and how they relate to my initial research questions.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

When we look at the world and only see what it can become, we neglect what it is.

–Alice Sparkly Kat (2021)

This study sought to answer three questions. First, what are the experiences in youth leadership development programs that disaffect them? Second, what are the leadership skills they find valuable? Third, what type of program would this group of teens like to see? In Chapter III, the CYPAR journey the students experienced and the foundations for the study design were elaborated on. This chapter will explore the findings of this process and begin to answer the research questions of this study. As discussed in Chapter III, CYPAR recognizes the need to include marginalized voices, particularly youth voices, in developing solutions to community needs and challenges. This methodology provided a format where community members joined the dialogue and worked to form their relationships, connections, and solutions. In this chapter, you will find a discussion of the themes that surfaced through the cohort's work.

Working With Teens

Utilizing a CYPAR process with teens was not without its challenges. Working with youth in this way requires the researcher to be agile and ready to shift their focus to match the community they serve. As dynamic individuals, teens often change topics or reframe their needs or conversations, and it is up to the researcher to rise to adapt. As a result, workshops could not be planned or follow a blanket curriculum. Instead, each workshop's agenda was prepared after completing the previous session to make this process successful. While a difficult format that requires flexibility, time, and fast turnaround, this process allowed for the needs, challenges, and changes the group wanted to incorporate.

While each workshop had a different goal and the cohort had dialogues around various topics, themes of power, connection, and community were ever present in every workshop. The themes presented in this chapter did not arise one after the other but emerged at different process points, sometimes overlapping.

Figure 4.1 illustrates the cohort's journey and the themes that surfaced along the way.

Figure 4.1

Cohort's Journey and Themes Emerging in Different Phases



The following discussion elaborates on the themes of this unique process. Participants began creating the spaces for their CYPAR journey from the first one-on-one introductory interviews. In addition to sharing basic personal information, during the interviews the youth participants talked extensively about what they hoped to get out of the process. Quite a few students were interested in learning more about the academic process, while other students were eager to have their voices heard and learn about the experiences of other youth. They also took this time to share some of the leadership development experiences and critiques that were on their mind. Many of the stories students shared involved working with both adults and other teens, a theme that would continue throughout all the workshops and post-program conversations. Notably, while participants had the opportunity to change the “language of leadership” throughout the study, they did not. Even in using some of the common language around leaders, leadership, and community the youth created an initiative which considers and includes characteristics often excluded from dominant non-person-of-color and non-indigenous spaces. Leadership characteristics like, unconditional inclusion, creating meaningful and emotional connections, celebrating individual cultures and identities, and prioritizing youth voices and decision-making, creating spaces where youth would feel supported and inspired, were the focus for the cohort. While the participants shared many challenges, they overall were grateful for the opportunities these programs afforded them. In most instances where they shared, they were dissatisfied with their experiences in which they had had unsatisfactory interactions with adults or adult decision-making.

Throughout the chapter, I reference quotes and experiences of the study participants. However, I intentionally do not provide full profiles of these students to further protect their anonymity, especially because most of the participants are under the age of 18. Many of these

participants had experiences in youth leadership development programs through which they may have connected to this study. To protect their experiences, and the safe communal space we built, only quotes and vague details related to each student are shared in this paper.

Findings From the Study

Often, the teens in this study expressed feeling that adult frameworks prevent youth from thriving. One participant, Scott, said that “Youth opportunities for adult learning styles is limited.” Throughout the workshops they described feeling a lack of authority. Their experiences of having little to no authority impacts the value they perceive in youth development programs and how much trust they can put into the process. This became the most apparent in Workshop 3 when the research they did revealed that youth development programs are steppingstones to professional leadership. Every participant was unsure if the preparation they were receiving in youth programs was adequate given the lack of authority and control they experience. Even though their group research during Workshop 3 suggested that youth leadership development programs are steppingstones to professional leadership, the study participants were skeptical, citing their lack of experience making real world or meaningful decisions that were implemented. Also in Workshop 3, the cohort had a focused dialogue concerning the connection between youth leadership development and communities. Throughout their research, the participants found mostly positive information about Youth Leadership Development program, however, they were apprehensive about the impact these programs have on youth in the long run. Their concerns about youth programs were centered around anxiety, students developing poor self-care habits, and even credited these experiences with developing personality qualities like narcissism.

In Workshop 4, the cohort designed a survey that was concerned with the experiences of other teens in youth development programs and the opportunities they had. As part of Workshop 5 the cohort reviewed the from their survey. Not to their surprise, the information revealed there is a plethora of youth programs available to the point where many teens feel like they cannot keep up. The data also reflected characteristics about youth leadership development that was similar to the conversations the participants were having amongst themselves. This includes feeling limited in the roles and responsibilities they are allowed to take on, the restrictive role adults play, and feeling a lack of authority. Skills that teens who took the cohort's survey found the most valuable were interpersonal communication skills, persistence, patience, collaboration, and listening. However, skills youth want to learn from programs but did not include interpersonal communication, leadership, and how to create opportunities for themselves and their communities. Overall, through their survey, it was clear that teens were looking for youth leadership development programs and opportunities that were more relevant to their needs and resources.

Workshop 6 is where much of the conversation about planning their own initiative happened. In this space they created a program that was open to any teen, was considered a "value add" to their lived experiences and was a multi-year opportunity. The cohort also wanted their youth program to be free, explaining that program fees prohibit individual from being able to participate, and part of their commitment to inclusion means allowing anyone to join without needing access to financial resources. Lucy explained their decision by saying, "If we are talking about equity and inclusion then we want to have people who can't afford a cost in the first place, anyone should be able to have access to youth leadership in general."

Reflecting on their experiences in Workshop 6 and the post-program conversations, cohort members used the words “seen” and “surpassing expectations.” Participants reported that this space was able to help foster relationships between individuals, provide a space for youth to learn about research and the academic process, and support critical conversations about leadership development. While much of the feedback was positive, participants expressed frustrations with technology and the online format. They felt that technology challenges impacted their ability to interact with each other and engage in the process at times.

Themes From the Study

Six themes became apparent from the study:

- Adults have a profound influence throughout the YLD experience.
- Youth want real-world experiences.
- Youth are grounded in community.
- Youth care about cultural community.
- Youth want to make decisions and execute them.
- Youth want to be seen as whole people.

Within these, several sub-themes emerge. These themes and sub-themes are now discussed in order in subsequent sections.

Adults Have a Profound Influence Throughout the YLD Experience

The impact of adult roles, influences, and expectations on youth leadership development programs was a part of every interaction with youth in discussing their youth leadership programs. While some of the stories they shared were positive, an overwhelming number of their interactions with adults were negative and contributed to their impressions of leadership and youth leadership development. They saw adults as controlling the environment, using youths as

means to meet institutional and personal goals. The cohort had wanted adult support and also wanted to address the impact of adult decisions that do not fully support youth goals in a program.

Many different stories were shared by participants at various points in the study process, including ones that focused on the impact adults have on their experiences. Conversations about adult influence on their leadership experiences shared tales of feeling used and being cherry picked because of favorable qualities they may have exhibited. One participant named Jane had described their experience as, “I’m being used as a face.” Participants also described they felt their ideas were being dismissed by adults, and that administrative input and control was stifling their experiences. Kort shared their experience saying, “I feel like sometimes in organizations, especially though school, they try to make you feel like you can be engaged, and sometimes the teachers and the adults need to have control, but they want to have the appearance that you have control, is kind of frustrating” While the frustrations of the cohort members were clear in the stories they shared, these young people cared about the positions they serve and the communities they work within. Unfortunately, the overriding sentiment is that they feel they are not being taken seriously.

Adults Control the Environment

Youth understand that every aspect of the programs that they are a part of is influenced by adult decision-making. Adults choose how programs are run, where they are held, and what happens in these spaces. A cohort member, Darnel, described his experience in the first workshop as “being manipulated to make it seem or say something or think something.” The control adults yield, and a lack of transparency makes it difficult for youth to trust what is

happening in these spaces or why the spaces need to exist in the ways they do. Another cohort member, Holly, shared this critique of leadership programs she has been a part of:

I have been in a few clubs, where it's like, even though the mission is very good and something I believe in, it's the leadership, or adult faculty members, that determines the course of the club or activity, and it can really determine whether or not you feel motivated to be in it. So, I've definitely had to take a step back from some clubs because the leadership was just haywire not to see this go any further.

Adults' interactions in these environments are not always about how they control the space from an ideological way but also in the practical activities of the programs. During the interviews, several participants mentioned adults influence how comfortable youth feel socializing. Sometimes youth want adults to interact with them to help break social barriers. A cohort member, Sarah, described an occasion when she was a new member of a teen youth program and felt anxious about socializing with her peers. She had joined the program to help her meet new people and work on her social anxiety. Unfortunately, the adults did not take an active role, and she was left to manage the interactions alone. She sought more of what she described as "structure" to help her overcome those anxieties and connect with the group. After this experience, she did not return to the program. Sarah further described this experience she had at camp:

It wasn't the best for me . . . I think a lot of it is not focusing on the interactions between the kids because, for me, I need to actually learn how to talk to other kids, not really as much about the ideas, a lot of us already have the ideas on how we just need to like to execute it.

The feelings of being controlled, whether through curriculum, interactions, or the environment, were ever-present. The control these participants relate to is not constructively supporting their growth but instead is holding them back or inhibiting the progress and experiences they want to foster.

Adults Have Institutional and Personal Goals in Youth Leadership Development

When youth leadership development programs are introduced, they generally have expectations, rules, and goals that extend beyond the impact these programs have on youth. However, the teens are not always aware of precisely what these external goals are or why, but they feel the effects. For example, one student, Jane, said she is “used as a face” in programs she has participated in because she is an excellent public speaker. However, Jane also describes how she did not like public speaking and did not like having attention focused on them in this way.

The cohort shared this feeling of being manipulated in programs, not just in how individuals are positioned in front of adult audiences but also in how institutional processes limit the ability of youth participants to implement their own goals or agendas. For example, cohort member Lucy described their experience when trying to implement changes that were seen as counter to the institution’s purposes.

[Green Leaders] is trying to raise money for composting in the school and we are getting a lot of pushback from the administration because it cost a lot of money . . . and we can raise our own money, but the school is just kind of like “no” . . . We aren’t allowed to have our own voice and that’s been one of the bigger issues within my school community.

Despite talking about receiving pushback, Lucy did not understand why there was resistance but instead internalized the message that they were not interested in sincerely listening.

