The author of this chapter draws on adult leadership literature by presenting the adaptive leadership model. He then presents case studies of three existing youth leadership education programs, viewed through the lens of the adaptive leadership model. The analysis explores the conceptions of leadership that inform each program, the pedagogies employed by each program to teach leadership, and the alignment that exists between theory and practice. The study concludes with a grounded theory exploration of the theories and pedagogies employed in youth leadership education in the field today.

4

Exploring youth leadership in theory and practice

Max Klau

In recent years, a major shift in thinking has occurred among psychologists, educators, youth workers, and policymakers interested in adolescent development. The old focus on pathology, delinquency, and problem prevention has begun to be supplemented by a new interest in health, resilience, and opportunity development. In an extensive review of the youth development literature, the Cornerstone Consulting Group notes that while the earlier focus resulted in a wealth of research exploring risk factors contributing to psychopathology, the new interest has begun to generate findings
regarding protective factors that promote resiliency. A partial list of these factors includes a supportive family life, social supports at school, religious values, aspirations, perceived self-competence, motivation to do well, supportive peers, a sense of agency, and initiative.

Despite the growing academic interest in the topic, however, there is much about positive development that we still do not know. As Larson states: “We have a burgeoning field of developmental psychopathology but have a more diffuse body of research on the pathways whereby children and adolescents become motivated, directed, socially competent, compassionate, and psychologically vigorous adults. Corresponding to that, we have numerous research-based programs for youth aimed at curbing drug use, violence, suicide, teen pregnancy, and other problem behaviors, but lack a rigorous applied psychology of how to promote positive youth development.”

It is my belief that the notion of youth leadership education contains elements of theory and practice directly relevant to this emerging interest in promoting positive psychological development. Therefore, this pilot study aims to address this gap in the literature through an exploration of youth leadership education as it occurs in the field. Specifically, I intend to present case studies of three youth leadership education programs that address the following original research questions: What conceptions of leadership inform the work of youth leadership educators in the field today? What pedagogical techniques are employed by programs to teach the model of leadership they espouse? In addition, as I progressed through the research process, an additional question emerged: From the perspective of the “adaptive leadership” model presented in this chapter, how might we diagnose the relationship between theory and practice encountered at these programs?

**Background**

Naturally, any analysis of youth leadership should avail itself of the considerable body of academic literature devoted to leadership in general. However, it is important to recognize that scholars have
highlighted the field’s problematic lack of clarity and coherence regarding a definition of leadership.⁵

Rost offers the most relevant critique. In his book *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century*, he states: “The word leadership (and, to some extent, related words such as lead, leader, and leading) are used in scholarly and popular publications, organizational newsletters and reports, and the media to mean very different things that have little to do with any considered notion of what leadership actually is. . . . In 1990, leadership is a word that has come to mean all things to all people.”⁶

Rost’s critique appears to hold true for the work related to youth leadership as well. Consider, for example, the following passage from a book devoted to an academic exploration of youth leadership. Van Linden and Fertman introduce the notion of leadership by claiming: “Adolescents are busy leading in many ways—maybe not as presidents of their class or members of student government, but in more subtle ways. They are baby-sitting, working a job, and volunteering. They are spending time with peers, hanging out at the mall, and being involved in school or community.”⁷

In their effort to assert that “all teenagers have the potential to lead,” Van Linden and Fertman appear to suggest that engaging in almost any activity can qualify as leadership.⁸

Additional readings further complicate the issue. According to various sources, engaging in youth leadership involves facilitating ice-breakers and group cooperation games,⁹ religious outreach and proselytizing skills,¹⁰ working on active listening skills, and developing abilities like courage, commitment, and humor.¹¹ Apparently, the concept of youth leadership is broad enough to include both brief, nondisclosive, group-building games as well as ongoing religious outreach based on disclosure of a deeply held faith; youth leadership occurs through both active listening and through joining the school band; adolescents lead both through becoming class president and by hanging out at the mall. Ultimately, the multitude of activities presumed to fall under the domain of youth leadership lends support to Rost’s critique.
If youth leadership can be almost anything, then what exactly is it?
In light of this confusion, it is perhaps not surprising to hear the results of a ten-year Carnegie Foundation study that examined 120 youth-based organizations located across the United States. The research found a profound disconnect between current efforts at youth leadership education and the experiences and needs of today’s kids. Findings suggest that many programs “often depend, at best, on implicit unexamined ideas about how young people develop leadership traits and what being a leader entails. At worst, youth leadership programs are described as an almost negative space into which practitioners project their own beliefs about what youth need.”

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**In search of clarity: The Heifetz framework**

It is my belief that Ronald Heifetz’s model of “adaptive leadership” holds particular value for academics and practitioners interested in working with youth. The Heifetz framework presents theoretical distinctions that bring considerable clarity to the question of what is meant by the term *leadership*. It also includes pedagogical tools that are directly relevant to the teaching of leadership. In addition, it was my encounter with this framework that inspired this research exploring how youth leadership education occurs in the field.

After reviewing the major movements in leadership theory (the trait approach, the situational approach, contingency theory, and the transactional approach), Heifetz highlights a conceptual problem that runs through much of this work: “These four general approaches attempt to define leadership objectively, without making value judgments. When defining leadership in terms of prominence, authority, and influence, however, these theories introduce value biases implicitly without declaring their introduction and without arguing for the necessity of the values introduced.”

