

Building the future: a practice-based approach to youth leadership development

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Abstract

Purpose – While leadership is a popular field of research and practice, there is a need for more studies emphasizing youth leadership development. The importance of youth leadership development in solving complex societal and organizational problems cannot be overemphasized. The purpose of this teaching tool is, first, to contribute to the field of youth leadership development. Secondly, gleaned from nonprofit work in Africa, this article aims to explore emerging leadership education approaches for developing young leaders.

Design/methodology/approach – This research maximizes a recent evaluation of the Teens and Youth in Leadership (TYIL) Fellowship program, conducted using a focus group interview with previous participants and assessing the impact and relevance of TYIL's model for the leadership development among youth.

Findings – Participants believed that the model adopted by the TYIL Fellowship for youth leadership development is relevant for their personal leadership successes and can be adopted by other youth leadership programs.

Originality/value – The featured program is novel, with potential for broad application. Youth program leaders, faculty members and practitioners can utilize this teaching tool research for developing young leaders in their various contexts.

Keywords Youth, Leadership, Youth leadership development, Youth development, Leadership education, Empowerment, Community, Youth engagement

Paper type General review

Introduction

Over the years, there has been a strong focus on organizational and adult leadership within the field of leadership studies and education. However, there is now a growing recognition of the need to address youth leadership development, capturing the interest of both scholars and practitioners (McNae, 2018; Redmond and Dolan, 2016; Tackett *et al.*, 2023). Conversations on youth leadership development and engagement have saturated the research and community development space, and the call for it has never been more urgent (Hastings, Barrett, Barbuto Jr, & Bell, 2011; Jones, 2008; Mihnea & Das, 2019). As the world experiences globalization and technological advancement, more opportunities and possibilities to develop youth have been created to enable them to access leadership training and development programs (Redmond and Dolan, 2016).

Notably, investment in the leadership skills and competencies of teenagers and youths is considered imperative to creating a bright future for the world (Selen & Devayani, 2010). Adolescents between the ages of 12 and 19 demonstrate high levels of cognitive engagement and enthusiasm toward leadership development programs (Eva & Sendjaya, 2013; Sun & Shek, 2012), and this period is ideal for introducing good leadership practices and critically investing in their leadership development (Hanks *et al.*, 2021; Liu, Venkatesh, Murphy, & Riggio, 2021). For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that the term “youth” varies

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by culture and context. While some define youth to mean the adolescence stage of a person, others define it as the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Bounds & Posey, 2022; Eva & Sendjaya, 2013; Sun & Shek, 2012). The United Nations defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNESCO, n.d.). Meanwhile, the Malaysian Government categorizes youth to fall within the age bracket of 15 and 30 (Arshad, Ismail, Fesol, & Ismail, 2021). Nonetheless, this study focuses on conceptualizing youth within the age bracket of 15 and 35, which is the most popular in the African context (African Youth Charter, 2019).

Youth leadership development offers a unique window into a new generation of organizational workers, social champions, the leadership development industry and theoretical terrain (Carroll & Firth, 2021). Moreover, it provides an avenue through which youth can explore their leadership potential through participation in community-oriented social ventures, civic engagement or social activism (Selen & Devayani, 2010). Notably, youth leadership development has transformed over time from discovering potential leaders to nurturing their talents and exceptional skills to providing practical leadership experience that can be replicated in their communities (Ogurlu & Sevim, 2017). Consequently, this has led to a remarkable impact across societies and among young people, and it has inspired various approaches, theories and concepts for developing young leaders. This paper seeks to review the literature on youth leadership development and its relevant theories and concepts. Furthermore, referencing the Teens and Youth in Leadership (TYIL) Fellowship in Africa, an eight-week program focused on youth leadership education, the paper will explore concepts and approaches relevant to the study of youth leadership development.