Sometimes, youth also interpreted the behaviors of adults in youth programs as being self-serving and centered around adults’ ideas and voices. Sarah described a civil justice program she attended and the experience she had with an overwhelming focus on adult voices.

I was in a civil justice program—it was supposed to be about justice, but it felt centered on the adults and them talking the entire time instead of interacting, and it was hard to pay attention. I would get headaches from just sitting there . . . I just thought that some of these programs would be more facilitated discussions, and it feels like people just talking at me.

Another cohort member, Scot, shared his experiences with adult interpretations of youth development programs: “Youth opportunities for adult learning style is limited.” This comment emphasizes a focus on adult approaches manifesting in youth leadership programs and how those messages can feel constraining.

This lack of discussion and emphasis on what the adults want to gain from hosting the program promoted skepticism amongst the youth in this study that made them feel the end goal is to be controlled by adults to do what they say. They are not specifically aware of what types of goals these adults may have; however, they feel the pressure to perform despite not having a clear sense of why they are being guided or held back by these authoritative forces. In working together, cohort members Jane, Scot, and Holly named these blind spots and their lack of awareness as one of the biggest challenges that youth face in leadership development programs.

Adult Support is Vital

While most of the conversations amongst the cohort focused on the many ways adult presence influences young programs negatively, the cohort never said that adults were unnecessary or lacking in contribution to these spaces. Instead, teens wanted adults in their spaces but to be supportive forces that help facilitate meaningful experiences. Several cohort members shared stories about when adults tasked with supporting youth leadership development let them down. Two students, Monica and Scot, had similar experiences in their respective schools. In both stories, students were planning community initiatives in which the adult faculty at their school showed no interest. They both described feeling poorly about themselves and the situation because teachers did not help them spread awareness or attend the events. Scot said he felt as if no one wants to be accountable for creating meaningful experiences for young people,

including the youth, and questioned if better adult support could help gain more interest from other youth.

The cohort discussed the best role for adults as mentors with what they described as a “limited role.” They want adult partners to help them develop tools, gain access to resources, and to help youth understand the appropriate ways to use their tools and resources. In addition to this technical support, they see adults as providers of ways to connect to the community and opportunities. Teens do not want adults to teach them what to think but how to think and help them find safe places to practice those skills before entering the “real world.”

One of the ways this support can be helpful is through facilitating relationship building between youth. Sarah shared:

I really struggle with social anxiety with kids, not really with adults, and it prevents me from having a lot of the social interactions I would like, and so I think that adult leadership, making sure to have good interactions between the other teens and facilitating those relationships because it is very hard to just like start talking to people. So if we have prompts, that would be helpful.

Adults must balance bringing too much of their expectations and not enough. These youth have so many experiences and knowledge behind them they are looking to utilize, but they still want to support, safety, and guidance that adults can offer.

Youth Want Real-World Experiences

Teens want to be seen as existing in the real world. They have spent most of their lives living in the hypothetical, and the leadership development programs they are a part of, even in high school, reflect that reality. However, they do not believe that these mock experiences will translate into real-world situations and solutions. This reality comes with a lot of frustration, and at times, resentment.

Youth Lack Opportunities to Practice

It doesn't teach you how to lead. It teaches you how to learn, and yes, something like debate is always good, and it's always good to learn more about politics and the world, but you have to be able to take that and do action . . . youth leadership does have a good education, but it kind of stops there and doesn't lead into any action. (Sarah, a participant)

Throughout the study, participants expressed recognizing talk without action. They understand that they have gained valuable skills and vibrant ideas, but they often struggle to find places and spaces where they get to practice in real-world situations with tangible consequences. When the cohort started to plan their leadership development initiative, embedding the idea into the real world was paramount. They shaped an initiative that supported young people's real-world goals and provided them with the resources to make their goals come alive. They discussed not only how mentors can shape that role but connecting youth the grant-writing and volunteer opportunities could be a part of that also. In every prompt about what the cohort wanted from youth leadership development, they talked about experiences. However, it was not about a particular kind of experience. Instead, they wanted it to be individualized and speak to the specific goals of that student. Holly described this saying,

I've kind of noticed like some of them. They do hands-off leadership to a certain extent, these people that are in charge. . . . It's more of like we aren't really leading—we are just coming up with ideas that are either going to be taken or they are not. They are either taken or dismissed.

The need to practice these skills comes from a fear of being, which cohort member Kort described as “dumped into the real world” after they graduate high school. Whether members were planning on going to college or straight into the workforce, they felt the youth leadership development experiences did not prepare them to face real-world consequences or truly understand the complexity of making community- or group-based decision-making. While

decision-making will be discussed later in this chapter, real-world decision-making was essential to the practice they seek in these youth development spaces.

Real-World Work is Meaningful Work

Hypothetical situations and practices in leadership are not as significant to youth in leadership development programs as programs that are situated in a real-world context with real-world consequences. Comments about the leading opportunities not “actually affecting change” or “really helping make choices” were abundant not only amongst the cohort but also from the response they got in their survey. Some members shared stories of belonging to programs that say they provide a real-world experience, but the execution is so controlled they do not feel like the actual drivers of the experience.

When designing their survey, the group emphasized working with the other youth to identify the appropriate and meaningful real-world experiences. In this suggestion, it can also be implied that youth will not find just any “real world” situation to be a meaningful use of their energy, and there is a theme of inclusion running throughout. The youth in this study talked extensively about how people hold diverse sets of backgrounds and interests that should be included when making decisions about youth leadership development.

Youth are Grounded in Community

The teens in this study expressed knowing they have only had the opportunity to experience a small part of the world. From first meeting the cohort members, they all expressed interest in learning about other people and connecting with teens from different parts of the country. They want to know how their hometown operates and create connections between new spaces and places, often putting their identity at the forefront of guiding their inclusivity and collaboration. They crave meaningful relationships and seek guidance and resources to start

building and influencing these spaces on their own. The cohort felt youth leadership can help grow communities and in return they gain valuable experiences and skills.

Several times while they were exploring youth leadership the cohort wanted to be sure to include community in the conversation, during exploring their personal experiences, their most favorable times happened in programs that made them feel connected to something bigger than themselves. In planning their own program, working with organizations in communities was a staple. They discussed matter-of-factly how organizations would be supporting their organizations and interacting with their cause. One of the research questions they came up with in Workshop 2 explored the relationship between youth leadership and communities. Three students, Tanya, Steve, and Sarah, worked together in exploring this topic. In their work they said, “Leadership training brings together those from all walks of life in order to teach them skills, ultimately facilitating the growth of a community.” Even after exploring this area on their own they were still interested in what their peers had to say and so they asked several questions in their survey about community. This included asking about where participants are from, how connected they feel to other communities, and the roles they feel they can play.

Youth Want to Build Meaningful Relationships

Youth who participated in this study are interested in connecting with other people and building meaningful relationships. They want to find people to relate to and to learn about the world. They see adult and peer relationships as necessary, and teens see youth leadership development programs as the place to foster those connections. When describing their personal experiences and through the planning of their initiative, they talked about the importance of connecting with others. In his interview, Darnel spoke of how important he found being in an opportunity like this was for him because he sees the more people he meets, the more he learns.

Another cohort member, Jason, talked about how he did not connect with youth too often, especially those who do not live in his neighborhood. He was looking forward to having that opportunity in the study. I wanted to be sure there was space to help facilitate those relationships.

Creating spaces for youth to connect with others was essential to their initiative's design. They made multiple instances for relationship building, including having one-on-one meetings with program members to communicate with them, prioritizing in-person programming to enhance the ability to connect, and advocating for a high adult-to-student ratio. When considering their program's skills, they included conversation skills, building relationships, and connecting youth to more community members.

While youth may have a strong desire to build these relationships, another theme was that many feel they do not know how to create relationships. Joyce and a few other cohort members shared that they struggled with talking in groups and connecting with new people, whether it was because of anxiety or shyness. These youth sought semi-structured environments that helped them build connections among themselves and other adults. In their initiative, some of these structures included mentor pairing, small group discussions, and inviting people to participate individually.

Youth Care About Inclusivity

Youth understand inclusivity to be a positive force that significantly benefits society. When addressing the role of leadership development in communities, cohort members Bea, Steve, and Sarah collectively shared that they wanted to be connected to new people and people who are different. Including different people extends beyond a conversation of race and nationality but includes disabilities, socioeconomic considerations, skill sets, experiences, and personality traits. Darnel summed up the groups' feelings on inclusivity best when he said, "I

don't get why people don't want to include people or see diversity as a bad thing, it's how we learn and grow.”

When discussing their own leadership initiative, the group concluded that the program would be open to every student, regardless of their prior experiences or focus of interests. Lucy, discussing the parameters of membership to their leadership initiative, commented, “We don't care if they have any goals in mind. What if they just want to be in a space to figure that out?” The group had two criteria they wanted to look for in a teen to be a part of their leadership program: engagement and interest. If a person was interested in what was happening and wanted to be engaged, they were happy to include them. When considering whether participants' attendance should be required, they did not want to set such a boundary. Their ideal initiative would not be attendance pressures on teens to create a space of support instead of another pressure.

Keeping their initiative free was also an essential part of inclusivity. The group felt that program fees limited who could participate and that those individuals not only deserved access to leadership development but brought valuable perspectives and life experiences to the table. The group also talked about how youth in the programs could work to keep the space free to participants, like engaging in grant writing and planning fundraisers. They had also discussed implementing a sliding scale for program fees but felt it was a last resort.

Youth Want to Collaborate

Youth are looking to connect with their community and work with them in addressing needs and challenges. They have ideas, knowledge, energy, and ambition to work hard but are not sure how to get started. They talked about collaboration when asked about the skills they want to learn from youth leadership development programs. They want to learn to collaborate

between individuals, groups, and communities. The cohort emphasized understanding how to work in a way that included as many voices and individuals as possible. Collaboration was brought up in every workshop session and was one of the characteristics of the initiative they planned as a group. Often, when talking about collaboration, they also included skills like listening to everyone's ideas and building relationships. They see collaboration to bring people together and include more voices in decision-making. One cohort member anonymously shared in a JamBoard activity, "I think youth in communities provide a new sense of thinking with them, knowing nothing, they [youth] question everything and they also provide a feeling of mentorship for adults." When in collaboration, the youth in this cohort like to "think together" and believe they can add knowledge to the collective.

