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Leadership Development

An Examination of Individual and Programmatic Growth

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This study focuses on two girls' experiences in one youth leadership organization during a period of 3 years. Relying on an embedded case study design, the authors examine the links between leadership development and programmatic structures and supports. Specifically, the development of leadership capacities are analyzed along three dimensions: communication and interpersonal skills, analytic and critical reflection, and positive involvement in community affairs. Within the leadership organization, the authors consider structures that accommodate and validate different styles of youth leadership and different developmental trajectories, focusing on how these structures evolved along with the leaders they were designed to support. The conclusion discusses the relevance of the lessons that the two girls exposed and that the program internalized to adolescent development research and youth development programming.

Keywords: *adolescents; leadership; development; after-school*

The youth of today will be the leaders of tomorrow. It is a well-known refrain, often invoked to justify investment in youth leadership training. Increasingly, however, organizations, agencies, and political institutions are recognizing the role youth can play not in the future but at the present moment, as leaders and change agents. In November 2006, the United Nations convened the first ever Global Youth Leadership Summit "to strengthen the worldwide movement to engage young people in decisions about the future of their communities, regions, and our emerging global society" (United Nations,

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2006). This summit appreciated that not only do youth have the most at stake in addressing the problems that plague our social systems, but also they have important ideas and insights to contribute to the formation and advancement of reform agendas.

In the United States, awareness of the value of engaging youth in social change efforts has spawned national, congressional, statewide, and municipal youth leadership councils and initiatives. High schools are offering elective courses in leadership; leadership-themed charter schools are dotting the landscape; and community-based organizations designed to promote youth leadership are proliferating. By some estimates, more than a half million high school students participate each year in some form of youth leadership programming. As Robert Woyach (1992) explains, "Youth leadership development is big business in the United States" (p. 1).

Despite such increases in youth leadership programming, practice seems to be outpacing research and theory. Ben Kirshner (2004) observes that although foundations and youth development practitioners are documenting the efforts of youth leadership programs, "much of this literature has a promotional tone—one that is focused on achievements, but less on process" (p. 5). The field of youth leadership remains in the margins of educational theory and research (Rickettes & Rudd, 2002; Roach et al., 1999).

By contrast, theoretical models and empirical arguments abound in the more general field of leadership. One recent article in *Leadership Quarterly*, for instance, considered how the theory of authentic leadership differed from theories of charismatic, spiritual, and transformational leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Some researchers apply these theoretical lenses, most commonly that of transformational leadership, to the study of youth leadership (Manning, 2004; van Linden & Fertman, 1998); however, other researchers seek to distinguish youth leadership from leadership more broadly cast. For example, Adelma Roach and her colleagues (1999) assert that youth leadership needs to be conceptualized differently than adult leadership. They argue that youth leadership must move away from "individual, competitive, incremental" (p. 21) models of leadership toward a framework that accounts for group processes and collective action.

Defining Leadership

Perhaps because the programs and organizations they study vary so widely in their conceptions of and approaches to youth leadership, researchers come to little consensus on how to define or operationalize the

term. Indeed, the concept itself takes many names, including youth leadership, youth voice, youth participation, youth civic engagement, youth decision making, and youth empowerment (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2006). Nonetheless, there does seem to be some agreement among practitioners and researchers that youth leadership entails competency in both communication and interpersonal skills. After studying five different youth leadership organizations, Shepherd Zeldin and Linda Camino (1999) pointed to communication and teamwork as two of the core leadership development outcomes sought. In their book *Youth Leadership*, Josephine van Linden and Carl Fertman (1998) describe "leaders as individuals (both adults and adolescents) who think for themselves, communicate their thoughts and feelings to others, and help others understand and act on their own beliefs" (p. 17). Studying the 12 organizations chosen to participate in a Youth Leadership Development Initiative, Social Policy Research Associates (2003) observed that "leadership within a civic context is not so much about individual achievement as it is about learning how to participate in group processes, build consensus, and subsume personal interests and ideas to those of the collective" (p. 7). Beyond communication and interpersonal skills, however, youth leadership remains a fuzzy concept in the literature.

Although we see some advantages to this fuzziness, insofar as it grants programs flexibility in formulating their goals and in recognizing and supporting the strengths of the different youth they serve, we also believe that there is a need for greater consistency in the use of the term "youth leadership." Such consistency will allow researchers to build on one another's scholarship in meaningful ways. It will also enable practitioners, funders, and youth to work together to advance shared understanding of the roles youth can play in decision-making processes at various levels of the system. Currently, the term "youth leadership" functions as a Rorschach test, susceptible to various interpretations. Rather than resorting to the other extreme and imposing a rigid, arbitrary definition on it, we call for grounding the notion of youth leadership in a theoretical framework that will enhance its meaning and credibility.