While he recognizes that these approaches have provided some useful insights, Heifetz makes a strong case that this lack of clarity
is problematic. He notes that leadership has been exercised in the past by figures such as Rosa Parks and Mohandas Gandhi, who made an impact from a societal position that initially lacked formal prominence, authority, or influence.

On the basis of this insight, Heifetz argues for making a distinction between authority and leadership. While the two concepts are related and frequently confused, one need not possess authority to exercise leadership. Authority involves holding a formal position, such as student council president, teacher, principal, or CEO. However, as the examples of Parks and Gandhi demonstrate, individuals without authority may still attempt to exercise leadership. Because young people rarely wield formal authority in society, this critique of the literature on adult leadership is particularly salient for scholars interested in exploring the practice of youth leadership.

Heifetz also distinguishes between technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges are relatively straightforward problems that we already know how to solve. Far more complex—and ultimately far more important—are adaptive challenges that have no clear solution and frequently require changes in the values and behaviors of the group. To put this distinction into more concrete form: planning a bus route in Montgomery, Alabama, was a technical challenge; transforming the relationship between blacks and whites in the Jim Crowe south was an adaptive challenge. Again, this notion is salient to the theory and practice of youth leadership; it allows us to differentiate between hanging out at the mall or playing in the school band and, for example, advocating against drunk driving.

In addition to providing these theoretical distinctions, Heifetz employs three key pedagogical tools in his leadership education methodology:14

• Case-in-point learning. By encouraging students to discuss the real-time dynamics of the class itself, students in Heifetz’s class have a chance to explore who is being given informal authority, who is being marginalized, and how important dynamics like race or
gender affect the group. The experience feels radically different from a traditional lecture or discussion, and results in a particularly personal and deep type of learning.

- **Below-the-neck learning.** Heifetz recognizes that the experience of exercising leadership is considerably more intense than the experience of simply talking about leadership. It requires courage and the ability to tolerate emotionally uncomfortable circumstances for long periods. By creating a safe space in which students can both experience and reflect on this discomfort, Heifetz demonstrates that it is valuable to engage the emotions as well as the intellect.

- **Reflective practice.** Students are constantly provided with opportunities to reflect on why they made particular choices or responded in particular ways. The result, once again, is a uniquely personal and deep educational experience.

Taken as a whole, the Heifetz framework includes elements of theory and practice that are directly relevant to the work of youth leadership education. His model is helpful in addressing the confusion that emerges from the literature on both youth and adult leadership, and provides useful tools for diagnosing the pedagogical practices in use in the field. For these reasons, his work both inspires and informs this research.

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**Nature of the research**

The purpose of this research is to begin the process of bringing both attention and clarity to the topic of youth leadership. Specifically, my goal is to understand both the theory and practice of youth leadership and youth leadership education as it occurs in the field by exploring the following research questions: *What conceptions of leadership inform the work of youth leadership educators in the field today? What pedagogy is employed by programs to teach the model of leadership they espouse?* In addition, I examine: *How might we diagnose the relationship between theory and practice encountered at these programs from the perspective of the “adaptive leadership” model?*
In an effort to address these questions, I engage here in a grounded-theory exploration of adolescent youth leadership education. Specifically, I present multiple case studies involving three existing adolescent-focused youth leadership programs. Through these case studies, I seek both to understand each program in detail and to gain some more generalizable insights into the variety of theories and practices currently in use in the field. Naturally, my knowledge of the Heifetz framework has informed my interpretations of what I encountered in the field.

Data collection for the study involved site visits, direct observation, review of educational and promotional documents, informal interviews with participants, and formal interviews with educators and senior staff. Programs were selected as cases for this study on the basis of the following criteria:

The program focused on an adolescent population.
The program literature presented an explicit focus on the concept of leadership.
The program included a pedagogy designed to teach leadership, as opposed to being simply a social club or organizational committee.
The program explicitly promoted the importance of civic engagement in the sense of communal and political responsibility; it went beyond the limited scope of promoting mastery of a particular domain such as sports or the arts.
The program had a reputation in the field for quality programming and strong impact. I endeavored to visit programs that have received positive recommendations from youth development professionals in the field.

By necessity, programs were selected on the basis of convenience, that is, in terms of whether both location and timing were manageable given my status as a full-time student.

Two clarifications must be made regarding the cases selected. First, it must be understood that these three case studies are in no way a representative sample of the general population of youth leadership programs. Second, this research is not intended to present a
formal evaluation of the programs selected. Such an evaluation would require alternate methodology and a different level and type of commitment from the programs studied.

Rather, the goal is to begin developing a theoretical framework for understanding and diagnosing the practice of youth leadership as it occurs in the field. For this reason, the names of all programs and individuals encountered in the field have been altered in an attempt to maintain their confidentiality. Because the conversations and pedagogies I encountered represent the heart of my research questions, I have made every effort to present those details in as faithful and accurate a manner as possible.

Data analysis included both single-case and cross-case analysis. The validity of the interpretations I present in my analysis was tested through member checks and by working with an interpretive community. A series of codes related to leadership conceptions and pedagogical techniques emerged from this process and were used in rigorous analysis of transcript data and observation notes.

In the report that follows, I present a brief case study of each program I visited. I include an overview and background for each program, and then present data relevant to my research questions. Following each case study I briefly analyze the theory and practice I encountered at each program on the basis of the elements of the Heifetz framework presented earlier. After the final case study, I conclude with a cross-case analysis of all three cases. In this section, I summarize my major findings and offer suggestions for future research.