Youth Care About Cultural Community

Youth want to understand their histories and identities. They appreciate being in cultural spaces that help them learn about their family, immediate community, and roots. When asked about the parts of their identity that were most meaningful, most of the cohort members responded by relating to their cultural identity in some way. Whether it was declaring themselves as advocates for Black power, as cohort member Steve did, supporting causes such as "Black Lives Matter," for Lucy, and "participating in Jewish life" as Sarah indicated, cultural programs were vital to young people. Cultural communities did not only talk about race and religion but also represented and were grounded in the LGBTQAI+ community. These identities matter to youth and they find that programs that support these identities are the most impactful. Lucy shared that being in a Black Student Group was one of her most positive youth leadership development experiences. This program not only gave her a space to connect with other students

and adults who shared similar cultural backgrounds but allowed her to learn about the history of her community and how to be an advocate.

When designing their initiative, the cohort decided to include these culturally relevant opportunities that can speak to a range of participants. They shared it was important to hold professional development topics centered around the experiences of Black Women and other groups that their participants may represent so they can understand how these topics relate to them better. They feel that including this context in their development provides a richer experience. Ignoring these ideologies could not be an option for them in their programs.

While culturally relevant programs positively influenced the group, a few cohort members talked about how sometimes they found those spaces to be overwhelming. They described cultural expectations they may not embody and how that can be an overwhelming experience. Kort shared their knowledge, saying:

I've never done well with things like summer camps or Jewish youth groups, and I know that usually Jewish people are really into that. I just found that it was hard to connect with people in those situations. I think those are good places for certain people to connect but not everyone. . . . they forget it's not the same for everybody.

When cultural spaces do not focus on the individual needs of their participants, it can make youth feel like they are lumped together without consideration for personal preferences, sensitivities, or needs.

Youth Want to Make Decisions and Execute Them

The participants in this study often felt left out. Whether it's deciding, planning, delegating responsibilities, or even being given a preference, cohort members shared they do not feel included throughout youth leadership development programs and instead think the tasks and decisions they are given are menial. Decision-making was one skill set the group was most interested in exploring as part of their initiative. However, they felt strongly that most of the

opportunities to make decisions were of little consequence to the program or their peers. In addition, they added that when they did have the chance to make decisions they were disregarded or discredited. Darnel described his experience at school, saying:

I had an old school that I went to . . . and they had a student government that did absolutely nothing, they had no power, nothing that they said or brought to anyone's attention was addressed and they really had no power whatsoever, it was just a title given to a random group of people.

In Darnel's experience, decision-making was built into the program. However, when the youth in this study made decisions in other youth programs, they expressed feeling they did not get to implement them but instead were blocked by an adult and administrative power. Cohort member Jane shared a similar experience:

When it comes down to a certain point, I try to make change or work with other people to make a change, and it's constructive. I go to forums, I've written emails, I've gone to suggestion boxes, and I've like met with people, to and like as much as I try to like create change and make it a more productive and safe space for everyone, I constantly feel like . . . they will take a little bit of it and be like, "woo!" and then like it's just the tip of the iceberg, and they won't really address the rest of it, or like you feel a bit undermined. So, I think it's upsetting, especially when you are part of a group that you have given so much to, and they have given you so much, and like you want to be able to like advance and change it, and it's just like not doing that.

Not only did cohort members bring up these frustrations, but they also were included in feedback received from the community survey the teens did as part of their process. When teens are invited to make a choice but not given the ability to execute that choice, only half the lesson is learned, and youth recognize that. Part of making youth opportunities grounded in real-world experience is allowing the choice, and the consequences of those choices, to manifest. Otherwise, to the youth in this study, it feels like what Darnel described as a "performance."

Youth Want to be Seen as Whole People

When discussing how cohort members are disaffected by youth leadership development, strong feelings around being made to feel disrespected, undermined, and not listened to were

present. They experience the ever-pressing narrative that youth do not know anything or have little to no life experiences to contribute when they have an abundance of experiences, feelings, and expectations to offer. When considered in such a harsh light, it can be difficult for youth to feel like they are being cared for or sincerely considered in youth development spaces. Darnel described his experiences “as controlled.” He went on,

They try to skew or control the results to get what they want. They try to shun out your voice. They try to push you down, you... your voice isn't valid because of your age . . . just flat-out undermine what you say. That has been my primary problem because you just feel like you are being undermined and not being taken with respect or validity.

Some youth feel the boundaries of being “too young” only when entering youth leadership development spaces. More than half of the cohort shared how they are given responsibilities at home that reflect a level of maturity and adulthood they do not experience when in these programs. Joyce shared that she helps her family business, takes college classes in addition to her schoolwork, and takes an active role in caring for her siblings. Darnel said, “My mom treats me grown. I’ve had to learn to survive on my own, so she doesn’t have a choice, and like people don’t always recognize that in these youth programs.” Youth have meaningful lives that are grounded in their behaviors, identities, and needs. When youth leadership programs assume a particular type of teen experience, they create discomfort for the youth who do not have a life reflecting that reality.

Answering the Research Questions

Considering these results and findings, the research questions of this dissertation can now be directly addressed.

Research Question 1: On Disaffecting Practices

The first research question posed in this study was, what are current youth leadership development practices that can disaffect youth?

In the Cohort's experience, adults, for the most part, get to set the stage. They are the orchestrators of the environments in which these youth development programs sit. These environments impose a set of expectations, relationships, and restrictions on youth programs. While programs may try to mitigate the impact, the agendas of the institutions and communities can still be detected by some youth and can lead to unfavorable outcomes for the youth involved.

Feeling used for their public speaking skills or passed up on because of their social anxiety contributed greatly to the disaffecting experiences of youth in this study. Hyper focusing attention on one teen or a group of teens because they represent an ideal type of teen leader for that organization can also make some youth feel uncomfortable and create an uncomfortable dynamic between them and their peers. Asking the same student to speak at board meetings or lead projects created a sense of being used for their ability to perform for the adult audiences instead of their insights. Students who are not chosen for these roles feel a lack of space to learn or that they do not meet the criteria set by the adults in charge. While some people in the study felt this tension from adult expectations and restrictions because of being chosen to perform front and center, others felt they were never afforded the opportunity to do something different because they were not good enough.

When the participants of this study felt they were being manipulated by forces they do not quite fully know or understand, it contributes to feeling a lack of control, authority, and autonomy. This lack of control, again, diminished trust amongst the cohort and made them feel isolated from the experience and their peers. This lack of control was further exacerbated through administrative barriers which delayed decisions, stalled action, and dictated outcomes. The cohort discussed many instances of feeling disrespected, discredited, and given opportunities that do not have meaningful consequences or real-world outcomes. When programs provided

opportunities where youth experiences and needs were overridden with adult goals or expectations, youth did not feel like they were being seen as a whole person with their own individual experiences and hold valid expectations for the future. Instead, they described what I understand to be stereotypes of the youth experience. There are expectations of what youth are doing, their level of responsibility, and family life that are apparent when these youth interact with organizations that are unforgiving, for example creating disincentives for youth who have attendance challenges. The youth in this study found the programs which relied heavily on unchecked assumptions about teens to be exclusive environments that do not include an adequate level of diversity.

Answering Research Question 2: Towards Programs Better Reflecting Youth Needs and Values

The second of my research questions was as follows: How can current youth leadership development programs better reflect the needs and values of the youth and communities they serve?

To better reflect the needs and values of teens in youth leadership development programs there are three areas that should be considered: inclusivity, skills, and individualization. The youth in this study were fierce advocates for inclusivity. They believed that every teen, no matter their situation, skill sets, or knowledge, should have access to youth leadership programs and be given opportunities to practice and learn leadership skills. This inclusion goes beyond thinking about race but including diversity in physical and mental health and abilities, socioeconomic diversity, and life experiences. In embracing inclusivity, the teens in this study also sought individualized experiences that connect with teens where they are. Through building

relationships with individual youths, youth development programs can better include them in the program and make the curriculum more relevant to their life and needs.

Youth in this study not only wanted to learn valuable leadership skills, but also wanted to have real world experiences that can help them practice these skills. Often, cohort members in this study referred to wanting to connect with other people and learn how to communicate and collaborate with them better. The youth in this study saw leadership development programs as a space to help introduce them to working within their community and teach them how to build community relationships. The cohort also talked about how youth development programs can provide steppingstones to professional development opportunities. Beyond using youth leadership development programs as a space to communicate with adults and in adult environments, the cohort also expressed wanting opportunities to learn how to connect with other youth in semi-structured environments. Creating community-based programs or opportunities for youth that reflect their individual needs, include real-world decision making, and promote communication and collaboration is most aligned with the expectations of the cohort.

Answering Research Question 3: Content and Structure of Better Youth Leadership Development Programs

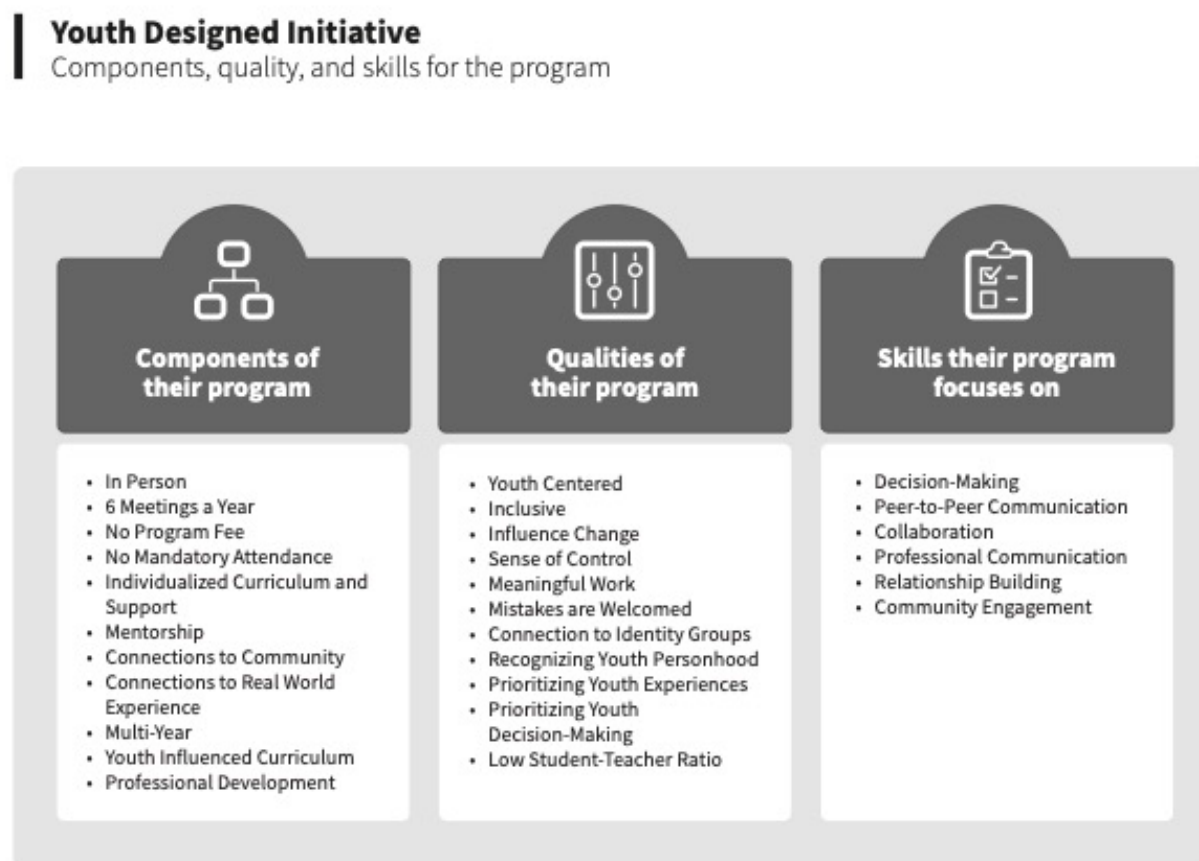
The third research question was, what would the content and structure of a leadership development program, created by youth who have been disaffected by leadership programs or discourse, look like?