Leadership Development Research Paradigms

Just as there is a lack of consensus about how to define youth leadership, so too the question of how young people develop leadership competencies, whatever they might be, fragments the community of youth leadership

researchers and practitioners. Answers tend to take one of two forms. Either the work focuses on individual developmental processes, or it addresses contextual supports and practices that facilitate leadership development. Integration of these two paradigms remains rare. Representing the first approach, van Linden and Fertman (1998) propose three distinct stages of individual leadership development: awareness, interaction, and mastery. In the first stage, the young person does not actively think about leadership; in the second stage, he or she begins to reflect on and explore his or her leadership potential; and in the third stage, he or she concentrates effort on improving his or her leadership capacities. John Ricketts and Rick Rudd (2002) expand on van Linden and Fertman's theory of youth leadership development, linking the three stages to processes of comprehension, analysis, application, synthesis, and evaluation. Although they go beyond van Linden and Fertman's general model of development, Ricketts and Rudd do not specify particular practices or programmatic structures that promote processes of comprehension, analysis, application, synthesis, or evaluation.

Alternatively, those researchers who do focus on contextual features and procedures tend to gloss over the individual developmental process, suggesting that leadership simply happens wholesale once certain policies and practices are instantiated. Some youth development practitioners and evaluators underscore the importance of activities that encourage self-reflection, self-knowledge, and identity work in the development of leadership (Mohammed & Wheeler, 2001; Nagle, 2003; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Others, including education researchers, focus on the need to build relationships through collaborative effort, youth/adult partnerships, and mentoring (DesMarais, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000; Kirshner, 2004; Roach et al., 1999; Woyach, 1996). And still other researchers point to the value of providing youth with opportunities to assert their voices, share their opinions and ideas, and participate in decision making and rule setting (DesMarais et al., 2000; McLaughlin, 2000).

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Focusing on two girls' experiences in one youth leadership organization during a period of 3 years, we set out to bridge the gap between research on individual processes and research on contextual provisions. We examined the links between leadership development and programmatic structures and supports. Contrary to most theoretical frameworks that assume a single directional influence running from context to individual, our framework

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework: Directionality of Effect

conceptualizes the link that runs between context and individual as bidirectional and dynamic. As detailed in Figure 1, our framework allows for the possibility of the participants effecting change in the program, just as the program attempts to effect change in its participants.

Guided by the premises shown in Figure 1, we explored three research questions:

1. What does youth leadership look like in context?
2. How do programmatic structures and supports allow youth in the same program to develop different leadership competencies and identities?
3. What programmatic changes must be made to accommodate and validate not only different styles of youth leadership, but also different developmental trajectories?

To answer these questions, we used an embedded case study design. In the next section, we describe both the organization and the participants we studied, offer rationales for their selection, and detail our methodological and analytic approach.

Methodological and Analytic Overview

Site: Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning

An after-school program based at a middle school in Redwood City, California, the Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) program provided the context for this article. In YELL, cohorts of 15 to 20 youth are trained to use social science research techniques to study an issue of concern to them and to use their findings to formulate policy recommendations. The program serves a population of primarily Mexican American students from low-income families, who would be classified as working poor. In the years of this study, the campaigns the youth pursued ranged

from the lack of safe and fun places for youth in the city at large, to the lack of affordable and accessible public transportation options for youth, to bullying problems at their middle school.

The YELL program offered an ideal site for this study for two reasons. First, though the program is expressly committed to empowering youth as leaders, it does not hold up a single, static definition of leadership. YELL recruitment materials and annual reports do not define leadership or name known leaders. For example, the rooms in which YELL sessions occur are adorned with the youth's work, rather than pictures of American presidents, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cesar Chavez.

Although the program does not explicitly emphasize leadership skills, it does encourage youth development along a number of dimensions. These include communication and interpersonal skills, analytic and critical reflection, and positive involvement in community affairs. As the acronym implies and as the structure of the year dictates, YELL has always put a premium on developing youth's communication skills, so they can effectively present their findings and recommendations to school or community leaders. Although it has evolved each year, the curriculum also has consistently focused on helping youth to acquire the capacity to think critically not only about the problems in their schools or communities, but also about the processes by which these problems can be changed. The programmatic focus on sustaining youth involvement in civic affairs emerged organically through time, as the youth continued to show interest in YELL and in the other civic opportunities presented to them. These three dimensions provide a conceptual spine for evaluating leadership development in YELL.

A second reason for the site selection was that YELL offered a unique place in which to examine the interplay between student growth and organizational growth. During the 3 years of this study, the program cycled through three different directors, each of whom set a different tone with his or her unique leadership style. These directors also made slight changes to the program's structure and curriculum. Amid these changes, one of the constants remained a handful of female participants. These girls guarded the program's identity, communicated its institutional memory to the new directors and to the new participants, and demonstrated a commitment to advancing the causes in which they had become invested through previous years' campaigns. We focus on the experiences of two of these girls in this article.