Background and related literature

Youth leadership development research and discourses have existed for decades (Miller, 1975; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998). While there is no uniformly agreed definition for youth leadership development, scholars and organizations have developed theories and models as essential tools for developing young leaders. For instance, Ricketts and Rudd (2002) established that youth leadership development should primarily focus on critical skills such as awareness (i.e. helping youth see the role leadership plays in one's life), interaction (i.e. helping youth develop the desire to explore leadership as part of their lives) and integration (i.e. emphasizing the opportunity to integrate leadership skills into one's life). In contrast, Redmond and Dolan (2016) conceptualized youth leadership development along skills development (involving skills such as social, emotional, collaboration, etc.), environmental conditions (such as access to mentorship) and actions (including expressing leadership within their community) components. While context is an important consideration, scholars have acknowledged the potential for transferring insights from one culture to another, including particular attention to the potential for broader application of African youth empowerment programs (Udeh *et al.*, 2023). Thus, this study is inspired by Larson, Walker, Rusk and Diaz's (2015) research on the call to address and understand practitioner challenges in youth development. Some of these challenges may be proactive and may include opportunities, problems or dilemmas that may arise in the course of implementing youth programs.

The TYIL Fellowship program – an initiative of the TYIL based in Africa – is a youth leadership development organization targeted at training youth on core leadership skills and competencies (TYIL, 2024). The program adapts a model of leadership education (Allen, Rosch, & Riggio, 2022), youth empowerment (Sheffer, 2018), collaboration (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016) and community building (Waddock, 2016) in teaching and preparing youth for present and future community-based leadership roles (see Figure 1).

Leadership education

Over the years, leadership education has always been evolving. Rost and Barker (2000) forecasted that leadership education content in the 21st century will cover three broad

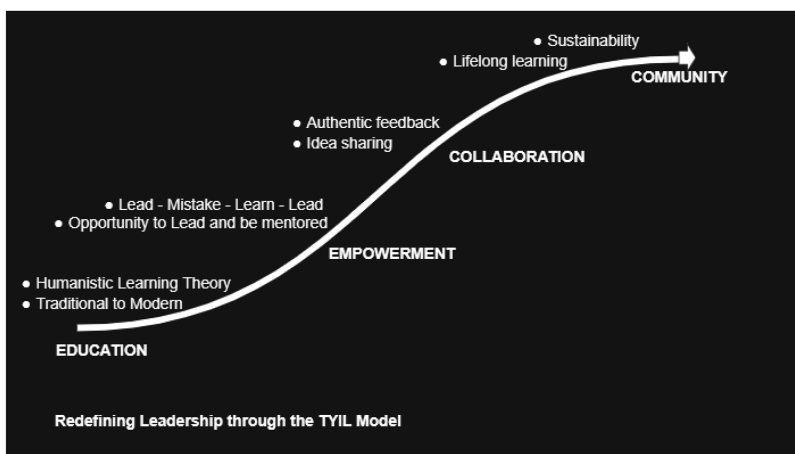


Figure 1. TYIL Fellowship model. *Note.* The figure above shows the TYIL Fellowship model adopted from a TEDx talk by the founder of TYIL, Israel Oyedare, titled *Redefining Leadership to African Youth*

categories: (1) the evolution of social change and development, (2) the processes that lead to social development and (3) the dynamics of human nature in the change process. This assertion underscores the importance of leadership education in preparing youth to be responsible for creating social impact (Huber, 2002). Similarly, utilizing the social change model, Martinez, Sowcik and Bunch (2020) suggested that community service experiences and study abroad programs are two relevant approaches for youth to access leadership education. Significantly, leadership education has become a composite focus area for many youth programs, subsequently leading to the development of diverse strategies for effectively educating youth in leadership and developing their cognitive, emotional and behavioral skills to impact their societies (Allen *et al.*, 2022; Ricketts & Rudd, 2002; Watkins *et al.*, 2017).