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**National leadership conference case study**

**Background and overview of program**

The National Leadership Conference (NLC) is a national organization that has been in existence for more than forty years. According to its literature, the NLC’s mission statement is “to seek, recognize, and develop leadership potential commencing with high
school sophomores.” Every year the organization runs programs in all fifty states; one representative from every high school in the state is invited to attend a residential seminar.

I observed a four-day program held at a hotel in a small New England city. At the seminar I attended, more than 90 percent of high schools in the state—both public and private—were represented. The nearly two hundred students in attendance represented a remarkable cross section of the state’s social and economic diversity. Representatives from the poorest inner-city schools sat next to peers from some of the nation’s most elite private institutions.

Participants appeared to be selected for the program through a variety of processes. Some students I talked to told me they had to compete in an essay-writing contest in which they composed an answer to the question “What is leadership?” They were there because they wrote the winning essay. Others told me there was no competition at their school; they were simply invited by a teacher because they were the president of the sophomore class or of the student council. Still others said they were invited by a teacher or guidance counselor even though they were not in a position of formal authority in their school. Eventually my conversation with the director, Sarah, confirmed that students were there as the result of a variety of processes. While the program encouraged essay contests to determine representatives, there were no firm criteria by which schools selected individuals to attend the conference.

Once there, however, it was clear that the program sought to treat each participant as exceptional. Over the course of my time at the program, the director, the many facilitators I spoke with—even the program nurse—spoke in glowing terms of the intelligence, creativity, and idealism of the students they encountered there.

**Conception of leadership informing the program**

It is difficult to identify a clear conception of leadership at the NLC. When I asked the director to explain to me the NLC’s conception of leadership, she recited the organization’s mission statement: “to seek, recognize, and develop leadership potential starting with high school sophomores.” When I asked what the
NLC means by “developing leadership potential,” the director mentioned two slogans I would hear frequently over the remaining three days of the program: “We teach them how to think, not what to think,” she explained. “And we encourage them to respectfully challenge the viewpoints that they hear.” Both of these phrases are echoed in the NLC literature and Web site. However, she continued, saying,

Something we look for is not just the person who is doing everything all the time. It’s the person who shares ideas and draws out ideas from other people who aren’t so willing to share. . . . A lot of times groups “choose” leaders. Sometimes it’s just the prettiest or most outgoing; that’s not really what we look for though. Our evaluators go more by experience. They have all been around for a couple years and know what to look for. . . . We don’t write down leadership qualities because it is hard to put into words. We don’t want to tell them what a leader is. We are not all the same. We don’t teach them what a leader is; we give them a chance to do it.

After speaking with the director, however, I interviewed a staff member I noticed making rounds throughout the room. He told me he is part of a selection committee responsible for choosing which participants would be selected to continue on to the national conference later in the year. Over the course of the four-day program, a team of evaluators would select a boy and a girl who would represent their state at the NLC World Conference, to be held several months later. None of the kids knew they were being evaluated in this way; the staff member explained that telling the participants beforehand might bias their behavior. At the final ceremony on the last day of the program, the names of the selected participants (as well as two alternates) would be announced.

I asked him whether NLC has a formally stated conception of leadership and he shook his head. “I am not sure,” he said. I asked what he was looking for, and he said, “I am looking to see whether other kids seem to follow along; I look for the kid who is creative and gets things done.”

Later on, I spoke to another member of the evaluation team. She also was unaware of any formally stated conceptions of leadership
that the program endorsed. When I asked what she was looking for as an evaluator, she said, “I think it is about really listening to each other. Still holding on to your own ideas, but really listening, and then taking that back to the schools.”

The difference between the answers of these two evaluation team members surprised me; they seemed to be looking for two dramatically different participants. In addition, I found it hard to understand the connection between the director’s statements regarding the NLC’s conception of leadership and the remarks by the selection committee.

Pedagogical techniques employed by the NLC

The NLC pedagogy is based on clear guidelines from the national office. Local programs are to present a series of seven panels, exploring topics that can be chosen by the local staff. At the conference I attended, topics included the importance of voting, a mock trial, genetic testing, the media, “rights of young adults,” education, and volunteerism. Each panel included adults who are experts in the field. For example, the mock trial was run by a real state judge, and the panel on media included local reporters and media executives.

Following each panel was “family time,” an activity that allowed each student to interact with the panel members in a slightly more intimate format. The students split into four groups and headed to each corner of the room. Then, each panelist spent five minutes fielding questions at each station before rotating on to the next corner. The time with each panelist was brief, but clearly gave the participants more access and insight than would be possible in the large-group setting. When each panelist’s five minutes were up, the students in that corner all yelled “Outstanding!”

It was immediately apparent that the NLC puts a great deal of emphasis on this sort of enthusiastic cheering. Time between panels was filled with an incredible amount of energy as tables of students “challenged” each other with cheers (“We got the spirit, yes we do! We got the spirit, how about you?!”), or individuals stood up to try to get the whole group to sing songs such as “Buttercup” or “Lean on Me.”
While this enthusiasm and energy was initially inspiring, by the third and fourth day of the program I found myself exhausted by the endless cycle of panels and cheering. As the program progressed, I was surprised to find that members of the evaluation committee removed students from the list of finalists if they stopped cheering or appeared to express frustration with the constant high levels of enthusiasm. In this sense, the cheering (which I had assumed to be a peripheral part of the NLC experience) actually played a central role in the program’s pedagogy.