Participants: Celeste and Desiree

Several factors informed our selection of the two case study youth. Having joined YELL as eighth graders, both Celeste and Desiree were

among the most consistently involved participants during the 3-year period. As freshmen and then again as sophomores, they remained involved in the program as YELL mentors, helping to facilitate the campaigns of the new crop of participants. Both girls also had similar backgrounds as Latinas from families with modest incomes, and their starting places with respect to leadership paralleled each other closely. Both girls were described as shy eighth graders, despite the bright pink streaks in their hair and the many accessories they sported. They also both seemed eager to make a difference in their communities but unsure of the impact they could have. Using the case study approach, we trade depth for breadth with the intention of uncovering how these two individuals' paths toward leadership proceeded along various routes, even when bounded by the same programmatic context.

Data Collection

To understand the leadership trajectory each girl followed during her 3 years of involvement with YELL and the way the program adapted in response to these girls' development, we relied on multiple sources of data. These sources included baseline and end-of-year interviews with each girl for the 3 years of her involvement; transcripts from a focus group at the end of their freshmen year; and interviews with adult YELL staff members. Of the four adults interviewed, one worked with Desiree and Celeste for all 3 years, one for 2 years, and two for the third program year only. Three of these four adults shared the ethnic background of Desiree and Celeste. One of the adults was male, and the other three were female.

In addition to interview data, we drew on field notes collected during YELL sessions. Field notes tended to focus on the session's activities, but they sometimes included a record of the comments or contributions made by individual youth. Because the field note records compiled the various notes taken by the adult participant observers during each session, supplemented by reflections from the program director, the data used in this study represented a range of perspectives. Triangulation of both data sources and investigators added richness, complexity, and greater credibility to our study.

Data Analysis

To analyze our data, we developed an in vivo coding system consistent with the grounded theory approach to data analysis (Glaser, 1969). We then used the coded transcripts and field notes to write analytic memoranda, which helped identify patterns, themes, and points of contrast in the stories of each girl's relationship with YELL and development of leadership capacities.

Because of our own long-standing involvement in YELL, we were familiar with the general stories of Desiree and Celeste before we began this study; however, we sought not just to deepen our understanding of their leadership development, but also to adopt "an engaged approach" to our research (Way, 2005). We attempted to remain open to the unexpected in the data. We checked initial hunches in our interviews with the two girls at the end of their third year of involvement and in our interviews with the four YELL staff members. We reflected on our own subjective lenses by keeping track of those points that challenged our propositions and exposed our assumptions, and we sought to elucidate, rather than evade, the complexity and vibrancy of the girls' experiences and perspectives.

Exemplifying Leadership in YELL

At the end of their third year of involvement in YELL, when asked directly if they considered themselves leaders, both Desiree and Celeste answered affirmatively. The adults we interviewed also recognized both girls as leaders. In this section, we describe the kind of leader each girl had become by the end of her third year in YELL.

Explaining why they saw Desiree as a leader, most of the adults affiliated with YELL pointed to her energy and enthusiasm and her ability to convey her knowledge and understanding. To characterize Desiree's leadership style, adults used adjectives such as "direct," "articulate," and "passionate." One former YELL director described Desiree as a "more visible kind of leader." She continued to describe Desiree's leadership style as transformational: "Desiree has a knack for influencing people in a positive way, and kind of modeling; so [she's] kind of a leader by doing." Echoing this assertion, another staff member commented that Desiree "is one of those very verbal, active catalysts in group that's just really pushing the group to achieve more."

In describing Celeste, adults affiliated with YELL tended to emphasize her involvement outside of YELL as an indication of her leadership. One adult noted how impressed she was by "seeing [Celeste's] willingness to participate on the community level." Another former program director commented,

> The fact that Celeste makes a choice and volunteers, with youth advisory councils for the city, several years worth of participation in YELL, a willingness to come to meetings, to mentor the students. I think those are amazing choices for somebody who's fifteen, sixteen. I would say of course she's a leader.

Focusing within the YELL context, a third adult staff member described Celeste as "that staying presence." Indeed, Celeste earned recognition in her third year of YELL for her perfect attendance record, a record she managed to keep despite having to rely on pubic transportation to get to and from YELL sessions. Another adult noted that she has succeeded in developing "close relationships with other adults or other young people in YELL." This adult appreciated Celeste's "encouraging and supportive" presence. Generally recognized as "less vocal" than Desiree, Celeste was nonetheless valued as someone who "cares a lot" and remains deeply involved.

Although both are considered and consider themselves to be leaders, Desiree and Celeste represent different styles and forms of leadership. Desiree's strength is her voice; Celeste's strength is her interest in listening and learning. Where Desiree takes center stage, Celeste assumes a more behind-the-scenes role. These two girls stand as two different models of leadership within and beyond YELL. Both models entail concern for personal growth as well as interest in helping others, and both support high levels of community involvement, but they differ with respect to the directionality of the energy flow and the manifestation of purpose. Where one is about effecting outcomes, the other is geared toward supporting processes. How these two girls who started off in such similar places developed into such different kinds of leaders as they moved through YELL is the subject of the next section of this article.