When given the opportunity to create their own youth leadership development program, the cohort imagined a program grounded in real-world experiences that consider youth voices, needs and values. Figure 4.2 illustrates the components the cohort created, highlighting the characteristics of the program that were important, and the skills they wanted the program to

focus on. How they came about this initiative exposes specific ways the youth in this study understand why youth leadership development matters, and whose voice is needed at the table. For example, the youth in this study saw inclusivity play a role in almost every aspect of the program, from the interview process to program fees, and personal interests, the youth in this study were passionate about preserving individuality and promoting community and connection with people who embody several differing identities.

Figure 4.2

Cohort's Youth-Designed Program Components and Qualities and Skills Needed



They crafted a program that was to be a value add for youth and was open to any young person who had enthusiasm for being a part of their community, experience was not a requirement. In this program a group of students would meet in person about six times a year to do professional development around the needs of the group members. The topics of the program would be decided by surveying the program participants on their current interests, goals, and needs. Special topics were also a part of the program where culturally relevant programs and speaker could support the needs of the students. For example, the cohort talked about bringing in speakers to address the needs and concerns of Black women in the professional world. To join this program, teens would have to interview; however the interviews are seen as a tool to get to know the program member and confirm their interest in the program. The cohort did not want to instate mandatory attendance for members, taking into account the number of competing commitments they feel youth have. They shared that having a relaxed attendance policy would make people feel more welcome, and not provide awkward pressure for people who may feel “lost” or “left behind” when they miss workshops. The cohort felt many of the reasons that lead youth may miss programming are outside the control of the youth themselves.

This program also provided mentors for students to help them navigate their interests, goals, and needs, so even if a person was not sure what their goals were, they could get support in talking about it with either an adult or peer mentor. This program was intended to be multi-year with the ability for youth who have done the program more than once the opportunity to become mentors, or to just continue as a regular member. The role of adult mentors is to talk to teens about their goals and help them enhance an existing project or start their own project or initiative. These projects or initiatives could be public, and invite more people into their space, or be private working on individual needs. The cohort also expressed wanting a high mentor to

student ratio so that each person can feel like they are getting adequate attention and not overwhelm adult mentors.

Beyond working with mentors, the teens saw their program as being integrated into the community. They hoped that local nonprofits would be involved in supporting youth initiatives, providing professional development, and helping them discover how they can contribute to their community. Youth in this study want their programs to provide meaningful connections to community but want to be sure their needs and experiences are included and valued in the spaces they collaborate with. Practicing leadership and decision-making in these spaces was also a part of the program. To them, practicing their leadership skills in this program means using their decision-making skills and impacting change.

While online resources were part of their program model, they did not think social media was a helpful space for providing information for professional development. When discussing the role they could see social media playing, the cohort had said they could see it being used for announcements or social interactions but would rather have a website with information and resources any teen can access. Resources and tools the cohort thinks would be valuable for the program to touch upon are related to topics such as communication, working with others, decision-making, conflict management, confidence building, connecting to first-hand experiences, and communication while holding onto your identity.

Conclusion for Findings Chapter

The teen cohort that came together for this study was a vibrant group. While people participated in different ways and at different rates, every member of the cohort helped to shape not only the formation of a leadership initiative, but they were a part of the research and goal setting of their project. These youth are impacted by the role adults play and the goals and

expectations adult powers bring to their youth spaces. While they want to be supported by adults, they want to be integrated into real-world challenges and communities. They want to be able to use their voices to not only make decisions but see through the consequences. All these pieces are part of a much bigger call for youth leadership development programs to recognize youth as whole people who have meaningful life experiences, rich identities, and responsibilities that might look different than the expectations set by youth leadership programs.

The program they designed focused on inclusion, diversity, and connecting young people to real-time recourses and experiences. In addition, their program promoted skills like communication, relationship-building, decision-making, and collaboration. While on the surface, some of these traits can be ascribed to many youth development programs. However, there are nuances to the themes from the study, which speak to the relationship between teens and communities, the forces that guide the expectations placed on teens, and the cultural conversation about what it means to prepare youth for the future. The next chapter will discuss my conclusions from this study, offer recommendations for youth leadership development, present a review of the limitations of the work, and make suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER V: INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Building a Future With Teens

While I have always been fascinated with leadership development and supporting individuals, I accidentally entered the world of teen leadership development. Early in my career, I spent my summers working at teen camp programs for supplemental income. When working in this space, I fell in love with supporting a group of people I had never considered before. All the young people I met were passionate, caring, emotional, curious, and knowledgeable. They wanted to not only be recipients of the future but to be a part of creating it, so I started to focus on ways to facilitate teens being a part of the process of building their future. However, along the way, I found myself in a space where teens who did not meet expectations were often disregarded.

This study focused on working with a group of high school students disaffected by youth leadership development to understand their experiences and what they wanted or needed from these spaces. Working with this group of teens is especially important because few studies investigate the experiences and desires of youth who are critical of or do not support programs they have participated. Being guided by the participants in imagining the future of youth leadership development was an experience that sometimes seemed chaotic, messy, underwhelming, overwhelming, profound, and frustrating. They were overenthusiastic some days, and other participants felt they believed there were more important things going on in the world. In matters of the latter, usually, they were right. Building this future with the teens meant suspending my expectations, holding my tongue when speaking was not necessary, and asking questions when I felt like making a judgment. Through this process, they were brave, compassionate, and grateful. I have come to find this is often the case when I approach youth

with an open mind and heart. I am pleasantly surprised by what the cohort offered and what I have to learn.

I first started experimenting with what I refer to as the “playground method” of working with teens in my camp summers. In those spaces, I would do what any good playground monitor does: set up equipment, teach the students how to use it, and then let them play. In these instances, this would usually mean laying down tools for dialogue, sharing a piece of text or media, and letting them say what they had to say. I would stay silent in these spaces for a painful amount of time both for me and, at times, for them. Sometimes, they did not know what to say or did not want to say anything. My motto was, “You create this experience. I am just here to guard the doors.” The playground is to be a safe space to play and experiment and, as the trusted adult in the room, it was my job to ensure safety. Safety is not only making sure the equipment works and no one is in danger but being sure the right people are inside the playground. In these spaces, it is crucial ensure only constructive ideas, values, and intentions are moving beyond the fence or classroom door. These same ideas went into how I worked with this group of teens, promoting an environment of safety, inclusion, and voice.

In this chapter, I discuss the conclusions to my research questions and provide interpretations of the findings within the context of other literature. Topics which will be discussed in this chapter include personhood in youth leadership development, experiential education and the role adults play in these spaces. Working with this cohort, it became apparent to me that these young people did not feel they were being afforded the full benefits of personhood. Considering how they have been treated throughout programs, the lack of thought or consistency exhibited by the people who create and manage these spaces left them feeling as if they were not due the respect of a fully adequate human. Compounded by the limited nature of

experiential education, cohort members of this study were eager to see new roles that adults can play. Unlike in Chapter IV, this chapter will also consider concrete recommendations to organizations, educators, and philanthropists. An ecosystem model of youth leadership development is proposed as a tool groups and individuals interested in YLD can use to better understand the landscape their youth programs, or future programs, sit within. The chapter will conclude with a review of the study's limitations and provide insights for further research.

Addressing the Personhood of Teens

Recognizing Personhood

This study showed that the teens who participated did not feel regarded as whole people when in some of their youth leadership development programs. Instead, they have felt a part of who they are, whether that be their identity, experiences, or needs. Something was missing from the experience that denied them a complete sense of personhood. Personhood is the understanding of who has the privilege of being regarded as a full person (Appell-Warren & Fong, 2014; Jenkins, 2014). Appell-Warren and Fong (2014) discussed that personhood became a more popular anthropological topic in the 1930s and 1940s when anthropologists studied indigenous groups of people, describing them as “primitive” and not having a fully developed sense of self. There was a belief that indigenous people did not have a sense of an “inner self” and only could understand the concept of “person” through other people. From a White Western colonized perspective, this ethnocentric interpretation of the human experience helped justify a set of norms and laws perpetuating the destruction of a group of people and stealing their land. Before the 1930s, personhood had always been a topic of discussion in American discourse, especially when talking about enslaved Black people, Indigenous Americans, children, and those with disabilities.

Youth are not generally understood in society as being seen as a group of people with much experience, agency, power, or influence. Appell-Warren and Fong (2014) described personhood as follows:

An analytical term used by anthropologists to indicate who, within any given culture, is considered to be either a fully functioning and accepted member of adult society, or, in the case of children, who is considered as being on the way to being a fully functioning and accepted member of adult society. (p. 17)

Youth leadership development programs can perpetuate this systemic harm by privileging adult ideas, goals, and experiences over that of the youth they serve.

Cohort members in this study shared several stories where youth development practitioners and the organizations and communities they serve claim their goals are more important than those of the youth. These stakeholders then denied the youth the ability to express and claim a full sense of their needs and experiences, thus denying them a sense of personhood. Moreover, studies such as Clay and Turner's (2021) discussed specifically how youth from marginalized identities are targeted by adult systemic forces often dragged into a "managerialist subterfuge" (p. 386) strategically designed to abate youth power, influence, and activism. The youth in this study were keenly aware of the subterfuges they participated in. They repeatedly cited the obstacles, projects, and lip-service they received while trying to participate in a youth leadership development program. Unfortunately, the subterfuge has translated for the teens in this study into something that denies them the ability to express their whole selves.