By the final day of the program, I realized that many participants shared my own confusion regarding the importance of the constant cheering. When I asked participants what they had learned about leadership, many responded that they were not sure what all the cheering had to do with leadership. Others stated that they felt they had not had a second to think because of the constant noise. Still others argued that enthusiasm must be an important part of leadership and seemed to enjoy the constant spirit and energy.

The program ended with all participants and staff gathered for a final ceremony in the main hall. To wild cheers and applause, the director announced the male and female selected as winners by the evaluation committee. I had noticed these students during my time at the program; they are both outgoing, attractive, popular, funny, polite, self-assured, and friendly: the kind of students that everybody in high school likes. After four days of panels, questions, and cheering, the program publicly anointed these individuals as the “best” leaders—the ones who have what it takes to represent the state at the world conference.

The selection left me feeling bewildered about all I had witnessed over the four days at the program. The enthusiasm and genuine goodwill of everyone on staff was obvious and undeniable. There was also no doubt that, on the one hand, the program pedagogy promotes civic involvement, community service, the importance of intellectual engagement with current events, and the validity of questioning authority. On the other hand, the constant cheering seemed to be the real pedagogical focus, a fact that undermines or contradicts much of the espoused values of the program.
Despite the idealistic rhetoric, the entire evaluation process publicly rewarded those extroverted participants with the stamina to maintain the appearance of unquestioning hyper-enthusiasm for the experience for four days straight. As I left the hotel, I couldn’t help but recall the sentiment of the Carnegie Foundation study presented in the introduction of this paper: “[Youth leadership] programs often depend, at best, on implicit unexamined ideas about how young people develop leadership traits and what being a leader entails. At worst, youth leadership programs are described as an almost negative space into which practitioners project their own beliefs about what youth need.”

**An adaptive leadership perspective on the National Leadership Conference**

The most striking aspect of this program is its lack of clarity regarding what it means by leadership. The mission statement (“to seek, recognize, and develop leadership potential starting with high school sophomores”) puts leadership at the heart of the program’s vision, but does not present any notion of what is meant by the term. The NLC’s literature highlights the values of civic engagement, community service, and critical thinking, and in many ways the pedagogy supports these values. However, for obvious reasons, the absence of a clearly espoused conception of leadership in a program that allegedly teaches youth leadership is problematic.

When viewed through the lens of the Heifetz framework, some distinctions emerge that clarify the assumptions informing the work done by the NLC.

**Leadership versus authority.** The NLC appears to place a very strong emphasis on the importance of authority. The core of the program’s pedagogy involves a series of seven expert panels in which the adolescent participants listen to lectures or talks given by adult authorities. While the panels focus on subjects that promote civic engagement (such as law, medicine, journalism, and community service), the pedagogy suggests that for the most part students can exercise leadership only by attaining an adult position of authority.
In addition, although the program endorses “respectful questioning of authority,” by placing so clear an emphasis on constant cheering, the pedagogy seems to demand unquestioning enthusiasm for authority. This disconnect between theory and practice at the program challenges the effectiveness of the NLC at its core. The pedagogy appears to undermine one of the few explicit values presented in the NLC’s amorphous conception of leadership.

Technical versus adaptive challenges. In the absence of a clear conception of leadership, it is difficult to diagnose whether the NLC is focused on addressing technical or adaptive challenges. It is telling, however, that the program deliberately avoids controversial subjects and places such strong emphasis on cheering. It appears as though the clearest message to many of the students is that leadership involves constant upbeat enthusiasm. According to the Heifetz model, this educational message is a problem, as addressing adaptive challenges is sure to create some amount of discomfort. Teaching young people to remain constantly enthusiastic may encourage them to avoid addressing difficult but important issues.

Case-in-point learning. The NLC pedagogy is almost completely focused on frontal lectures and panels interspersed with brief question-and-answer sessions. I observed no instances in which students were given the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences or learn from the group dynamics.

Below-the-neck learning. Again, the core of the NLC pedagogy was frontal lectures and panels. Aside from the enjoyment and group coherence (or at least the appearance of these emotions) elicited by the ubiquitous cheering, very little emphasis was placed on engaging participants emotionality. As many of the students eventually began to wonder, it is reasonable to question why teaching leadership demands mandating a state of perpetual enthusiasm.

Reflective practice. The students had no formal opportunities to stop and reflect on their own actions. There were some spaces, such as family time, for students to ask questions of others, but never of themselves. On the contrary, questioning the experience in any way was discouraged by the program; students who stopped
cheering were taken out of the running to move on to the world conference.

In conclusion, it is problematic that this program is so amorphous in theory and inconsistent in practice. However, despite these considerable criticisms, it should be made clear that the intentions of everyone involved in this program were completely commendable. My sense was that many of the staff members were frustrated by their own lack of clarity regarding the purpose of the program but had few opportunities themselves to reflect on their work or engage with relevant literature.

The NLC may be an example of the sort of uninformed and confused practice that previous studies have highlighted as being all too common in the field of youth leadership education. Ultimately, however, it is promising to consider how this national program affecting thousands of youth annually might be improved through exposure to relevant research and best practices.

Jewish Leadership Organization case study

Overview and background of the program

The Jewish Leadership Organization (JLO) is devoted to teaching Jewish young people about the connection between Jewish values and civic engagement. I observed a four-day conference at a hotel in Washington, D.C., but this was actually just one component of a year-long Jewish leadership curriculum. Groups of participants came from a variety of communities (Boston, Dallas, Phoenix, and New Haven). All thirty-three students were involved in a particular Jewish day school or supplementary religious school in their home community, and at this point (late January) they had all already spent a semester exploring the connection between Jewish values and civic engagement using a classroom-based curriculum developed by JLO.