How Celeste and Desiree Grew

In this section we describe the ways in which our case study youth developed their leadership skills and capacities in the context of YELL. Based on the stated mission of YELL, we specifically examine their development along three dimensions: communication and interpersonal skills, analytic and critical reflection skills, and the extent to which they apply or refine these skills in community-based efforts beyond YELL. We first explain how each dimension is supported by the YELL curriculum or the program's structure. We then show how the girls responded to opportunities to develop in these areas, tracing their growth year by year.

Communication and Interpersonal Skills

In YELL, communication and interpersonal skills are promoted through activities in which youth are encouraged to speak their minds, to serve as

formal facilitators, to work collaboratively with adults and peers, and to share analyses and recommendations in public forums. During sessions, YELL program directors included activities designed to help youth become more comfortable sharing their experiences, ideas, and suggestions for the issues they wanted to address. Program time was devoted to building a cohesive group identity. During the first 2 years, team-building games were used as warm-up activities for each session. In the third year, the new YELL director added overnight retreats and rock climbing as opportunities for youth to become comfortable with each other and with the adult facilitators. Through these team-building exercises, youth practiced discussing personal experiences and voicing concerns about their community or school. Eventually, they would practice sharing their research findings with their cohort, and by the end of the academic year, they would be prepared to make formal research presentations to community members. Youth who returned to YELL as mentors facilitated groups of their younger peers, led workshops for adults and youth across the state, and participated on panel presentations.

When they joined YELL as eighth grade students, both of our case study youth showed some reluctance to speak up. In the field notes from their first year in the program, Celeste's and Desiree's participation and contributions are not often referenced. During their baseline interviews, however, both girls identified "speaking out loud" as a personal goal they hoped to achieve in the program. By the end of that first year, when asked if the YELL program had helped her in any way, Desiree said, "Yeah. I think that I am more comfortable speaking in groups now, and I think that I have gained the skill of how to interview people." In response to a follow-up question about the usefulness of these skills, Desiree explained, "Well, I think that later on . . . I might . . . continue doing community work . . . and I might have to interview somebody else and that would help me. And of course, speaking in groups [will] help me not to be so shy." In response to the same questions, Celeste mentioned that her participation in YELL had taught her how to conduct interviews, but she did not elaborate on the significance of acquiring that skill.

As freshmen in high school, both Celeste and Desiree assumed the role of YELL mentor. Reflecting on what she gained from her experiences that year, Desiree echoed the theme she identified the year before. "I just got more experience speaking in front of people." Similarly, Celeste commented on experiences with public speaking, but her remarks and style of speaking did not exude a comparable level of confidence:

> And another skill . . . I don't know! . . . hmmm! . . . I guess maybe talking in front of other people—because I get like really nervous. . . . I was doing that . . . presentation thing and I was getting like, "Uhhhh, I don't want to do this anymore!" So . . . I liked doing it, but I didn't want to do it. It helped me to . . . learn how to speak up.

During their third year of participation in YELL, under a new program director, YELL experimented with a slightly different structure. Rather than take on one issue to research, the cohort split into three small groups, each tackling a different topic. This structure gave Celeste and Desiree the opportunity to mentor a specific group. Desiree mentored the group that was lobbying for a new hang-out spot on their school campus, and Celeste worked with the group that was seeking to reduce bullying at their school.

During that year, Celeste was still described by adults as "not very vocal," "very shy," and "friendly but reserved." Celeste, however, felt that she had "changed a lot" since eighth grade. In comparison to her first year in the program, she felt that she had become "more outgoing and talkative." She claimed that she was more willing to express her opinion, and she credited YELL with giving her "a lot of experience in a lot of areas, like interview skills and surveys."

Despite her clear interest and engagement, Celeste continued to appear shy and quiet in public settings well into her third year of YELL involvement; however, in the context of her small group, Celeste began to feel more comfortable speaking up and facilitating. The director that year reflected, "[Celeste] has become an excellent facilitator. . . . She really stepped up and was able to take on that leadership role, kind of a focal organization point for the group." When she was asked if she observed any changes in Celeste during the course of the year, the director remarked, "I did. [S]he [changed] from sitting on the outside of the circle to really interacting with the youth, especially in her group. And I saw her in action with her small group . . . She did an excellent job." In her small group, Celeste also forged "close relationships" with the youth. Known for being a careful listener, she became a sought-after confidante by many of the participants. Despite her "quiet facade," Celeste showed evidence of growth as a facilitator and a participant who was always willing to be part of the conversations, even if that meant listening more than speaking.

Changes in Desiree's communication and interpersonal skills also were observed during the third year of her involvement in YELL. One adult referred to Desiree's growth on this dimension as a "metamorphosis." Another commented, "She facilitates all the time . . . and is just a rock star."

The field notes from the third year of Desiree's involvement in YELL are punctuated by remarks she makes and activities she directs. For instance, one researcher commented, "Desiree began our session by checking in with the team members to get an update of where they are right now." By the end of the year, one of the adult facilitators reflected on Desiree's talent for facilitation:

> [Desiree] participated extremely well and tactfully in group discussions. She was extremely clear about the whole vision of YELL. She knew where the students needed to get to. She would always explain to students the goals of the research groups. She was very clear on all the research components. She knew how to . . . be persuasive with all the forms of data and stuff, so she was really . . . a nice guide.