Some of the youth in my study felt their voices were dismissed because the authoritative powers are often convinced that young people do not know enough and are too disruptive to everyday processes. Instead, they are considered spaces for possibility, a place for adults to intervene and guide teens toward what is "right" and "wrong." When developing youth as

leaders, these ideologies are ever present and compressed between cultural expectations that privilege ways of communicating, behaving, and thinking.

The Average American Teen

Another implication of the study was that stories that were shared by cohort members expressing how they felt they were unable to express their whole selves. They expressed feelings that they were, in some way, different from the usual idea of who or what are youth and the experiences and knowledge they have and comes with. The teens in this study felt that their responsibilities were not considered valid, and assumptions were made about the resources they had access to and their support at home. The youth in this study felt that programs requiring fees or a specific levels of attendance, override the decisions of the youth groups, are exclusive to other teens, and limit who could participate. Such sentiments are reflected in their research design, as discussed in Chapter IV. Understanding who is considered an “average American teen” can begin to unpack assumptions communities hold about the young people they serve.

While one cannot deny that young people are still growing, learning, and developing, being recognized as not “fully functioning” is a characteristic felt by the youth who participated in this study. Not being recognized as capable of managing multiple responsibilities, having to be a resource for others in their life, and being capable of responsible decision-making—all traits generally associated with a fully functioning adult—is interpreted as condescending and disrespectful. As Perry (2002) described, “To be defined as ‘normal’ means to not be defined at all, to just ‘be’” (p. 6). To these teens, aspects of a program that remind them they do not meet the White standard of youth development leaves a bad taste in their mouths and can be harmful to students who quietly strive to meet the criteria. While the youth in this study did not explicitly

say they did not meet “White standards of youth,” they most certainly differentiated themselves from what was taken to be average participants of the programs they had been in.

Disenfranchisement of Youth

Youth who do not fit the expectation of normalcy or exceptional Whiteness will somehow be excluded, ostracized, or compromised from the basic expectations and structures of the programs created by adults. Even programs that make claims like “this program is for everyone” are pulling from a generalized idea of who “everyone” is. Each youth in this study felt they had a particular identity that did not fit these normalized expectations, whether because of their race, class, socioeconomic status, personal experiences, religious affiliation, or disabilities. When they did not meet the expectations set before the group, they felt isolated, lacking in opportunity, unsupported, and abandoned.

As discussed in Chapter II, these sentiments reflect what other studies have found, that children can be dehumanized in society, especially those who represent minority identities (Costello & Hodson, 2014; Goff et al., 2014; N. Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). For example, Goff et al. (2014) saw strong connections between the treatment afforded by staff to White students and Black students who were attributed lesser human qualities and held to a higher standard of accountability than their White peers. However, this discrimination is not just amongst teens and the adults who support them but also in relationships among teens. Freie (2014) found that when White high school students from an affluent High School talked about themselves, words like “normal” and “average” were rampant. However, when talking about students of color—predominately Black students—they spoke of them as being “city youth.” In another study about the organization Autism Speaks, they discuss how youth with disabilities are often overlooked in youth development programs because they are denied adequate time to speak or

express themselves, an obstacle perpetuated by adults and peers (Courchesne et al., 2021). The youth in this study had their own stories which related to how they were different from other youths. Reflected in the sentiments from this study, these ways of being defined are a product of being seen as “unusual” and can expose how youth programs are not providing the inclusive, safe spaces they strive to produce.

Supporting Personhood

While the youth in this study had many negative experiences with youth programs, many had positive ones. The programs that supported their identities provided real-world connections and resources and allowed for unabated real-time decision-making. Cohort members felt these opportunities had lasting impacts. The study participants also suggested supporting the personhood of youth through youth leadership development programs means embracing students for who they are and what they have to offer and acknowledging the uniqueness in everyone. It means not operating from assumptions about who teens are or the experiences they hold. Instead, programs should find more ways to increase the expression and inclusion of youth in the development and execution of programs intended for them. When organizations spend so much time and effort guessing what young people want without asking and engaging them, they waste their time and energy. While they may be correct in a few instances, the teens in this study had a different experience, instead feeling isolated without adult players even realizing the impact they were having. Asking questions and providing adequate time and space for youth to answer is essential. Throughout this study, there were instances of silence that could be misconstrued as disengagement or boredom, but more times than not, the few minutes of silence gave students a chance to submit a response in a matter that worked for them, whether that be speaking in front of the group or typing a message in the chat box.

Programs which honor the personhood and experiences of young people have been studied before, many of which are grounded in the community and identity of its students. Many of the cohort members in study also reflected being positively impacted by programs grounded in community and identity. The programs whose stories were cast in a more favorable light allowed teens to find community, while also celebrating the uniqueness of its members, and providing support that directly addressed their unique, needs. By working on personal goals and challenges, participants gain valuable connections to their community and grow their confidence and self-efficacy. As described by Sue Johnson of the Nia Cultural Center in Smith's (2021) book, *How the Word Is Passed*: "If you give young people the tools to make sense of their history, you are giving them the tools to make sense of themselves, thus fundamentally changing how they navigate the world" (p. 173). It is this level of individualism that the youth in this study were looking for; ways to connect not just with the tools they needed to get jobs, but including the tools needed to connect with the community, make friends, and practice fundamental world skills in a safe environment.

Adults in Youth Development

One of the surprising elements of this study was just how large of a role adults play in youth's descriptions of their negative youth leadership development experiences. In this study, almost every negative experience in a youth development program revolved around adult ideas, interventions, or support (or lack thereof). While adults were the key to their negative experiences, they were also integral to their positive experiences and an essential component of their leadership initiative. However, when considering what role adults play in these programs, it is necessary to think about it in three ways: the good, the bad, and the institutions.

The Good

Youth and adults have an interdependent relationship, which teens recognize. While not explicitly discussed how that interdependence is illustrated, a symbiotic relationship can help communities flourish. As discussed in Chapter II, there is extensive research on the impact adult mentors can have on young people (Hastings et al., 2011; Lerner et al., 2014; MacNeil & McClean, 2006; Riddell, 2017; Roach et al., 1999; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998; Xing et al., 2015). In this study, cohort members were adamant about the potential positive impact adults can have on youth and youth leadership development programs. With the right expectations, training, and experience, non-parental adult mentors can provide opportunities for youth to ask questions they could not usually ask, tools they would not normally have access to, and connections to communities they would not usually interact with.

In the experiences shared by the cohort members throughout this study, youth were often disaffected when those aspects of the student-adult relationship were absent. Adults could provide access to resources otherwise unknown to teens, and those relationships prosper when they are given in an environment where youth can safely explore those resources. The teens in this study wanted to connect to adults who could bond with them authentically and intimately so that they did not feel judged or labeled as others but were embraced as whole human beings who could bring value to their communities and relationships.

The Bad

Adults have a lot of influence on youth. As Voltaire once said, “With great power comes great responsibility,” and sometimes adults are irresponsible with the power. With adults at the center of youth, they can have alternative agendas which can surface in their youth development programs. If these goals and plans of adults do not emerge explicitly in the curriculum, they will

begin to show how the program is structured and the responses teens get to their comments, questions, or demands. When programs are positioned as being “for the youth” or “youth-led” but have unchecked adult influences in the space, this can make students feel unheard and like they are receiving lip service from adult figures.

YLD programs need to recognize the messages sent to youth when asking them to do things on behalf of the program or organization. For example, when Jane described how she felt being “used as a face,” she was sharing a story about what it was like to always be asked to speak at adult program events like board meetings but never being listened to or having any power to do anything.

These behaviors influenced and orchestrated by adults, which have often been present in my career, have cultivated feelings of being used amongst the members of this study. In contrast, other teens in this study felt constantly overlooked and not given a chance or the support needed to succeed. None of these qualities make up a recipe for building trusting relationships between teens and adults, let alone trusting relationships that allow students to explore their skills and values safely. When alternative agendas driven by adults surface, youth feel no confidence in the adults, whom they need or in the program’s offerings. The sense of being used, taken advantage of, or controlled, becomes the primary feeling and response amongst youth in these circumstances. These pressures exist in programs where students have overall positive experiences of the program and where they have had negative ones. The youth in this study had enjoyed being a part of communities and programs until they encountered adult-curated roadblocks such as always having their needs redirected to other adults or spaces, setting selective standards, and giving students “busy-work” to prevent their changes or challenges from being met.

The Institutions

The institutions which promote and often host these youth events are comprised of adults, adult goals, resources, values, and expectations. These institutions can be supportive forces that promote giving away their power to encourage youth experiences and influence. On the other hand, they can be bureaucratic environments focused on creating the illusion of control and impact through busy work. Recalling Clay and Turner's (2021) work on the managerialist subterfuge, this just keeps youth busy until they run out of steam, the program cycle ends, or the change is no longer possible. Creating spaces for youth voices at board meetings, but not taking what they have to say seriously—or often leaving their items to the last minutes—are a few ways intuitions can try to make young people feel they are making a difference while not extending any power or influence to the young people. Stories shared in this study reflected these intuitional challenges, such as being given avenues for “feedback” but constantly being asked to provide that feedback to yet another person leaves the student who really did have something to share got too tired to continue.

Also in this study, stories were shared about youth being invited to make decisions, but when they did, being told “no” without explanation or discussion for collaboration or compromise. When institutions are deaf to the young people they are trying to serve, they do a disservice to the youth and deconstruct valuable relationships with stakeholders whose potential for investment can only increase with time.

Moving Beyond Experiential Learning

Cohort members consistently brought up experiences where they were not challenged and could not see the results of their efforts in decisions; their effort, in the end, making little or impact. Each time they told such a story, in one way or another they were referring to the

experiences they were a part of. Teens in this study felt that all too often they were not being afforded complete opportunities because they were not being taken seriously. They felt their knowledge and experience being dismissed or stunted.

As I reflected on this, it became apparent the philosophies which guide these youth leadership development spaces are limited in how they approach youth, their abilities, and their experiences. The youth who participated in this study had been involved in programs that used experiential learning, but the experiences they shared, exposed potential limits of experiential learning. While working with the study participants, I came to see that many of these students were participating in youth leadership development programs and opportunities that embrace—or attempt to—the philosophies of experiential learning. However, the discussions in the study began to expose possible shortcomings of this field. While experiential learning embraces giving young people a chance to learn by trying new things and interacting in real-world situations, many of these tools look like real work experiences. Still, they are limited simulations that the adults in the room control.