There really was no selection process by which participants arrived at this conference. They were all students who chose to take this class and were able to pay the several hundred dollars required
to participate in this field trip component of the course. Following these intense four days in the nation’s capital, students were expected to return home to organize and execute their own community service project.

Conception of leadership informing the program

On the first night of the program, JLO founder and executive director Rabbi Marc Stein delivered a keynote address. On our schedule, the topic of the speech was presented as “Jews as agents for positive social change.”

Marc began with a question about leadership: “How many people have been in a position of leadership?” Many students raised their hands. Then he asked, “How many can think of a time when they exercised leadership?” A few hands tentatively went up. “They are two different things,” he explained.

One involves being elected. The other is something you can do every day. Let me give you an example. You are at a meeting and someone is clearly left out. If you go over and talk to that person, that is an act of leadership. Jewish leadership requires seeing the world in that way—who can we reach out to for help? I call it “spiritual heroism.” Let me give you an important saying: “In a place where there is no one of moral courage, try to be such a person.”

... Out of the very core of our tradition comes a demand, a requirement, a challenge to exercise our leadership to help those in need. So how do you convey from generation to generation a tradition that conveys the values you see on the walls? Open your eyes guys! Compassion, justice, love all of God’s creations! That is what we are here to explore in the next four days!

It was an inspiring moment. Marc’s passion for these ideals is unmistakably real, as is his commitment to the task. The keynote address also made it abundantly clear what the JLO means when it speaks of leadership. In the minds of everyone in the audience, these words would frame and inform every subsequent moment of the program.

Pedagogical techniques employed by the JLO

Over the course of the four-day program, the JLO employed a wide variety of pedagogies. Students listened to a lecture by a renowned
retired executive from a major Jewish organization, and they asked questions of expert panels addressing issues such as AIDS and affirmative action. They took field trips to visit advocacy organizations working on issues such as homelessness and hunger, and engaged in an afternoon of community service at a variety of locations around the city. They spent an afternoon involved in “Street Torah,” an activity in which students handed out food and clothing to the homeless in a local park, and were given time to engage these destitute men and women in an extended conversation. Considerable time was devoted to small group discussion and debate, and each outing was followed by an opportunity for collective reflection on the experience. The program concluded with each group visiting one of their congressional representatives on Capitol Hill. According to participant feedback, this wide array of pedagogical techniques employed by the program provided an engaging and provocative educational experience.

For the most part, the connection between the very clear conception of leadership presented the first evening and all subsequent activities was immediately apparent. The one issue I encountered that seemed to detract from the effectiveness of the program involved some social dynamics that evolved over the course of the program. As frequently occurs, two or three awkward or outspoken participants were marginalized by the group. While these dynamics were hardly unusual or out of the ordinary, the program did not really address issues of ostracism or marginalization within the group. In this otherwise carefully conceived and executed program, the issue represented one area where the theory of “spiritual heroism” might be more directly connected to practice.

*An adaptive leadership perspective on the Jewish Leadership Organization*

In terms of its espoused conception of leadership, the JLO could not be more different from the NLC. The notion of “spiritual heroism” was quite clearly presented and informed much of the practice of the program. It was not surprising to find that, unlike at the NLC, students here did not seem confused about the
purpose of the program or the relevance of various activities to exercising leadership.

**Authority versus leadership.** The JLO was actually explicit in presenting a similar distinction. The director made it clear that one need not hold a formal position to exercise leadership, and the program included a variety of pedagogies that were not focused on frontal lectures by adult authorities. Students worked in small groups, engaged in community service, and experienced Street Torah. The program presented opportunities for youth to experience leadership in a more personal and immediate way.

**Technical versus adaptive challenges.** Again, the JLO was explicit in promoting the importance of advocacy and working for social change. Students were encouraged to think about difficult challenges like homelessness, hunger, and AIDS in a sophisticated manner that allowed for uncomfortable emotions and discussions of controversial issues. Based on the notion of “spiritual heroism,” students were encouraged to try to address these adaptive challenges.

**Case-in-point learning.** As the example of the marginalized students demonstrates, the program did not use the dynamics of the group as a focus for learning. On the one hand, the director was aware of the importance of these dynamics, but he suggested that there is only so much that can be done to manage the way chaperones address these issues. While there are no easy answers related to managing these social dynamics, this remains a frontier at which the JLO could work to bring the pedagogy even more in line with its espoused theory of leadership.

**Below-the-neck learning.** The variety of pedagogies employed by the program encourages below-the-neck learning in a number of ways. Activities like visiting with a congressional representative or interviewing a homeless person all challenged participants at an emotional level in a way that lectures and panels do not. In addition, the JLO allowed space for difficult emotions by allowing students to discuss issues like AIDS and homelessness with openness and candor.

**Reflective practice.** The JLO makes a deliberate and continuous effort to build reflection into its pedagogy. Following events like community service, Street Torah, and visiting advocacy organiz-
tions, participants were given an opportunity to explore their experiences and feelings together.

Overall, when viewed through the lens of the adaptive leadership model, this program avoids many of the problems highlighted in the youth leadership literature. The JLO is carefully conceived at the theoretical level and thoughtfully executed at the practice level. This clarity and deliberateness allows for a degree of alignment between theory and practice that, relative to other programs, ensures a more impactful and effective youth leadership education experience.

