

Youth Leadership Development: An Investment for the Future

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Abstract

The importance of youth leadership development in this present world cannot be overemphasized. It remains a veritable tool for preparing young people for the present as well as future roles and responsibilities. This practice manuscript presents a detailed exposition of the Teens and Youths in Leadership (TYIL) Fellowship program, a 10-day intensive training targeted at developing the leadership skills of secondary and post-secondary school students in Nigeria. Key points of information include the rationale behind the Fellowship program, why the humanist pedagogy was adopted, and how the 5Cs of positive youth development (PYD) are practiced. Over the last three years, tremendous progress has been made among those who have participated in the TYIL Fellowship program.

Session Learning/Participant Objectives

Following this session, participants will be able to:

1. Describe an innovative way of developing young leaders for the future.
2. Identify the importance of the 5Cs of positive youth development to leadership.
3. Explain how humanist pedagogy can be applied in youth leadership development.

Introduction

In recent years, discussions around youths in leadership have been at the center of research, as many are beginning to see the importance of youth engagement in leadership and community development (Hastings et al., 2021; Jones, 2009; Liu et al., 2021; Oparinde et al., 2017; Parkhill et al., 2018; Seemiller, 2018). As the world evolves, more opportunities and possibilities to develop youths have been created in form of traditional and modern platforms to assist them access the leadership training and development programs needed to impact their societies (Redmond & Dolan, 2014).

Akin to the above is the growing popularity of the concept of positive youth development, which is a development practice that focuses on preparing youths for the present as well as future leadership responsibilities by identifying and investing in their strengths (Waid & Uhrich, 2020). In this present age, the importance of youth leadership development cannot be overemphasized as it prepares them for an evolving world and contributes to building a just and moral society (Redmond & Dolan, 2014; Shekhar, 2022).

Youth leadership involves the participation of young people at some level to make the transition from childhood to adulthood, and its development is a way to discover and develop the leadership capacity of these young people, harness their energy and vitality to contribute meaningfully to their communities (Jones, 2009; Redmond & Dolan, 2014). This energy and vitality can be observed in their uncommon leadership through volunteerism, community engagement, and decision-making activities (Ossai, 2022).

This practice manuscript focuses on youth leadership development and its impact on the larger society. Using humanist pedagogy and the 5Cs of positive youth development, Teens and Youths in Leadership (TYIL) in Nigeria has consistently trained and developed young leaders over the last three years through its TYIL Fellowship program. This session seeks to give an exposition of the model TYIL follows in training young leaders.

Background/Review of Related Scholarship

Through different approaches, youth leadership development has transformed overtime from just being about discovering potential leaders to nurturing their talents and exceptional skills and providing practical leadership experience applicable to their sphere (Ogurlu & Sevim, 2017). Approaches such as experiential and learning-by-doing methods have been introduced where leadership can be explored, taught or experienced by young people (Redmond & Dolan, 2014). This approach not only seeks to provide leadership skills to youth but ensures they are allowed to participate in and authentically express their leadership potential (Redmond & Dolan, 2014).

Another approach to youth leadership development is the youth-adult partnership with which youths are engaged to practice appreciative inquiries, as well as discover and express their unique voice without boundaries and in a safe environment (McNae, 2018). When adults or superior individuals devote time to develop young people's skills, and provide the right conditions, experiences, and opportunities, it enables the youth to take meaningful action in their community (Redmond & Dolan, 2014). The teaching of leadership behaviors to youths has been posited by Eva and Sendjaya (2013) to foster the cultivation of their altruistic nature and ensure they engage in and render acts of service in their immediate environment and the local community. Youth leadership development focuses on teaching the importance of authentic self-leadership and how to replicate the same in serving others (Redmond & Dolan, 2014).

In practicing the youth-adult partnership approach in youth leadership development, Rumeli et al. (2021) posited that a generational gap problem may be unavoidable in mentoring and transferring leadership knowledge to youth within an organizational structure. However, organizations can embrace a culture of continuous learning and knowledge sharing to prepare youths for future organizational roles. Learner (2005) introduced the 5Cs of positive youth development (PYD), which is a way of grooming leaders for future leadership roles. Each C signifies a range of traits that are expected to be present if young people are developing positively. The 5Cs include character, confidence, connection, caring, and competence. Likewise, the Queensland Youth Development Research Project (YDRP) developed a new paradigm to positive youth development that is strength based. This paradigm outlines six principles that should be embedded in every youth leadership development. The principles include learning and development, leadership and decision-making, an inclusive ethos, community service, partnerships and networks, ethical promotion (Seymour, 2017).

In teaching leadership to young people, the humanist pedagogy brings active learning to ensure the personal and full development of human potential. The focus of this pedagogy cuts across the cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal domains. It also facilitates the development of

knowledgeable learners who know and can nurture themselves, other people, and their environment (Hare, 2019; Johnson, 2014; Purswell, 2019).