Youth empowerment

The empowerment of youth during leadership development programs is a strategy for ensuring that youth adapt to change and initiate such changes in their environment (UNESCO, n.d.). Youth empowerment is a collaborative effort where adult leaders and youth organizations create opportunities for youth to believe in themselves and develop the necessary skills for leading the process of change within their various contexts (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003). Sheffer (2018) provided a simple assertion that empowerment is the process where a young person is given the authority and power to perform leadership. This process involves creating a safe environment, meaningful activities, a welcoming social climate and offering encouragement such that it motivates youth to challenge the status quo, exercise positive behaviors and maximize social opportunities (Cargo *et al.*, 2003; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006).

Collaboration

In a youth leadership development program, collaboration, which takes the form of youth-adult partnership (Y-AP) or peer collaboration, is essential in providing the necessary motivation for participatory learning (Powers, 2024). Y-AP is instrumental in providing critical scaffolding, support and guidance in the planning and implementation of projects (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016) and essentially providing synergy with self-efficacy to ensure youth participation in their leadership development (Krauss *et al.*, 2014; Richards-Schuster

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and Timmermans, 2017). On the other hand, peer collaboration refers to the process whereby youth form alliances with other youth to achieve a goal (Hood & Mc Neil, 2005). Through this form of collaboration, youth can pool their energy and enthusiasm to engage in community-focused social initiatives, civic involvement or activism (Selen & Devayani, 2010).

Community building

Community building is a reliable approach for ensuring post-program engagement and continuous leadership development among youth (Waddock, 2016). This has become a growing concern for many youth-based leadership development programs (Blyth, 2011; Surr, 2012). A community-based system enables youth to be reminded of the need for leadership education in their personal journey and social impact, consequently developing their interest in the field and inspiring their commitment to lifelong leadership learning (Waddock, 2016). One of the most ubiquitous activities deployed in a community-based accountability system is regular engagement in learning and project-based events and activities (Casapulla & Hess, 2022).

TYIL fellowship learning content

The TYIL Fellowship is an eight-week, fully virtual, intensive training that targets African youth in tertiary institutions and recent graduates between the ages of 18 and 30. The application process is usually not a rigorous one, as the program seeks to attract as many youth as possible. Meanwhile, selection is largely based on the application submitted. As seen in Table 1, the participants are exposed to critical topics such as elements of leadership, citizenship and followership, leadership education in Africa, being a change agent, law and the community, leadership and politics, among others.

Description of the TYIL fellowship program

Leadership educators and practitioners can adopt the model in Figure 1 systematically and based on their respective contexts. This section provides an explanation of how the TYIL Fellowship utilizes the model.

First, leveraging the contribution by Rost and Barker (2000), the TYIL Fellowship educates participants on core leadership concepts that address the issue of social change and development and the processes involved in creating change within societies. To achieve this, the TYIL Fellowship adopts the use of humanistic pedagogy as a tool for educating youth. Humanistic pedagogy emphasizes the “human or humane” end of the learning process and acknowledges the presence of four important elements in leadership education – the educator, student, learning procedures and learning circumstances (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020).

Table 1. TYIL fellowship 2024 course curriculum

Week	Topics
1	Elements of leadership and being a change agent
2	Law and the community and leadership and politics
3	Building successful teams and building multicultural relationships
4	The act of storytelling and movement toward climate change
5	Citizenship and followership and leadership education and development in Africa
6	Transformational leadership and leadership and health
7	Design thinking and creating change through sports
8	Class presentations

Note(s): The table includes an outline of TYIL Fellowship courses in 2024
Source(s): Authors’ own work

Moreover, through this approach, TYIL encourages active learning and participation among youth by engaging them in community services and brainstorming sessions, thereby resulting in the full development of their leadership potential (Martinez *et al.*, 2020; Purswell, 2019). In addition, the TYIL Fellowship maximizes globalization and technological advancement to introduce modern approaches for learning. These approaches include the use of online learning management platforms with the aim of ensuring equality and access to learning resources and materials for participants across various countries in Africa. Based on a recent evaluation, a participant believed that:

What really stood out for me is the caliber of speakers, in terms of pedigree and how experienced they are, and TYIL provided that opportunity to have a robust insight into really great speakers, which have challenged some of my long held standing beliefs—you know, in terms of pursuing the course of leadership.