Institute for Justice and Leadership case study

Overview and background of program

The Institute for Justice and Leadership (IJL) is a national organization dedicated to combating racism, sexism, and bigotry. The program I visited brought together twenty-two high school sophomores and juniors at a scenic New England summer camp facility. I was told that this group was slightly smaller than the average in states with a more established program. Although the organization has been running its summer youth leadership program for many years in other states, this particular camp is less than five years old.

From what I can gather, students hear about the IJL summer experience through word of mouth and apply to attend. Participants I spoke to told me they heard about the program through a church group or through their parents or a teacher or guidance counselor. Although there is a brief application, my sense from the staff is that, because of the newness of the program, very few applications were denied this year. The result of this recruitment method was a relatively small, phenomenally diverse group of young people genuinely interested in and committed to the mission of the IJL.

Conception of leadership informing the program

When I asked Andrea, one of the program’s codirectors, to explain the IJL’s conception of leadership, she looked puzzled.
“That’s hard to explain,” she said. “Although I have been involved with the IJL for four years, I have only been in this codirector position for about three months. So I am not so up on this. I can definitely tell you our mission statement, though: We fight bias, bigotry, and racism through advocacy, conflict resolution, and education.”

Lewis, the other codirector, had a similar response. Asked to explain the IJL’s conception of leadership, he said, “Hmmm. We talk more about ‘community relations’ or ‘race relations’ here, I would say. What I would call the leader of the future is knowing your own biases, prejudices, and fears.”

Once again, I am surprised to find that a program that bills itself as a leadership training experience has so little clarity on what the term means. It is obvious that the staff members I spoke with were intimately familiar with and deeply committed to the mission of combating bias, bigotry, and racism. Indeed, the pedagogy for the entire week was focused on raising awareness of these issues. However, the notion of what it means to be a leader on these issues, either at the camp or back home, seemed to receive very little thought.

**Pedagogical techniques employed by the IJL**

The IJL relies almost exclusively on group processing, case-in-point learning, and reflective practice. Over the course of the retreat there were no lectures or expert panels. All the time was devoted to open and honest discussions regarding race, religion, and gender. Through structured discussions and group activities, participants were encouraged to explore how these dynamics play out in the daily interactions within the group.

On the final day of the program, participants engaged in a “segregation exercise,” in which participants were separated into small groups and told not to communicate outside of their group. Counselors encouraged this isolation while waiting for the participants to “break” the exercise, which they inevitably did. The experience concluded with a long processing session in which students explored the case-in-point dynamics that occurred and how they relate to wider issues of racism, bigotry, and bias.
The result of this constant focus on group dynamics appears to be a profound learning experience. Students engaged in a deep and personal way with some very painful and controversial issues in a safe and supportive environment. According to participant feedback, the cathartic experience of shared vulnerability and pain was ultimately a validating and empowering experience.

Although the experience was clearly powerful, the program spent very little time exploring what it means to act on this new awareness back home. Trying to be a leader in addressing issues of racism or bigotry outside the program’s safe space can be dangerous, and the program treated the issue as something of an afterthought. My sense was that this oversight was the result of the program’s amorphous conception of leadership. Although this is just one component of an otherwise carefully crafted program, in this case, greater clarity of theory would surely result in more effective practice.

**An adaptive leadership perspective on the Institute for Justice and Leadership**

The IJL differs from the other two programs in that the pedagogy focuses almost completely on case-in-point learning. For an entire week the participants explored their own religions, races, sexual orientations, and backgrounds, and had serious and open conversations about how these dynamics played out in the group. It is problematic, however, that the program was so unclear about what was meant by leadership. Being aware of these issues is not necessarily the same thing as being a leader trying to work on these issues outside of the IJL community. Once again, it seems likely that this lack of clarity regarding the notion of leadership served to undermine the impact of the program.

**Authority versus leadership.** Although the IJL does not explicitly make this distinction, everything about its pedagogy makes it clear that you need not have a position of formal authority to have an impact. In the absence of lectures and expert panels, the whole focus of the program was on relating to peers in a way that could hardly be more personal or relevant. However, since the IJL does not really know what it means by leadership, it misses an important
opportunity. Exploring these issues in a safe environment at a summer camp is one thing; working on these issues at school with one's peers is quite another. By not examining the dangers of leadership or the ways groups will resist change, the IJL leaves its participants with minimal insight into how to take the experience home.

**Technical versus adaptive challenges.** More than any other program I visited, the IJL stayed focused on adaptive challenges. Every moment of the experience was characterized by difficult and emotionally sensitive conversations. The program did a remarkable job of trusting the participants to grapple with these challenges in a fashion that was so open and mature. Again, however, the program could be improved by including some analysis of the dangers and threats that result from working on adaptive challenges. Discussions that can be had during IJL may not be so easy to have back home, and the program could be improved by preparing participants to understand and address these challenges.

**Case-in-point learning.** The case-in-point model is at the core of the IJL's pedagogy. It is quite literally impossible to imagine participants being marginalized as occurred at the JLO. Dynamics of ostracism would be immediately explored; at the IJL program I visited, even the most unusual kids were considered an integral part of the group experience. The fact that this program has used this model for years is a powerful testament to the fact the young people can be trusted to engage these sensitive issues.

**Below-the-neck learning.** During my stay at this program I saw several people, including the codirector, on the edge of tears. Even as an experienced educator who was merely observing the event, I personally found the segregation exercise to be emotionally exhausting. The program is about as far from a sterile question-and-answer experience as can be imagined.