Even when she was not assigned or asked to assume a leadership position, Desiree played an active role in the YELL sessions in her third year. During a city councilwoman's visit to YELL, Desiree did not hesitate to raise questions: "I want to ask a question about a different topic. Do you take youth into consideration at the city council?" When the city councilwoman responded, "Well, we have a youth advisory board with parks and recreation," Desiree rejoined, "I was involved with that, but I stopped because there was no commitment, and it really wasn't working. No one from the city council ever even came to talk to us." Desiree then went on to offer the councilwoman sound counsel for future youth boards: "Make it clear. Make sure that the youth voice is heard. Remember to come and ask." Confident, assertive, and articulate, Desiree stood out in her third year at YELL as a model for younger participants. She highlighted the role of the program in helping her to find her voice, explaining that she felt "thankful for [YELL] because it helped me to be able to speak in front of people. Because before I would just be kind of shy and just like, 'Um. . . .' And now I feel more comfortable."

During the 3 years of their involvement in YELL, Desiree transformed into a visible and vocal leader; Celeste remained relatively quiet, but within the context of her small group, she had emerged as a strong facilitator and a trustworthy, caring mentor.

Analytic and Critical Reflections

YELL promotes analytic and critical reflections in multiple ways. The program's curriculum is grounded in a research-based approach to social change. Once youth choose the issues of concern to them, they are trained

in social science research methods and principles in order to ensure that their work represents the opinions of their peers as well as relevant adults. YELL participants learn how to conduct interviews, take field notes, develop surveys, create video documentaries, and analyze their data. Although they are trained to gather information on the chosen topic, they are also encouraged to draw from their own experiences to add personal examples and to illustrate their investment in the issue. In addition to the press for critical analysis of social issues, the youth are exposed to different strategies for effecting change. They gain knowledge and experience in the differences between talking to adults at a community forum, rallying at the state capitol, and communicating a message through a mural project.

Because both Desiree's and Celeste's contributions were not frequently referenced in the field notes during their first year of participation in the program, there is little information about the quality of their analytic thinking that year. Interviews at the end of that first year yielded some insight into how each girl processed the significance of her work. When asked what she had hoped to accomplish with the research project that year, Desiree reflected, "I hoped to find out what other youth think, because we already knew what everybody in the group thought, but we didn't know what other people thought." Celeste expressed a similar interest in gathering perspectives from other youth for the purpose of informing their work on safe hang-out spaces. "I want the survey . . . to find out what youth want and then take what most of all the kids want, like say if it's another teen center, I want to do what the kids ask." By the end of the first year, it seemed that both Desiree and Celeste were curious about their community's needs but had yet to develop a critical stance on a particular issue.

In the subsequent year, the interview protocol included questions designed to gauge the participants' analytical thinking skills. Students were asked to respond to a scenario in which youth who attended a school with few resources came to them for advice about how to effect change at their school. Celeste suggested getting some peers together to brainstorm ideas and talking to the school's principal, who could then take the issue to city council. Desiree advocated using a similar change strategy, but she added an additional level of reflection. "I'd tell them, it's not really going to get done in one year; it's something that they need to keep on waiting with, and they could do a lot of things." Although both girls offered some strategies that paralleled their experiences with YELL, Desiree's comments revealed greater depth in her analysis of the social change process.

In that same interview, the girls were asked to reflect on the purpose of conducting research in YELL. Desiree explained, "[Y]ou need point of

views from other teenagers and from more people than just sixteen [YELL youth] . . . so people will actually take it seriously. That's why we did a survey." Celeste answered the same question by saying, "[We do research] to find out more things you don't know about, like to . . . expand your mind." Their answers to that one question exemplified a fundamental difference between the two girls' analytic approaches. Desiree's comments showed evidence of her emerging focus on being convincing and taking action, whereas Celeste's comments highlighted her interest in expanding her mind and "learning as much as [she] can about things."

By their third year of involvement, the differences in their analytic approaches seemed to explain their underlying purposes for participation in YELL. At the end of that year, the program director described Desiree as an individual with a profound interest in social justice and Celeste as an individual eager to learn. According to the YELL director, Desiree had learned to model critical reflection in conversations with the younger cohort of participants:

> Desiree and her capacity to . . . bring context to things and to give perspective at critical times and to keep people from getting myopic and only looking at what's right in front of them, I think is really exceptional.

Another adult described Desiree as "thoughtful." He continued, "She's got a critical mind, in terms of her politics, in terms of looking at what happens in school, how teenagers engage with teachers in classrooms, and also kind of a greater community sense."