Brief Background on Experiential Learning

Experiential education has its roots in the idea that people “learn by doing” (Gentry, 1990; Kolb, 2015). It became a way of working with people in educational settings, allowing individuals to incorporate their knowledge and experiences into learning new skills and ideas (Kolb, 2015; Kolb et al., 2014; L. H. Lewis & Williams, 1994). A key aspect of experiential education is to focus on the process of learning instead of the outcomes. Another characteristic of experiential education is approaching learners as “whole people” (Gentry, 1990), which means that throughout experiential education, we must consider our learners as functioning people with a world of experiences and knowledge to offer. While experiential learning has become

increasingly popular and seen as an intentional educational approach, it can be limited. There are two areas where experiential learning can fall short: limitations of simulations and disregarding the importance of outcomes in the learning experience.

Activities and simulated experiences are two predominant ways for experiential learning to manifest, each with limitations to how they represent the so-called real world (Gentry, 1990). Activities and simulations are often experiences that emulate real-world needs and decision-making; however, the consequences and outcomes of these actions are not meaningful. Some simulations, like volunteering situations or internships, can provide actual real-world problems but often do not have any significant influence or decision-making power. The youth in this study experienced these limitations when they expressed being in projects that did not connect to real-world consequences or that their projects never went beyond the initial proposal stage. Their feelings were shown by such quotes as Holly saying, “It’s more of like we aren’t really leading—we are just coming up with ideas that are either going to be taken or they are not they are either taken or dismissed;” and Sarah stating, “I’m in another program, and the adults just talk the entire time and the kids don’t get a chance to give input so no one is that interested in it because they just don’t make the program good.” In addition, the youth were aware that the learning situations they encountered were “set up,” contributing to negative feelings, including not being taken seriously and losing trust in the process.

Challenges

Focusing on the process of learning is a much-needed and practical aspect of learning and development. However, ignoring learning outcomes can be detrimental to a complete understanding of how to build experience effectively. Ignoring the importance of outcomes in youth development spaces can deprive youth of the completeness of the experience by ending the

program curriculum at the ideation stage. It can also justify adult interference and control to dominate the result. For example, students in this study talked about work they had done being rewritten by adults without their consent, and their choices were even ignored when it came to putting their work into action. These youth are denied the experience of seeing the outcomes of their choices and the process. Without the sight of outcomes, they only get half of an experience.

The youth in this study expressed needing experiences that matter and make a difference in their communities and amongst their peers. By high school, the youth expressed having had enough “simulations” and wanting to exercise their skills in “reality.” The limitations of simulations become the shortcoming of experiential learning theory. Despite the goals of approaching youth as whole people with experiences, adult observers and authorities put restrictions on youth influence and impact. When engaging in experiential learning, it is important to consider if using simulations and adults using their roles to mitigate the consequences of teen decision-making of teens truly recognizes youth as “whole people”—yet another reminder that teens seek a sense of personhood in their spaces.

Looking Beyond Experiential Education

Looking beyond experiential education means moving beyond the simulation and understanding how youth development opportunities for teens can be integrated into the community, addressing real-world needs, and allowing for real-world impact and consequences. Throughout this study, the youth commented on feeling as if the opportunities they were given were shallow, overly controlled, and did not contribute to any real-world outcome. When creating their own initiative, they were centered around being sure the opportunities they were offering were meaningful and connected to the real community and outcomes. They even talked about their program supporting new community initiatives by other teens. This approach

abandons any cookie-cutter repeat curriculum for leadership programs. When experiential opportunities are embedded in the real world instead of being merely simulations, resources and human power are needed to make those programs come to life. The real world moves quickly, dynamically, and on a timeline that is not so easily swayed. Integrating programming into a community means adjusting the curriculum and resources to meet the present needs of the community and the youth. Moving beyond the basics of experiential learning requires the institutions that support these programs to operate dynamically with a willingness and preparedness to support youth's unique and possibly untraditional interests. Creating experiences that meet teens where they are and allow them to make real changes that will be reflected in the community, can be a refreshing approach for teens looking for leadership development opportunities.

Youth Leadership Development Ecosystems and Recommendations

Communities constantly ask how they can engage with young people but do not know how to do so. In these settings, adults sit around tables asking each other, "What do the kids want?" I have been to a few of these meetings, and usually, the adults at the table who have kids, grandkids, or niblings, share their latest trends. "Well, my teen is really into this social media platform" and, "My kids are too busy with sports" are often phrases used while people ponder, "What do the kids want?" Unfortunately, in these situations, well-meaning adults can perpetuate their assumptions about teens in their community and can reproduce them in the programs and opportunities they offer. Creating programs in this vacuum can work for some students but not all. Sometimes, these assumptions and the decisions made based on them, perpetuate community biases and exclusivity. These experiences often deny teens a sense of personhood and are perpetuated through limitations in experiential learning that underly curriculum development.

My research indicated that this situation can be rectified by including the group of people one wants to influence, support, and talk about, at the table. Organizations and communities need to invite teens to the table more frequently and ask them what they want and need. They need to make spaces for them at adult board meetings and help them understand the complexities of providing them with what they are asking for. This ask is more than just creating youth boards that “act” independently from adult perspectives but integrating them into the areas of making decisions about what skills teens need to learn, what goals and outcomes they have, and how they should get to go about learning about it. Sometimes communities and organizations find themselves in a position where they cannot be as transparent or inclusive as they would like. Maybe, particular stakeholders are not ready to give away some of their power to teens in this specific space. However, in these instances, communities need to be as transparent as possible with the people they serve. The youth in this study quickly understood when other forces were at play and when the “youth lead agenda” was compromised.

It is not easy to shift an entire community or organization’s perspective on how to work with teens. Moving from the top-down authoritative way of addressing and teaching youth has been a comfortable norm for many institutions. Also, many organizations may be attempting to work with teens from a holistic person-centered way but are finding the process falling short. By considering the themes from the study and the stories shared by cohort members, I have identified five elements of the youth leadership development ecosystem that create the environment in which these programs exist:

1. Values and goals,
2. Transparency and relationships,
3. Community stakeholders,

4. Support and resources, and
5. Staff.

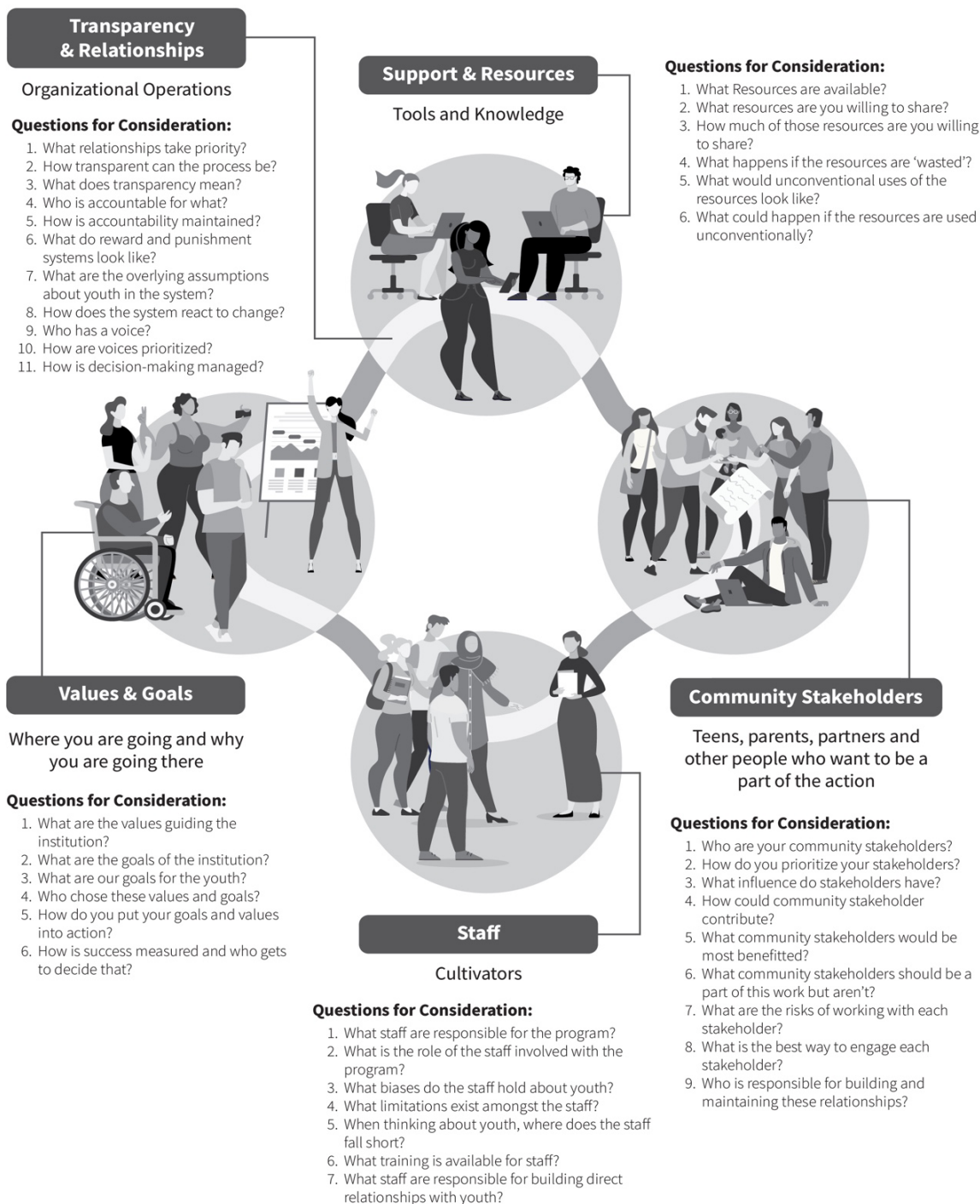
Understanding the elements of the system and how they work interdependently can help provide clarity as to what forces are impacting YLD programs. Each element is space to inventory the environment a community or organization is cultivating in creating or running youth leadership development programs. These elements do not have a right or wrong answer, but the benefits and challenges of each component for an organization should be considered. Figure 5.1 shows these elements how they are connected, and the questions organizations, educators, practitioners, and philanthropists should consider about each, when working with or building a youth leadership development program.