**Reflective practice.** The IJL doesn’t so much make time for reflective practice; it is more accurate to say that the whole program is reflective practice. Nothing occurs without being examined and explored as a group. This clearly makes for some very deep and personal learning, especially when considered in relation to the other programs I visited.
Overall, the IJL comes closer than the other programs I visited to actually using the Heifetz model with young adults. That the program is national and has been operating for years is a powerful testament both to the program’s ability to facilitate these discussions safely and to the capacity of young people to handle this emotionally challenging type of learning. It is intriguing to consider how effective this demanding program might be if it was based on a more carefully considered notion of what it means to teach when it claims to teach leadership.

Cross case analysis

While the three case studies presented here are not a generalizable sample of all existing youth leadership programs, they incorporate a diverse array of theories and practices related to youth leadership education. Surely they provide a window into understanding some general themes related to the work that is currently occurring in the field. In the section that follows, I consider all three programs in the light of the two research questions that informed this study: How do you determine the effectiveness of a leadership program? What educational techniques are employed by programs to teach the model of leadership they espouse? In the context of exploring these questions, I also include my diagnosis of the connection between theory and practice at each program, informed by my knowledge of the “adaptive leadership” model.

Question 1: What conceptions of leadership inform the work of youth leadership educators in the field today?

The most important finding to emerge from this research is the fact that two of the three programs I visited had no clear conception of what they meant by leadership. Significantly, these were the two national programs, which touch hundreds, if not thousands, of young people annually. Also important is the fact that these programs pulled students out of their home communities for four to six days explicitly to teach them about leadership. It is remarkable
that so much infrastructure, manpower, and effort goes into an educational endeavor that is so amorphous at its core.

In particular, the National Leadership Conference stands out as an example of the problems that arise when practice is based on unclear or unexamined assumptions of what is meant by leadership. Although the NLC lacks a carefully considered conception of leadership, its pedagogy presents some strong but implicit biases and values. The emphasis placed on adult authorities by lectures and panels, the focus on enthusiastic cheering, and the selection of “winners” who are the “best” leaders all imply an assumption that authority, prominence, and charismatic influence are essential to leadership.

My research suggests that, by subscribing to these largely unexplored assumptions about leadership, the program involves a pedagogy that in many ways undermines the central values the NLC claims to promote. While championing the notion of “respectful questioning of authority,” the program mandates constant enthusiasm for all facets of the experience. While claiming to teach “how to think, not what to think,” the program allows almost no space for reflection, and actively discourages questions about the program’s purpose and pedagogy. Thus, in many ways, the lack of clarity at the NLC has consequences that appear to undermine the program’s best intentions.

The other program lacking a clear definition of leadership was the Institute for Justice and Leadership. Compared to the NLC, however, the IJL demonstrated considerable alignment between theory and practice. Despite its amorphous conception of leadership, the program had a clear mission statement about ending bias, bigotry, and discrimination. The pedagogy of the program consistently focused on advancing this mission. Once again, however, the lack of clarity regarding leadership did appear to relate to educational limitations of the program. In this case, the result of an amorphous conception of leadership appears to be a missed opportunity to educate students on how to exercise leadership effectively on these issues when they return to their communities. By treating the issue of “taking it home” as an afterthought, the IJL may limit
participants’ abilities to act on their heightened awareness to issues of bias and bigotry when they return to their home communities.

The other program in the study presented a quite explicit conception of leadership. The Jewish Leadership Organization’s notion of “spiritual heroism” was clearly stated in the first hours of the program. In addition, the pedagogies employed by this program were closely aligned with this espoused theory of leadership. On the basis of this research, it seems reasonable to assert that this clarity of purpose results in readily apparent educational benefits. For the most part, programs with clearly espoused theories of leadership incorporate pedagogies that effectively advance, as opposed to undermine, stated values.

It is important to recognize, however, that programs inevitably teach more than just their espoused conceptions of leadership. For example, the NLC never talked about the “great individual” conception of leadership, but much of the pedagogy reinforced this theoretical stance.

Thus, in an effort to answer my first research question more effectively, I engaged in a grounded theory analysis of the data to generate a list of conceptions of leadership that are embedded in the pedagogies I encountered. The result, presented in Table 4.1, represents a partial but, I hope, informative overview of notions of leadership currently employed, either explicitly or implicitly, in the field of youth leadership education today.

It is interesting to note the degree to which various programs incorporate a number of these conceptions. For example, the IJL lacks an espoused conception of leadership. Yet the pedagogy it employs clearly promotes several conceptions presented here. For example, it endorses notions of moral and spiritual leadership, relational leadership, and civic leadership. Practitioners in the field may find it helpful to review this list and evaluate which conceptions are implicit in the work they do. Making these conceptions explicit may facilitate greater alignment between theory and practice, potentially enhancing the quality of education that occurs at each program.