Also revealed in Figure 1 is the youth empowerment component. TYIL Fellowship utilizes various resources – such as access to mentorship, financial support and educational tools – to enable youth participation in their programs and for them to apply the leadership concepts they have learned and initiate social change (TYIL, 2024). This empowerment process gives participants the opportunity to practice community-based leadership during the training and make mistakes while learning in the process (Hastings *et al.*, 2011; Hornyak, Patterson, Orchard, Allison, & Canteen Youth Leadership Working Group, 2022). Furthermore, in line with the recommendation by Sheffer (2018), mentorship is a big component of the TYIL Fellowship. During the fellowship program, participants are given opportunities to interact with program organizers and previous participants, thus building their relational skills (Úcar Martínez, Jiménez-Morales, Soler Masó, & Trilla Bernet, 2017). A participant mentioned during an evaluation interview that:

What I really like about TYIL Fellowship is the involvement of the convener in the program. I'll say that the convener was really kind. . . . He's really always interested in knowing. Oh, are you guys fine? Or what do you need? Do you need any resources for this?

A third component of the TYIL Fellowship program is collaboration, which is an integral part of TYIL's approach to developing young leaders (TYIL, 2024). TYIL fosters a culture of collaboration by facilitating peer collaboration among youth, as posited by Hood and Mc Neil (2005). This is implemented by encouraging youth to pool their skills, energy and motivation to create a meaningful and enduring difference in their community. Through sharing and dialog, youth engage in critical reflection and analysis of social problems and how these problems can be resolved collectively. As a result of their team engagement, they learn the process of giving and receiving constructive feedback, which is an essential leadership and professional skill (Catalano, 2020). Another participant shared their thoughts:

I think it's really beautiful to see youths come together to want to do leadership right. . . . I think that it is from a perspective of deep passion and desire that you find most people committed to a course like this.

The last component of the TYIL Fellowship model, as revealed in Figure 1, is community building. The TYIL Fellowship developed a unique, flexible and collaborative community accountability system designed to further enhance and promote a culture of continuous leadership learning and development among youth (TYIL, 2024). Key features of the TYIL's community approach are creating an open system where previously trained youth can seek advice and mentorship, giving them access to grants for creating community change, training opportunities, sharing weekly leadership articles and initiating regular meet-ups to discuss emerging leadership issues that are affecting their communities. This community-building approach addresses the concerns of Blyth (2011) and Surr (2012) about the lack of a sustainable approach for following up with youth post-leadership programs. One of the participants shared their experience that:

I remember I was in the fellows' group right after the program, [and] we were moved to the community Whatsapp group. We get integrated into the community, and then we get to really be involved in the subsequent conferences and meetings that they have.

Discussion of outcomes

Over the last 7 years, 68 participants between the ages of 18 and 30, from 5 African countries, have been trained through the TYIL Fellowship program. Of these participants, 36 (53%) were female and 32 (47%) were male (TYIL, 2023). As a result of their participation in the TYIL Fellowship program, many of the fellows have founded non-profits, engaged in volunteering activities within their communities, participated in school politics and even started teaching leadership to other youth (TYIL, 2023). For instance, Emmanuel Arowesan, a Nigerian youth and previous participant, co-founded a health initiative focused on treating jaundice for sick and small newborns in Africa. In a qualitative interview, Emmanuel shared that the TYIL fellowship model has contributed to his leadership journey:

In the area of education, TYIL fellowship deepened my understanding of leadership principles such as leading change, strategic decision-making, and innovation, which have been instrumental in shaping Neowel's [their start-up initiative] vision to lead empathetically. Through sessions on effective leadership, I gained valuable insights into the need for problem-solving and impact driven leadership, which I now apply to developing solutions for neonatal healthcare.