In this ecosystem, “Support and Resources” comprises the variety of tools and knowledge at the disposal of the program and its stakeholders. The “Community Stakeholders” are the teens, parents, funders, partners, and other people who want to be involved in the youth development in some way. While Staff are also Community Stakeholders, the staff which directly are responsible for the function and maintenance of the day-to-day of the youth opportunity or program are cultivators. They build, prepare, and maintain the spaces, relationship, and curriculum of the program. Each of these spaces has a set of “Values and Goals” which dictate where they want to go and why they are going there. Flowing between these four elements are “Transparency and Relationships,” which exist throughout the system.

Figure 5.1

*Elements of the Youth Leadership Development Ecosystem***Youth Leadership Development Ecosystem**

The impacts, skills and program qualities



In examining each of these elements, organizations can get a better understanding of the complete environment these youth programs are functioning within. A clearer understanding of the environment a youth program sits within may lead to insights as to what limitations a youth development program may have, new ways give youth voices power, and opportunities for growth. Each of the elements is described in more detail below.

Values and Goals

Institutions need to understand the core values and goals that influence their decision-making and the values and goals that influence their youth development programs. The teens in this study were frustrated when unsure about how what they were doing connected to larger institutional values and goals. The articulated values and objectives of the organization can be more clearly communicated not only to another stakeholder who may want to support the work but also to the teens they serve and their parents. When making decisions about the program, be sure they align with these states' values and goals. When the goals and values are misaligned with participants the student in this study did not have a positive experience. Once student Sarah said, "I'm in another program, and the adults just talk the entire time, and the kids don't get a chance to give input, so no one is that interested in it because they just don't make the program good." Institutional leaders should reconsider the decision-making process if the decisions misalign with institutional values and purposes. If program values and goals are unclear or murky, it can muddle the intentions of youth development opportunities. In some cases, institutions and communities may want to invite youth to help them define what these goals and values should be.

Transparency and Relationships

The youth in this study felt isolated by the lack of transparency of the adult and instructional players. Increasing transparency with the communities that are served through YLD programs and initiatives is vital to building and maintaining trust with teens. When organizations cannot be transparent about their decisions, they should consider why they feel this information cannot be shared. There may be consequences of sharing information with youth—like an overly emotional reaction—that an organization wants to avoid. However, in such instances, organizations should once again check their assumptions about the group and thoughtfully think if there are ways the information can be shared that could alter how it is perceived. For example, sometimes organizations want to share decisions about a program over e-mail, which may cause an adverse reaction, when instead, they should organize an in-person town hall to discuss the changes as a community. Sometimes information cannot be shared, but an organization can be transparent with participants and stakeholders by letting them know that they cannot provide information right now but will do so later.

Community Stakeholders

Taking inventory of community stakeholders is vital to understanding the environment youth leadership development programs sit in. Funders, community members, organizations, organizational leadership, parents, school communities, and many more are all a part of the ecosystem youth programs sit in. They help construct the environment in which these initiatives take place. It is essential to not only identify these stakeholders but to understand the roles they can play and want to play. Different funders, parents, and communal organizations may have resources that could enhance the youth's experience and provide many opportunities. Cohort members in this study talked fondly of opportunities to connect with adults in meaningful ways

and made it a key component of the initiative they planned. In their program, they wanted to individually connect students with adults that related to the participants' interests and needs.

One of the challenges of incorporating this level of community stakeholder focus is the professional power it takes to cultivate and maintain these relationships adequately. The teens in this study were very aware of the interaction between stakeholders and their youth programming; however, they did not always feel included. Some of the stories cohort members shared seemed more a performance to an audience than actually being integrated into the experience. Other stories shared in the group touched on teens foregoing their own needs because they perceived the adult leaders around them to be overwhelmed. Creating experiences that integrate youth and stakeholders in meaningful ways takes time and energy. However, engaging stakeholders in meaningful ways can provide a backbone for the opportunities and experiences being offered by the programs.

Support and Resources

It is no secret that institutions hold the key to most of the community and social resources, especially when they provide youth development programs. Understanding the resources that are available to the youth is vital. Resources can include but go beyond monetary opportunities to include job and mentorship prospects, connections to other community spaces, decision-making opportunities, and meaningful experiences. However, in providing these resources, communities need to be prepared for the youth to use them in unique or unconventional ways. In providing them the resources, these organizations, and communities are giving away their power to be used however the youth want. Relinquishing control requires mutual trust between the institutions and the youth they serve.

I have seen this done by creating philanthropy circles of youth. In these spaces, youth are provided with money—in many cases a significant amount—to grant into community nonprofits that meet the values and needs of the youth within them. In these programs, youth have supported organizations that the institutions would not have traditionally supported. However, in the youth extending that support, new possibilities for collaboration and support came to be. In this study, some teens had ideas about how to help their schools recycle and really wanted to make positive tangible change. As evidenced by their commitment to this study, when trusted with resources, youth can do unconventional things, leading to further growth and healing within communities.

This study did not go exactly as I had planned; conversations did not always go as I had hoped, and the ways they wanted to talk and connect to each other was not something I could foster alone. It is also important to remember, youth are not infallible, so the institution must also prepare for some things to go wrong but be ready to use mistakes as lessons for growth for everyone involved instead of focusing on punishment or retribution. In providing support and recourse, communities must be willing to embrace change, the unknown, new things, and sometimes a few errors.

Staff

As evidenced by my study, the adult staff of a youth leadership development program is one of the most critical elements of an initiative. The staff under consideration are not restricted to facilitators or program coordinators, the managers of these programs, and the evaluators. These individuals are the adults who will orchestrate all of the above criteria. They make sure the programs and processes are moving forward and constructively. When the adult players that come together to make the programs hold extreme biases and criticism of youth, they can

compromise the system. However, not all adults who can create situations that disaffect youth in leadership programs intentionally enact biases against young people.

Sometimes adults who have not had a lot of experience with teens or youth are intimidated by the subject. As discussed in Chapter II, team training and education on biases when working with youth can help provide tools and support in these spaces. It is also essential for all staff members connected to youth leadership development to think about what they picture when they think about an “average teen” and then to ask, “Who is missing?” This information can provide insights into the biases held among staff about teens. It can be a starting point for conversations about how current programs or opportunities limit who they include. It can also be a space to discuss how the biases presented limit the personhood granted to the teens included in these leadership development spaces.

In addition, adequate staff time and presence is important in youth leadership development programs. The youth in this study recognized when the adult leaders of their program were overwhelmed and made sure a low student to staff ratio was present in their programs. When asked about this ratio they admitted to feeling their adult leaders are overburdened and so they hold back projecting their own needs because they do not want to add on to it.

Limitations of the Study

CYPAR

As discussed in Chapter III, many challenges with CYPAR have been identified. Researchers must dedicate themselves to working with young people who may direct the study and the information to a different place than the researcher intended. The researcher must embrace this outcome. Bringing youth into every aspect of research requires dedication to doing

research, its processes, and the researcher herself to be accessible to young people. Working in this dynamic space involves a level of flexibility from the researchers and facilitators, a challenge this study was able to meet successfully. In this study, there was limited time between sessions and so a lot of quick and fast inclusive action must happen behind the scenes. This rapid preparation was not only needed of the researcher but as well, of the cofacilitator. Also, CYPAR means working with all the voices in the room which can take time and increase the differing opinions within the group.

In addition to the mechanical challenges to a CYPAR study, it is difficult to always know if the teens are engaged with or interested in what the group was doing. Sometimes, their behaviors did not match my expectations. For example, in this study there were three participants in particular, Monica, Steve, and Scot, who always had limited communication, usually faced technical difficulties, and sometimes, made responses that seemed off topic. However, this was a good opportunity for me to work through my own assumptions about teens and about teens participating in a study and to find new ways to engage them. When offering other ways to express themselves, like using the chat, Jamboard, or pictures, they would have wonderful insightful contributions. When doing this work and looking for effective ways to engage a group of diverse youth, I found it helpful to include different ways of expression and encourage different ways to participate. An example of this was creating a Spotify playlist with the group comprised of songs about what it means to be a youth leader. These songs brought wonderful insights into how they saw themselves and leadership in general but did not require verbal articulation to be shared and understood by the group. While ensuring engagement from all members at all times of the process is a challenge of CYPAR, the format also allows for new and organic modifications to how engagement is measured and expressed.

Recruitment

When recruiting students, there were some interesting challenges in the triangulated relationship between teens, their parents, and the programs. A few students had expressed interest in joining the study. However, they did not qualify because their parents would not let them leave programs they did not like. One student expressed how their parents never allowed them to quit experiences, no matter how miserable they were. This is a powerful experience that is not isolated. Sometimes there are assumptions about the relationships youth have with their parents and the amount of autonomy they possess. Limiting this study to “youth who have not left a program” excluded the voices of teens with limitations put upon them by their parents. In addition, some students interested in the study did not get support from their parents. Despite leadership not being a requirement of the study, some parents insisted their child was a leader and did not qualify. Some of these demands came after expression from their teen and having the opportunity to clarify the study’s intentions. This prevented youth who had valuable experiences from being able to participate. When youth who expressed being disaffected from youth leadership development programs are prevented from joining the conversation because of systemic or relational challenges it leaves me to ask what could be missing from the experiences, needs, and ideas expressed in this study.

Working Online and Nationwide

Another anticipated challenge of this study was working with youth online. Holding workshops online can cause engagement challenges as individuals face technology obstacles related to their microphones, cameras, and connections. Sometimes these technical challenges led to repetition in our discussions and would cause the group to spend more time on a subject than intended. However, taking the time and effort to be sure everyone could connect and fully

participate ensured that all voices were heard. Most of the time, these challenges could be worked around. Nevertheless, I, as co-facilitator, and the study participants felt their impact.

A positive aspect of working with youth online was that I could engage a group of students from around the country. Working with youth from around the country allowed for a wide variety of experiences and stories to be shared. Another essential component of youth recruitment was their ability to have these conversations with youth from around the country. They were eager to listen to each other's' stories and understand their experiences' similarities and differences. However, working with a group of youth from around the continental United States posed challenges in arranging meeting times. It also did not allow youth to meet in person for this experience.

Surprises of This Study

When I first set out to do this study I wondered where the conversations and the participants were going. First, I was not sure if the youth in this study were going to continue to use traditional language around leadership. To my surprise, they were very comfortable using words like “leadership” and did not want to make any amendments to how leadership was talked about. I also found it surprising that the students were very adamant about including adults in their idea youth leadership development program. I imagined they could very well exclude adult figures from their programming; however, they believed adults were an invaluable part of the youth leadership development experience. Finally, I did not expect such a clear need to help socializing amongst other teens to surface as an important part of youth leadership development. In my experience creating youth development curriculum, there is need for a conversation about how much socializing time should be structured and unstructured. It became clear to me in this study that room for both actives must be present to satisfy a range of needs amongst teens.