Finally, this research is based on a recognition that we know very little about effective positive development practices for youth. It should be made clear that many of these conceptions of leadership
Table 4.1. Leadership definitions in youth leadership education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conception</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civic leadership</td>
<td>Interest in and engagement with issues of broad public interest</td>
<td>All programs (required for inclusion in this study)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charismatic leadership</td>
<td>Ability to influence peers through enthusiasm, extroversion, or creativity</td>
<td>Emphasis on cheering and extroversion at NLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership as formal authority</td>
<td>Attainment of a position of formal authority in a business or organization</td>
<td>Emphasis on lectures or expert panels featuring adult authority figures (NLC, JLO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relational leadership group</td>
<td>Ability to manage interpersonal dynamics for the good of the group</td>
<td>Espoused focus on “quiet leaders” at NLC; pedagogical focus on dynamics at IJL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service leadership</td>
<td>Commitment to engaging in activities dedicated to helping underserved or needy populations</td>
<td>Trip to soup kitchen with JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Great individual” leadership</td>
<td>Recognition of one or two individuals as “the best”</td>
<td>Evaluation and selection process at NLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual leadership</td>
<td>Ability to reason clearly and persuasively in a manner that influences others</td>
<td>“Family time” at NLC; group discussions at all programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral and spiritual leadership</td>
<td>Commitment to the cause of promoting social justice</td>
<td>Street Torah at JLO; segregation exercise at IJL</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

are closely aligned with theories that have already been extensively studied. For example, the notion of intellectual leadership is closely related to work done by Howard Gardner.\(^{23}\) Service leadership has been explored extensively.\(^{24}\) The notion of charismatic leadership has received considerable attention by scholars of adult leadership.\(^{25}\) A complete overview of the connections between the literature on adult leadership and the practice of youth leadership is beyond the scope of this research but would surely be of value to a field seeking greater understanding of how to promote positive development effectively.
Question 2: What pedagogical techniques are employed by programs to teach the model of leadership they espouse?

Once again, this research is based on a recognition that we know very little about effective positive development practices for youth. While the first question focused on theory, this question was designed to spotlight the actual practices used to teach youth leadership.

A complete list of pedagogies encountered in this research is presented in Table 4.2. This list represents my effort to codify and, I hope, clarify the practices I encountered over the course of my research. It is my hope that the list of pedagogical tools presented here may provide helpful new ideas to educators in the field who may be unfamiliar with some of the activities described here. Perhaps this too may promote more effective educational practice in the field. However, the list also raises some important questions. For the field to advance in its understanding of effective youth development practices, we must begin to move from a simple list of practices to an informed understanding of what constitutes best practices.

Once again, a first step should involve reviewing the wealth of relevant literature. Considerable work has been done, for instance, regarding the effects of involvement in community service projects. Research suggests that participation in service projects has a “salutary effect” on levels of political involvement, religious engagement, and substance use, and that it allows youth to develop identities and relationships oriented toward socially responsible participation in adult life. A complete review of the literature relevant to the wide variety of pedagogies presented in Table 4.2 is beyond the scope of this research. However, as the field continues to explore best practices in positive youth development, an in-depth analysis of the research related to these techniques would be a helpful contribution to both the theory and practice of youth leadership education.

Finally, this research raises many questions for further research. For example, what impact do these fairly brief pull-out programs have on participants? How important are preprogram activities and follow-up activities? How can technology such as the Internet be most effectively integrated into youth leadership programming?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical tool</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lecture</td>
<td>Frontal presentation by an authority to an audience</td>
<td>Keynote address at JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert panel</td>
<td>Presentation by two or more authority figures to an audience</td>
<td>Mock trial at NLC; AIDS panel at JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation and selection</td>
<td>Formal process of selecting “best” leader</td>
<td>Selection of NLC candidates to continue to world conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>Time set aside to reflect on feelings triggered by activities of program</td>
<td>Processing of segregation activity at IJL, personal priority list at JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case-in-point learning</td>
<td>Activity in which the real-time group process is the pedagogical focus</td>
<td>Segregation activity at IJL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large-group discussion</td>
<td>Exploration of issue in a large-group format</td>
<td>Processing of segregation activity at IJL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small-group discussion</td>
<td>Portion of larger group breaks off for more intimate exploration of an issue</td>
<td>Reflection sessions at JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community service activity</td>
<td>Engaging in actual service project</td>
<td>Work in soup kitchen at JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field trip</td>
<td>Leaving the primary educational facility to visit outside location</td>
<td>Trip to Capitol Hill at JLO</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cheering</td>
<td>Planned communal singing, chants</td>
<td>“Buttercup” at NLC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Material reward</td>
<td>Small token granted to reward desired behaviors</td>
<td>Stickers at NLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-solving activity</td>
<td>One-time, highly goal-oriented, team-based experience</td>
<td>Egg drop challenge at NLC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee activity</td>
<td>Ongoing team-based effort to plan or execute another event</td>
<td>Planning of visit to member of Congress at JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious text study</td>
<td>Group exploration of sacred texts</td>
<td>Bible quote debates at JLO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-context programming</td>
<td>Bringing together diverse youth away from their home communities</td>
<td>NLC, JLO, IJL models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preprogram activities</td>
<td>Preparing participants for program with activities that occur before out-of-context programming</td>
<td>JLO curriculum at Jewish day schools, supplementary schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-up activities</td>
<td>Continuation of engagement with ideas presented at out-of-context program after participants return home</td>
<td>Planning community service activity following JLO; involvement of alumni at NLC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ultimately, this exploratory research represents just the beginning of a process of bringing attention, clarity, and academic rigor to the study of youth leadership education.

Notes


8. Ibid.


18. As my research involved exploring diverse pedagogies, as opposed to diverse adolescent populations, I defined no specific criteria for participant gender, race, religion, or socioeconomic status factors that had to be included in this sample.


20. I was able to gather feedback from the directors of all programs except for the NLC.

21. Four graduate students from the Harvard Graduate School of Education analyzed a sample of my data.


**Max Klau** is senior researcher for leadership and evaluation at City Year in Boston. He received his Ed.D. in June 2005 from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where he focused his studies on youth leadership.