Description of the Practice

The TYIL Fellowship program is an initiative of the Teens and Youths in Leadership (TYIL) in Nigeria targeted at training secondary and post-secondary school level students on core leadership skills and competencies (TYIL, 2022). Applying the 5Cs of positive youth development (PYD), the program teaches and prepares youths for present and future roles. The key aspect of the program is the collaboration and relationship that is formed between the program organizers and participants of the fellowship program, such that the same is extended beyond the program.

The application process is usually not a rigorous one, as the program seeks to attract as many youths as possible; meanwhile, selection is largely based on how convincing the applicants are. The TYIL fellowship is a 10-day intensive training where participants are taught important topics such as personal development, mental health, character-based leadership, transformational leadership, health, and well-being. Participants are then given the task to conduct a community development project as a prerequisite to their graduation from the fellowship program.

The TYIL Fellowship is organized differently for the two categories of participants: secondary and post-secondary school level.

For the secondary school level participants, the teachings at this basic level are more self-focused and tailored to help participants discover their innate potential and important leadership mindsets. Participants are taught using the humanist learning approach and there is more attention to ensuring they understand the 5Cs of PYD. Character emphasizes the attitudinal and behavioral responses of youths under different circumstances, Confidence focuses on self-worth and self-efficacy, Connection stresses the importance of relationship building and development, Caring involves empathy and emotional intelligence, and Competence involves mastery within a domain of knowledge and discipline (Travis & Leech, 2014). Additionally, participants are given projects that help them internalize and practice these 5Cs of PYD.

For the post-secondary school level participants, leadership development is advanced and participants are taught impact-focused leadership to prepare them to make immediate impacts in their society. Like the basic level, the 5Cs of positive youth development (PYD) approach are applied to teaching, and participants are given practical leadership scenarios that have the elements of these Cs of PYD. TYIL follows a peer mentorship approach in mentoring participants, where previous participants act as mentors to present participants of the fellowship program. This is a way of teaching practical leadership and ensuring what was taught during the program is applied. As a prerequisite to graduating from the program, participants are asked to collaborate with their cohort members and conduct a community development project, practicing all they had been taught.

The above two levels are not dependent on each other. Participants do not have to go through the first stage before enrolling in the second.

Discussion of Outcomes

At both levels of the TYIL Fellowship, participants have recorded tremendous improvement in their endeavors. Feedback received from parents of secondary school-level participants indicates that the program has impacted their children's ability to hold conversations comfortably, negotiate, and concentrate. Notably, these children have been able to take the initiative to volunteer and lead in their local secondary schools and religious organizations.

At the post-secondary school levels, participants have attributed visible improvements in their academics and career to their participation in the TYIL Fellowship program. Many of the past participants have also gone ahead to found nonprofit initiatives and participate in leadership and political activities in their society/school. Some of the feedback received from participants is represented here:

TYIL is a great organization for every Youth and Teenager interested in Leadership. I was part of the TYIL Fellowship program in 2019 and it was indeed an amazing opportunity and a learning curve for me. TYIL is indeed part of my growth. (B.M.)

The TYIL program was an enlightening experience especially because fellow youths like me were speakers. The delivery and presentations were well put together and I was also able to get major life lessons. My capacity to be a great leader has been reinforced and I look forward to practicing all I have learned. (O.D.)

Although no systematic evaluation has been done previously, the program is often evaluated using simple surveys and interviews where participants discuss their learning points and how they intend to utilize all they learned. From the surveys gathered, it was evident that the fellows were more interested in participating in leadership opportunities within their communities and particularly focused on continuous leadership development.

Reflections of the Practitioner(s)

The organizers and facilitators provide a safe and collaborative learning environment where each participant is given wings to fly and mentored through the process. The TYIL Fellowship lays emphasis on participants discovering and investing in their unique voices (talents, passion and aptitude) and using the same to effect changes in their community. With this, many TYIL fellows have gone ahead to be more involved in their local communities. During the fellowship program, participants demonstrate the willingness and courage to take initiative and embrace leadership development. Many of them are usually inspired by the need to start something novel for their generation and solve transgenerational problems. The class tasks and cohort project helped the participants practice collaborative leadership and build relationships that outlived the fellowship program. To date, past participants have worked together on community projects and volunteered during the TYIL Fellowship programs. Using the humanist pedagogy was particularly helpful as the faculties put into consideration the different background of the participants and prioritized transformational learning by building relationships with them. Youth leadership practitioners and experts can replicate the TYIL fellowship approach in giving theoretical and practical leadership experiences to youth and ensuring there is a long-term structure for monitoring their progress over time.

Recommendations

In preparing youths for present and future leadership roles, it is recommended that the 5Cs of positive youth development (PYD) be taught and encouraged among youth. The 5Cs of PYD (i.e., competence, character, confidence, caring and connection) are core and fundamental to good leadership, hence, should be incorporated into any youth leadership development program. Adult-youth partnership should be used in giving practical experiences and mentorship opportunities to youth on how the 5Cs can be practiced and how such practice can be applied to leadership (McNae, 2018). This is also in consonant with Eva and Sendjava's (2013) assertion that leadership behaviors should be fostered among youth in order to cultivate their altruistic nature and ensure they engage in acts of service in their community.

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