In response to a question about what she most liked about YELL, Celeste pointed to the opportunity to learn from and about other youth. "I like how you can talk with other people your age. . . . You can help find out what youth want to do." Although Celeste's curiosity and interest in learning left an impression on the adults during her third year of involvement, none of them commented directly on her critical reflection skills. Similarly, references to Celeste in the field notes did not highlight analytic comments. However, interviews with Celeste during that third year suggest that she had been focusing her emergent critical lens on youth's roles in social change processes in Redwood City. When asked about problems in her community, she shared her concern that adults do not think youth can make meaningful contributions, and she worried that many of her peers agreed:

> I feel that a lot of kids . . . my age [believe that] we don't really have a voice. I think we do, but not really that people listen to us. . . . They think that we're like [bad] . . . not as mature as adults.

In a subsequent interview she returned to the same theme, criticizing teachers at school who were not "open to [youth's] ideas."

By their third year of involvement in YELL, Desiree and Celeste were directing their attention to different aspects of community-based work. Desiree followed a path of actively and vocally seeking comprehension of and resolution for issues of social justice. In contrast, Celeste quietly applied her critical lens more locally to issues of youth voice in her effort to comprehend and challenge the perspectives of her peers and adults.

Positive Involvement in the Program, School, and Community

YELL promotes positive involvement at different levels in the community. Youth are afforded opportunities to become involved within their cohort at YELL, within the program as a whole, within their schools, within their neighborhoods, and in the city or county. The program's "ladder of opportunity" helps support youth who want to remain engaged after their initial year of participation. Returning youth can graduate from being a YELL researcher to assume the role of YELL mentor. As mentors, youth facilitate discussions, offer insights based on their experiences in the program, and help support the new cohort of researchers. Mentors also help the program staff to build a cohesive group culture in which leadership is distributed and collective efforts take center stage. Youth also have the option of becoming YELL ambassadors by participating on panels or helping to plan and lead workshops at local as well as national conferences. As mentors and ambassadors, youth serve as resources, sharing their expertise and knowledge with others, be they younger students or adults.

The YELL staff also apprise the youth of other opportunities outside of YELL to become involved in effecting change, to represent the youth perspective, or to cultivate leadership skills. For instance, at the behest of the first YELL program director, some YELL participants joined the city's Teen Advisory Board. The deliberate links the YELL staff has forged with other youth development organizations and opportunities enable the participants to continue to serve as committed civic actors in a variety of capacities.

With regard to their participation in the life of their school and community, Celeste and Desiree initially followed different paths, with Celeste more involved in extracurricular activities than Desiree. As an eighth grader, Celeste was in the school play, and she played the saxophone in the school band. Desiree, in contrast, remarked, "I think I am a pretty boring person. . . . I am not involved in any sports or anything. YELL is the only [thing I do]." Their paths converged in their freshman year, as they both

returned to YELL as mentors and served on the same youth committees, including their city's teen advisory board. Their paths diverged again the following year. As a sophomore, Desiree concentrated more intensely on political activity, whereas Celeste took part in a broader array of civic activities, ranging from community service to community problem solving.

In addition to her role as a YELL mentor, Desiree joined two other youth groups as a sophomore, one of which was a time-intensive political activism program. She explained, "I like meeting new people and being active in my community." She felt she had become more confident and more interested in politics. This interest had prompted her to change her "whole group of friends" from people who just hang out after school to people who are involved with some of the same programs. In an application for her school's leadership class, Desiree described her newfound identity as an agent of change:

> When I think of a leader not only do important legendary figures come to mind, but also normal everyday people like you or me. Everyone complains, but only a handful of people do anything about their complaints. I have decided that I will be one of those in the handful.

In fact, Desiree began to attend citywide rallies and protests in her third year of YELL involvement. Desiree credited the YELL program for leading her to this activist path, saying, "YELL is what started it for me." One adult staff member at the end of the year noted that Desiree seemed ready to move beyond YELL:

> She's ready to tackle some bigger community programs and projects. So, she wants to get involved in a more heavy way . . . and some more kind of hard-core political stuff. . . . She's making this activism piece like more of a life-long thing.

Throughout her years in YELL, Celeste also placed a premium on involvement, but where Desiree's involvement became more focused and targeted, Celeste's involvement continued to cover a broad sweep. As a sophomore, she added volunteering at a senior center and participating in a community builders program to her roster of activities. Like Desiree, she highlighted the role of YELL in helping her to become more involved in other community programs:

> I think that [YELL] helped me realize that there are other people who have the same interests as you, and that if you really want to do something, you should just do it. . . . If you want to change something, you should change something.

In an interview during her third year, Celeste expressed interest in becoming even more involved, and she also hoped to persuade her peers to follow suit. "I want to do something to let teens know that there's stuff they can do besides skateboarding. . . . And, like, you can get involved." When asked why she joined and remained active in the Teen Advisory Board, Celeste explained,

> I do it because I think it's really interesting. [A]t first when I joined it, I had problems with it, but this year I came back because I think that it's good to get involved . . . and there's also a Youth Advisory Board too. So we're also trying to get 8th graders, here, from YELL.

Whereas Desiree seemed to have found her passion in political activism, Celeste may well be a passionate generalist. Despite these differences in nature or kind of engagement, both girls' résumés indicated high levels of positive community involvement at the end of their third year of participation in YELL.

