
Editors' Notes

As academics, practitioners, and policymakers increasingly support models of positive psychology and youth development, the topic of youth leadership represents an intriguing frontier of inquiry. The notion of leadership moves beyond mere resilience; it implies an exceptional level of competence and mastery over oneself and an ability to influence others.

Despite the relevance of youth leadership to the field of youth development, however, the topic remains largely unexplored. The minimal amount of scholarly literature related to the topic barely scratches the surface and does not provide definitive answers to questions such as, *What exactly is youth leadership? Is it different from adult leadership? How does it differ from productive youth development? Can it be taught? If so, what are best and worst practices?*

The lack of scholarly attention is even more remarkable in light of the extensive educational infrastructure currently dedicated to youth leadership education. Across the nation, hundreds—perhaps thousands—of programs claim to teach young people leadership. Exactly what are these programs teaching? What do they do well? What do they do poorly? An informed understanding of youth leadership could support the work being done in programs that affect the lives of many thousands of young people every day.

The chapters collected in this volume shed light on emerging frontiers in theory, research, and practice related to youth leadership. We hope this issue of *New Directions for Youth Development* will help to bring some much needed insight, clarity, and attention to this important topic.

This volume is divided into two distinct sections. The first section presents an overview of youth leadership theory and research. In this section, we review existing literature, explore pertinent debates related to the topic, and present recent empirical research.

The second section focuses on youth leadership in action. In this section, we bring in voices from numerous practitioners—as well as the young people they work with—to understand better how youth leadership education actually happens in the field. What assumptions inform youth leadership education? How do these ideas inform practice? What are the results of participation in these programs and experiences?

With this edition of *New Directions for Youth Development*, we have sought to bring together scholars and practitioners with decades of involvement in youth leadership education. Our intention in gathering together this collection of writings has been to bring a new level of focus, rigor, and insight to this important discussion. While these articles provide no simple answers, they do crystallize a collection of seven issues and debates that are central to the discourse on youth leadership. In the pages ahead, expect to encounter the following core themes.

1. *The centrality of social justice to the discourse on youth leadership.* All of our contributors highlight a clear connection between the work of youth leadership and matters of social justice. In both theory and practice, they argue, youth leadership involves working toward a more inclusive, equal, and just society.

2. *Inside versus outside leadership.* In their article “The Mystery of Youth Leadership,” authors Margaret Libby, Maureen Sedonaen, and Steven Bliss argue for the importance of distinguishing between “inside” and “outside” leadership. “Inside” leadership occurs inside existing formal institutions (such as schools, the Girl Scouts, community organizations, and so on) and involves the young people who have access and acceptance within those institutions. “Outside” leadership occurs outside of those institutions and involves young people who lack access and acceptance within those organizations. Both types are important, and can inform each other in useful ways.

However, communities must be intentional in their efforts to focus on both types of youth leadership simultaneously.

3. *Leadership as a position of authority versus leadership as an activity for everyone.* The question of authority and its relationship to youth leadership is highlighted repeatedly throughout this issue. Is leadership exercised only by individuals in positions of authority? Is it possible to be a leader without holding a position of formal authority? Given young people's limited access to positions of authority, this debate has a particular relevance to the study and practice of youth leadership.

4. *"Everyone can be a leader" versus "A select few can be leaders."* Youth leadership scholars and practitioners frequently make implicit assumptions regarding where they stand on this debate. It is a question with important implications for both theory building and program design.

5. *Youth as "future leaders" versus youth as "current leaders."* Should youth leadership programs focus on training young people to become leaders at some future date in some adult context? Or should youth leadership programming view young people as current leaders who are daily exercising power and influence in their communities right now? Again, opinions on this matter are frequently implicit and unexplored, and have important implications for both theory building and program design.

6. *The challenge of youth-adult partnerships in leadership education.* Youth leadership programming inevitably involves relationships between adults and young people. The articles in this issue highlight many of the challenges inherent in managing these relationships: How can adults authentically empower young people? How can adults meaningfully include young people in the decisions that affect their communities? Our contributors share their insights based on their considerable experience negotiating these challenges.

7. *Clarity and alignment in youth leadership education.* Leadership is a challenging issue to explore because it is inherently multifaceted and complex. There are multiple legitimate ways to understand and teach leadership, and different programs appropriately employ different models and pedagogies. In the face of this diversity, two issues become central to the exploration of youth leader-

ship programming. First, is the program clear about the model of leadership it holds at its core? Second, is there alignment between the core model of leadership and the pedagogies used to teach it? In the absence of a single, universal conception of leadership, these two dimensions allow for a meaningful exploration of the theory and practice informing efforts at youth leadership education.

We may not be able to provide simple, easy answers to these debates. However, our contributors have years of experience engaging with the theory and practice of youth leadership and have shown an unmistakable commitment to the importance of this work. We hope that by bringing their voices together in this issue we are bringing new levels of attention, clarity, rigor, and insight to an emerging frontier of interest and inquiry.

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