Future Research

This study in youth leadership development involved 12 teens from around the country meeting online to research, discuss, and design their youth leadership development program. If I were to repeat this study, I would consider bringing the research into a single, in-person community or program. Youth leadership development is a vehicle through which communities can invest in their future. They see it as helping usher them into adulthood and providing a sense of success and stability. The conversations between the students and the solutions they create have great potential to help a community learn about itself and find answers in partnership with young people.

This type of CYPAR study is also not just for youth. It could be replicated to engage people of all ages. Youth are not the only people exposed to and engaged with leadership development opportunities. Engaging with a group of adults who are disaffected or jaded with leadership development programs could expose possibilities for growth and improvement. The space could serve as a learning tool about where their organizations are falling short in employee engagement, professional development, and diversity goals. Moving through this process with other groups reveals gaps in current leadership programs, opportunities, and rhetoric but also helps identify culturally meaningful ways to address them. This study is not just about youth programs but about leadership development studies.

Personal Reflections

This study is just the beginning of a much larger and broader conversation about who in the general American canon is afforded the opportunities to be a leader and who is not. Not only is more robust language needed for talking about leadership and leadership experiences, but there needs to be a deeper look at the systemic approaches leading to the present outcomes. If

practitioners only look to the students who have done well to reassure them their programs are doing just fine, they are missing out on great growth opportunities. If practitioners only look to the students who have done well to help them answer questions about engagement, recruitment, and retention, these metrics will continue to decline.

While it is easy to write about how to engage students better, engaging a group of teens from across the country and online was hard. It required a lot of attention and time. It was essential to have a cofacilitator for this study to be sure that we were able to attend to the varying needs to participate and keep the program running. Sometimes a teen would have technical problems, or they seemed to be extra silent in the call or discussion, having an extra person to help support all aspects of the program was vital. The cohort members were most engaged when they were involved in creating something, no matter if it was survey questions, new initiatives, or goals for themselves; they loved to create and reflect on their personal experiences.

The teens in this study cared deeply about being given real opportunities, and they were all looking for spaces that would reassure them they were enough, and that their ideas were worthy of following through on. Throughout this process, I have been surprised by the youth's maturity and thoughtfulness. They shared their emotions with me, embarrassing and frustrating moments, and they did it with insightfulness, hope, and grace. Working with groups like these renews my hope for the future. In my practice, this study encourages me to include more community and learning lessons reflecting the "real world." I hope that more organizations will make space at the table for youth and open themselves up to possibility.

My own practice in youth development and leadership development has been impacted greatly through this process. In all aspects, lessons about patience and relationship building were reinforced. To create relationships which are transformative trust needs to develop—and to

develop trust requires dedicating time to cultivating relationships. In addition, this study reminded me to ask more questions. When I do not understand something or want clarity, I need to ask more questions of the people I am serving, young or old, instead of assuming or trying to guess what their answer will be. Leadership development has tried to become a prescriptive movement; however, leadership that strives to be inclusive and equitable needs to be more individualized and developed by and with the people it is meant to serve.

Conclusion

This CYPAR study brought 12 youths from around the continental United States who have been in some way disaffected about research, to discuss youth leadership development and create their initiative. This study showed that teens do not feel like they are being seen as capable human beings and are often given shallow opportunities, usually mitigated through adult intervention. Through this work, the limitations of experiential education can be seen and that aspects of youth leadership development programs should be considered. Beyond the values, resources, and staff of institutions that support or create youth leadership development opportunities, communities also need to consider their stakeholders and the level of transparency they can provide between stakeholders. By mindfully working through these elements' programs can better understand the different elements that are in play in their organization and may be contributing to limitations and successes. Overall, this study shows the need for youth to feel trusted and essential to the communities they are a part of. Often burdening the inheritance of the future, youth want to be actively a part of creating the now and have experiences, values, and needs that can positively contribute to ever-growing societies.

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Appendix A: Dissertation Leadership Questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short anonymous survey on Leadership Development. This survey is a small part of a larger study that seeks to work with high school students in reimagining what youth leadership development should look like. If you have any questions about this survey or would like more information on the study please contact Trisha Swed at [author's email] and visit sweddevelopment.com/CYPARStudy.

Demographics

1. Gender
 - a. Non-Binary
 - b. Female
 - c. Male
 - d. Not Listed
2. Grade in High School
 - a. 9th
 - b. 10th
 - c. 11th
 - d. 12th
3. What other group memberships or identities matter to you?
4. In the past, have you thought about joining a leadership development program but decided against it?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other
5. Have you ever left a leadership development program before finishing 25% of the activities or requirements?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Other

Leadership Questions:

Please rate if you agree or disagree with the following statements.

1. I consider myself a leader
 - a. Leichardt 1 (Strongly Disagree) -5 (Strongly Agree)
2. Adults in my community would consider me a leader. (Leichardt 1–5)
 - a. Leichardt 1 (Strongly Disagree) -5 (Strongly Agree)
3. My peers consider me a leader. (Leichardt 1–5)
 - a. Leichardt 1 (Strongly Disagree) -5 (Strongly Agree)
4. I agree with popular ideas of leadership.

- a. Leichardt 1 (Strongly Disagree) -5 (Strongly Agree)
5. I am given opportunities to practice leadership.
 - a. Leichardt 1 (Strongly Disagree) -5 (Strongly Agree)
6. There are things about leadership that make me uncomfortable.
 - a. Leichardt 1 (Strongly Disagree) -5 (Strongly Agree)

If students rate many items low, they will be asked additional questions:

Would you be interested in participating in an online study to redefine what leadership is for current and future generations? While making \$100–\$300? If you would like someone to reach out to you with more information, please leave your contact information below. If not, please disregard these questions and hit submit.

1. First Name
2. Last Name
3. E-Mail Address
4. Phone Number
5. State
6. What identities play an important role in your participation in the study?
7. What else should we know about you before starting with the project?
8. By checking this box, I understand that In order to participate in the study we will need to have parental consent.
9. Parent Name
10. Parent Email

Closing Window:

Thank you for your participation. If you have any questions about the questionnaire or study, please reach out to Trisha Swed at [\[author email\]](#)

Appendix B: Letter to Organizations

Dear X,

I am reaching out to you today to ask for your help in recruiting students for a leadership development study. My name is Trisha Swed and I am a Ph. D. candidate at Antioch University who is exploring the impact leadership development programs and opportunities have on young people. I have been working in youth leadership development for 10 years focusing in supporting nonprofits and underserved communities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and beyond.

This study's goal is to uplift the voices of young people negatively impacted by youth leadership development in some way. In addition, this study will create a space where those participants can create an initiative that would better meet their needs. Given the numerous studies on youth leadership development, many do not recognize or address the needs of youth who report having a negative relationship with current leadership ideas. The study aims to contribute to the ongoing understanding of youth leadership development and critical leadership practices while guiding youth development practitioners and educators toward more equitable youth development.

In this study, students will work in a group of ten other high school students from throughout the country. Together participants will collaborate in co-developing a leadership development initiative through six two-hour online workshops from mid-January 2022 to the end of February 2023. Throughout the experience, participants will have the opportunity to make new relationships, gain critical thinking and research skills, and provide ample opportunities for consensus building and teamwork. Each participant's contribution to the study will receive a stipend of \$100–\$300. Each participant's information will be kept entirely confidential, and any data connected to them will remain anonymous. You can learn more about the project and myself by visiting www.sweddevelopment.com/CYPARstudy.

I am asking if you would be willing to help recruit participants for this research. To do this, we would ask our community partners to share a survey asking about their general leadership experiences. Participants for the study will be selected based on how they answer the general leadership survey. Before any person joins study, parents will be made aware of the research and parental consent will be obtained.

While I cannot share specific information gained from your organization's support of this study, I will be able to share with you the final published dissertation that your organization can use to inform your youth programming in the future. If you have any questions or concerns about the project, please reach out to me.

Thank you for your consideration,
Trisha Swed
Ph. D. Candidate
Antioch University
Ph. D. in Leadership and Change
[author email]

Appendix C: Letter to Parents

Dear X,

You are receiving this letter because your child has expressed interest in participating in a youth leadership development study. This study's goal is to uplift the voices of young people in youth leadership development. This study will create a space where participants can create an initiative that would better meet their need and interests. The study's finding aims to contribute to the ongoing understanding of youth leadership development and critical leadership practices while guiding youth development practitioners and educators toward more equitable youth development.

In this study students will work in a group of ten other high school students from throughout the country. Together participants will collaborate in co-developing a leadership development initiative through six two-hour online workshops from mid-January 2022 to the end of February 2023. Throughout the experience participants will have the opportunity to make new relationships, gain critical thinking and research skills, and provide ample opportunities for consensus building and teamwork. For each participants' contribution to the study, they will receive a stipend of \$100–\$300. Each participants' information will be kept completely confidential, and any data connected to them will remain anonymous. You can learn more about the project by visiting www.sweddevelopment.com/CYPARstudy.

Before your child can participate, please review the information about the study, and sign the Participant Consent Form. Once I have received all the information, I will set up an initial interview the participant. If at any time you have questions or concerns about the project, please let me know.

Sincerely,
Trisha Swed
PhD. Candidate
Antioch University
Ph. D. in Leadership and Change
[author email]

Appendix D: Cohort Created Survey

SECTION 1

1. Age (Short Answer)
2. Location (City, State) (Short Answer)
3. How many youth leadership opportunities are available in your area?
 - a. None that I know of
 - b. 1–2
 - c. 3–4
 - d. 5 +
 - e. So many that I can't keep up
4. What are your experiences in youth leadership development programs like?
 - a. Likert Scale
 - i. Always Negative (1)
 - ii. Always Positive (5)
5. Do you feel like you have authority when you are involved in youth leadership development programs?
 - a. Likert Scale
 - i. Not At All (1)
 - ii. Often (5)
6. Are you part of a youth organization that has executive positions for youth? (If Yes/then section 2)
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. I don't know

SECTION 2

1. Have you ever applied for these positions?
 - a. Yes/No
2. Could you share more about your experiences with these executive positions? (Long Answer Text)

SECTION 3

1. What are the most valuable skills you have learned from youth leadership programs? (Long Answer Text)
2. What skills or experiences did you want to have from youth leadership development but did not have? (Long Answer Text)
3. Is there anything more you want to add? (Long Answer Text)