There are many explanations for the differences in the two girls' developmental trajectories through YELL that extend beyond the context of the program. These explanations include differences in their home life circumstances, in their school experiences, and in their friendship groups. Rather than addressing all such antecedents, we focused on how their development occurred in relationship to the program's goals, structures, and opportunities in order to illustrate the slow, sometimes halting, and divergent progress each girl made as she matured into a leader within YELL.

How YELL Grew

Despite the differences in their leadership styles, YELL validated and honored both girls as leaders. In so doing, YELL grew as a program. To legitimate each girl's form of leadership, as well as the path she took in cultivating it, YELL had to internalize lessons exposed by these two cases. These lessons are now embedded in the structures, the curriculum, and the values of the program. In this section, we identify five of these lessons and show how they have become instantiated in the program.

Leadership Skills and Capacities May Not Look Alike

With Celeste and Desiree counterbalanced, YELL could recognize that its effects on individual youth would not be uniform. In staff meetings and

in group sessions, adults began to emphasize the different forms of leadership that the program valued. By Desiree and Celeste's third year of involvement, the adults talked explicitly in sessions with the youth about the role of quiet leaders. For instance, the curriculum now includes a game in which youth must attempt to identify the leader of a particular activity. In the process they realize that in certain situations, a good leader may actually be the hardest to identify.

Leadership Development Takes Time

Celeste and Desiree also helped to illuminate the importance of allowing youth time to develop their competencies. In terms of her interpersonal skills, change was not evident in Celeste until the very end of her third year of involvement. Two events seemed to spark this growth. First, an opportunity opened up when the adult responsible for leading the small group Celeste was associated with could no longer attend YELL sessions, leaving Celeste to step into this role. Second, the program director honored Celeste by selecting her to attend an overnight conference at the state capitol. With increased responsibility and greater attention from adults, Celeste blossomed. Her development illustrates the importance of continuing to give youth opportunities to stretch themselves and to grow, even after they have been involved with a program for a long time. The program director recalled, "She needed the opportunities and she needed the direction, but once that was kind of established, she really went with it."

Desiree's case shows the importance of not giving up on a youth. In her second year of involvement in YELL, Desiree became frustrated by YELL and distracted by her new school. She missed several YELL sessions and some of the adults began to "worry about her" involvement with a peer group. At one point, one of the adults in YELL suggested that she be asked to discontinue her involvement with the program; however, the other adults supported Desiree and welcomed her whenever she showed up at YELL or a related event. At the end of her second year, Desiree was asked to serve on the committee that was interviewing candidates for the new YELL director position. From that point on, Desiree redoubled her investment in YELL, and she quickly emerged as one of the program's most prominent participants. Youth's leadership paths are not always linear. Mindful of this point, YELL has learned to maintain an "open door policy" for youth participants, always willing to welcome them back into the program.

Praise and Positive Reinforcement Go a Long Way

In interviews, both Celeste and Desiree shared anecdotes in which adults complimented them. These moments had left deep impressions on them. When adults learned about the effects of their offhand remarks and passing recognition, they decided to become more intentional about giving positive feedback to the youth. One program director recalled that when she saw Celeste "in action with her small group, I commented that I was really impressed." The director continued, "She seemed to really kind of blossom under the praise too. It seemed to really give her a boost and confidence. So, I think that was a good thing for me to see." Adults in YELL now give feedback to the youth, including the mentors, in informal and in structured ways. Individual conferences with youth are scheduled multiple times during the year as an opportunity for youth to receive feedback as well as to share their own programmatic evaluations and suggestions.

Self-Reflection and Goal Setting Can Support Youth's Growth as Leaders

Preliminary analyses for this article, read by YELL staff, suggested that one reason for the differences in Desiree's and Celeste's leadership trajectories lay in differences in their goal setting. Since her first year baseline interview, Desiree articulated public speaking and communication goals. She seemed intent on developing these skills. Although Celeste occasionally mentioned public speaking too, she tended to hold goals that pertained more to general learning and involvement. In the wake of this analysis, YELL incorporated goal setting and self-reflection exercises into the curriculum.

Opportunities for Growth and for Interactions With Adults Should be Distributed Equitably

Our analyses also noted that Desiree had ample opportunities for direct interaction with adults in YELL during car rides from school to the YELL site and from YELL to home. Desiree was also selected more frequently than Celeste for special presentations and workshops. These opportunities may have accelerated Desiree's leadership development. The program directors responded to this observation by again being more intentional about how opportunities are extended to the youth in YELL and how much individual attention each youth receives. In staff meetings, adults run through the names of all of the youth, including the mentors, to make sure

that they are staying connected to and informed about youth's lives within and beyond YELL.