Emmanuel further shared that he was empowered to "take on leadership responsibilities, from being the class captain of the TYIL Fellowship to being the CEO of Neowel and president of two other associations in my university." In the collaboration component, Emmanuel noted, "The emphasis on teamwork and leveraging diverse perspectives has been crucial in how I approach leadership at Neowel. I have learned to engage with experts and seek partnerships." With regard to community, Emmanuel reported, "The continuous follow-ups, opportunities sharing, and knowledge sharing through TYIL newsletters and WhatsApp group chat have been consistently reinforcing my drive to keep leading rightly and to scale Neowel more effectively." Similarly, Millenium Anthony, a Tanzanian youth and previous participant, runs community projects focused on bridging information and communication technology literacy gap among women and youth in Tanzania. Millenium shared in a qualitative interview that the fellowship "deepened my understanding of what it means to be a leader, both in theory and practice." With regard to empowerment, they shared that:

The fellowship empowered me on how I can take initiative, lead discussions, and apply the leadership concepts I learned. Now, I am happy I can confidently share what I learnt with other young girls in my country through the community of women in STEM that I am building.

Millenium furthered highlighted that:

Even after completing the program, the support from the Teens and Youth in Leadership Fellowship team has been good. Regular newsletters keep us informed and engaged, but also sharing different opportunities for leadership. The sense of community is a very unique experience as most programs do not offer post-program support to participants.

In another qualitative interview with Adenike Oladimeji, a previous participant who is actively engaged in university club leadership, they highlighted that the leadership education received during the TYIL Fellowship program in 2022 "exposed me to the fundamentals of leadership, service, and personal growth, laying a foundation for my journey even before gaining admission into the University of Ilorin." The participant further highlighted that the TYIL Fellowship empowered them with the opportunity to practice leadership, thereby building their "confidence and clarity to take on leadership roles, including my work with iLead Volunteers (an organization within their school) and advocacy for financial literacy" and set them on the "path to empowering others and building a legacy of impact."

Recommendations for future application

Youth program leaders, scholars and practitioners may utilize the TYIL Fellowship approach in training and developing young leaders. Although the training model is used for a community-based and non-formal leadership program, it can be adopted in ways that enhance the context in which it is applied for sustainable leadership learning and continuous leadership development. For example, around the globe, there are a variety of other youth empowerment programs that are less than explicit about their approach to leadership development (see Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014; Ekpoh, Edet, & Uko, 2014; Govan, Fernandez, Lewis, & Kirshner, 2015; Beckert, 2019; Hastings *et al.*, 2011; Hincks, 2017; Jones, 2008; Martinez *et al.*, 2020; Mortensen *et al.*, 2014; Murphy, Yuan, & Elias, 2020). This study presents a structure and guidance on how the model can be adopted to fit their contexts. In fact, the TYIL Fellowship model answers the call by Morton and Montgomery (2013) for “well-implemented models with clear theories of change.” Thus, it is recommended that youth leadership development practitioners design tailored leadership education curricula, empowerment tools and collaboration and community plans that align with the resources and needs of their specific contexts. This aligns with Larson *et al.*'s (2015) findings from experts that youth programs should be developed to adapt and respond to multiple dilemma situations. Additionally, as suggested by Walz and Tompkins (2017), there is a need to “democratize youth work by inviting and respecting all voices to weigh in on issues of practice, policy and accountability.” Practitioners are encouraged to regularly evaluate the outcomes of these elements on the leadership progress of their youth to ensure continuous improvement.

Furthermore, the model adopted for the TYIL Fellowship is useful in making the “hidden leadership curriculum” practices described by Rosch, May, Wilson, and Spencer (2023) more visible and intentional, particularly in the high school and college settings. As a result, practitioners and leadership educators are encouraged to adopt this training model as an approach for teaching leadership within a structured school curriculum. Additionally, it is recommended that class activities and assessments be tied to the practice of the key elements of the model, motivating participation among youth. Ultimately, incorporating the elements in a full cycle provides an opportunity for youth to develop core leadership skills such as peer-to-peer and youth-adult collaboration skills and project management skills and fosters a community spirit (Akiva & Petrokubi, 2016; Powers, 2024).

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