YELL has succeeded in instantiating the lessons highlighted by the cases of Celeste and Desiree in part because it was designed to be responsive to youth and community needs and in part because it has enjoyed steady leadership itself since Desiree and Celeste's third year of involvement. The third director with whom Desiree and Celeste worked manned the YELL helm for several years following these girls' involvement. With regard to the involvement dimension of leadership, both Celeste and Desiree demonstrated commitment and consistency in their third year. Perhaps not surprisingly, in order to change and grow, the program needed that same kind of leadership from its adults. Once it found that steady leadership, the link between the program and individuals became more dynamic, with channels of influence running in both directions.

Discussion and Conclusion

At the outset of this article, we bemoaned the lack of consistent definitions in the field of youth leadership. At the conclusion of this article, we seek to advance a conceptualization of youth leadership that is broad enough to encompass different styles and capacities but clear enough to distinguish the gang leader from the popular student body president and each of these from the student campaigning for social justice. We base this conceptualization on the examples of leadership Celeste and Desiree exemplified in their third year of participation in YELL.

Desiree and Celeste developed different styles of leadership within YELL, with Desiree more outspoken and focused on group concerns and Celeste more of a background leader, attentive to individual youth's personal concerns. These two girls answered our first research question about what youth leadership looks like by showing that leadership may take different forms and serve different purposes, even within the same organizational context.

These findings call attention to the risks of relying on a single, static definition of leadership that may alienate those youth who cannot or do not wish to be cast in that specific part. A broader, more flexible conceptualization of leadership can play to different youth's strengths, improving the likelihood that they will become engaged in the organization and in their communities in meaningful ways. As John W. Gardner (1990) points out, "Leaders come in many forms, with many styles and diverse qualities.

There are quiet leaders and leaders one can hear in the next county. Some find strength in eloquence, some in judgment, some in courage" (p. 5). For the young people who enroll themselves in leadership programs, the more possibilities that seem open to them, the better their chances of finding an appropriate leadership style of their own.

At the same time that we caution against a contrived, one-size-fits-all definition of youth leadership, we acknowledge that to be useful and meaningful, the concept must be undergirded by some clear organizing principles. We suggest that youth leadership is composed of three dimensions: communication and interpersonal skills, analytic and critical reflection, and positive community involvement. Youth may not be equally strong in all three domains, but strong youth leadership programs will attend to their development in all three. Because YELL paid equal heed to these three dimensions of leadership, Celeste and Desiree experienced growth in each area during the course of their involvement in the program. Celeste and Desiree stand as exemplars of youth leadership, then, because they developed competencies in each of these three areas.

In its approach to defining and supporting youth leadership, the YELL program demonstrates the grounded flexibility we recommend. On one hand, it validates and celebrates different styles of leadership, allowing youth time to discover and develop their strengths and recognizing and praising these strengths. On the other hand, through its activities and structures, it promotes an understanding of leadership that highlights the three dimensions of communication and interpersonal skills, analytic and critical reflection, and positive community involvement. This balancing act provides part of the answer to our second and third research questions about how a program can allow youth to develop different leadership styles connected by common leadership competencies.

The other part of the answer to these research questions can be found in the lessons YELL gleaned from Celeste and Desiree. These lessons expose the value of such programmatic features as encouraging self-reflection and goal setting, ensuring equal distribution of opportunities for growth, and showcasing adult models of commitment as well as capacity for change. Our findings also underscore the importance of allowing youth time to cultivate and demonstrate their leadership capacities. Even in the most deliberate and thoughtful of contexts, it may take youth such as Celeste and Desiree as many as 3 years before they have developed the courage, the eloquence, or the capacity for critical judgment that John Gardner described.

Perhaps the most important programmatic feature YELL evidenced, however, was its ability to learn from its participants, its ability to embrace the

bidirectional influence running between the context it provided and the youth who enlivened this context. YELL's attentiveness and responsiveness to Celeste's and Desiree's different developmental needs, strengths, and trajectories helped the program to grow. Because the YELL staff members were willing to reflect on the program's strengths and shortcomings and to adapt the program to accommodate the youth's development, the program learned as much from its participants as the youth learned from the program.

YELL's sense of responsibility for Celeste's and Desiree's growth and well-being was mirrored in the girls' own sense of responsibility for the program. In addition to revealing lessons about critical supports, Celeste and Desiree contributed to YELL by remaining committed to it as it weathered changes in adult staff and leadership. At the outset of their third year of involvement, they helped to nurture and sustain the program by transmitting important institutional knowledge to the new adult leaders. Much of the success and strength of YELL can be attributed to the mutuality of responsibility and influence that the program enabled between itself and its youth.

Our findings illustrate the role youth can play in shaping the very developmental contexts that seek to shape them. They remind us that just as the youth can benefit from participation in a program, so too can the program benefit from its participants. By emphasizing the dialogical relation influencing both youth and program, our article points to a new approach to the study of adolescent development in context. Certainly the question of how the context promotes development is important. Indeed, this question has stimulated considerable research; however, we contend that the question of how youth inform and influence these contexts is equally important, for implicit in this question is a conceptualization of youth as powerful agents, not just passive recipients. When the questions we ask, the programs we establish and fund, and the practices we support embrace such a conception of youth, we will have moved beyond the rhetoric to the reality of youth leadership.

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